

## The decision-making process of Human Resources leaders

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The present study explores the decision-making process (DM) in female leaders and their thoughts, emotions, and behaviors in this process. The decision making process is fundamental in an organizational context, being influenced by variables such as the emotions, the cognitions, the characteristics of the decision maker and the organizational culture. This study considers in particular the decision-making process that is experienced by women in a leadership position. Leadership refers to a process of interaction in which a person influences others, whether to make decisions, motivate or for any other purpose, through a hierarchically organized and formally accepted process (Brandão, Miguez, & McCluskey, 2016; Moller & Gomes, 2010). TABELS model allows us to understand how the constraints associated with decision processes are managed, assuming that they will activate the leaders' self-defense system and, consequently, the search for strategies that allow them to return to a state of stillness.

This study has the following specific goals: (1) to identify the phases of the decision-making process and (2) the areas of decision-making experienced as challenging; (3) explore the emotions and (4) cognitions experienced in the decision-making process; and (5) the representations regarding the experience of the decision-making process. Data were collected from 11 women with leadership roles in Human Resources departments in Portugal, aged between 29 and 52 years old, all with higher education qualifications. The critical incident interview was used, considering a critical incident as a situation where it was necessary to make a challenging decision as the HR Department leader. The interviews were transcribed, validated and then subject to Content Analysis (Bardin, 2011), with the support of NVivo®11.

The results show that the decision-making process happens sequentially in six phases: (1) identification of the need for decision making, (2) information search, (3) identification of existing alternatives, (4) choice of one of the alternatives, (5) implementation of the decision (6) and evaluation of decision making. The leaders in this study collect information from various sources before the decision and their evaluation of the decisions taken may lead to their review when they do not have the desired effects. The decision areas experienced as challenging were: to accept projects and / or challenges; give negative feedback; dismiss people; decide on compensation and benefits; definition of the department or service strategy; and dealing with maladaptive behaviors. The decision-making process is characterized by both positive and negative emotions, but the dominant emotions throughout the DM process are generally negative (e.g., fear, anxiety, frustration). The feeling of relief arises at the end of DM. Regarding the cognitions of the leaders,

three major themes aroused: the leader's way of acting, their lack of understanding of the situation and the importance of improving processes. The decision-making process seems to be influenced by the leader's characteristics, the organizational context and the perceived impact of the decision on the leader. The results point that the leaders in this study have a cautious and inclusive management style in order to feel secure regarding their final decision. The study allowed leaders to reflect on how the decision-making process is experienced, exploring and developing this process, and hence enhancing the quality of their leadership. Future studies should seek to deepen the knowledge regarding the strategies used by leaders in the critical situations experienced in their work context and that involve decision making. This will support the development of adequate tools that meet their needs.

**Key words:** women leaders, decision making, TABELIS, human resources, critical incidents

### **References**

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