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# An Exploratory Study of the State of United States Women in Leadership

D. N. Smith

*Kennesaw State University*, [dsmith1@kennesaw.edu](mailto:dsmith1@kennesaw.edu)

D. Roebuck

*Kennesaw State University*, [droebuck@kennesaw.edu](mailto:droebuck@kennesaw.edu)

M. Maendler

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An exploratory study of the state of United States women in leadership

Deborah N. Smith, Ph.D., Deborah B. Roebuck, Ph.D. and Ms. Michelle Maendler

Kennesaw State University

Author Note

Correspondence should be addressed to Deborah N. Smith, Ph.D., Associate Professor of Higher Education and Leadership Studies Director, Assistant Department Chair, Department of University Studies, Kennesaw State University, 1000 Chastain Rd., MD 1802, LIB Bldg. 17, Rm. 422, Kennesaw, GA 30144, (770) 423-6874, dsmith1@kennesaw.edu.

### Abstract

The overarching goals of this study were to explore the views of women in leadership and their opinions as to who and what strategies have most helped them develop as leaders. To explore these topics, the authors administered a survey and used NVivo 9 and axial and selective coding to analyze the results. Two themes emerged from the data; 1) United States women leaders value action over vision, and 2) they seek to be leaders in all areas of their lives, not just at work. Encouragingly, other women and workplaces are noted as contributing to the women's leadership development. The authors conclude that these findings can be used pedagogically to strengthen women's leadership development programs in institutions of higher learning.

## An exploratory study of the state of United States women in leadership

### **Introduction and Literature Review**

Women in leadership have been a topic that has intrigued both practitioners and researchers since at least the 1960s. The Catalyst (2012) organization, founded in 1962, was one of the first organizations in the US which sought to tap into the untapped potential of women who wanted to be in the workforce and assume leadership roles in all areas of their lives. In 1998, the White House Project (2012) was founded to level the playing field for women in politics and business. The following year, Hartman (1999) edited a book which included interviews with 13 well-known women ranging from New Jersey Governor Christine Todd Whitman to Susan Berresford, the first woman president of the Ford Foundation. Hartman asked her interviewees about leadership and found that while not all of the women were comfortable being labeled as leaders, they all viewed themselves as agents of change. Then in 2004, McKinsey women (McKinsey & Company, 2012), launched a project in which they collected oral histories of top women leaders in different age groups and careers from various regions of the country. Thus far the researchers have collected over 100 video interviews.

The initial starting point for better understanding women in leadership in these and many other research projects begins with a definition of leadership. When defining leadership, Rodgers-Healy (2003) stated that women will often list people they know (e.g. mother, pastor) as embodiments of leadership. Typically the reasons these admired women were identified is that they were consistently present in someone's life and genuinely cared for them. Even when listing women they personally did not know as admired leaders, the perception that a woman has made a difference in the world was a frequent reason a woman was described as being

inspirational. In concurrence with these findings, the latest Gallup Poll (Jones, 2011), listed Hillary Rodham Clinton as the most admired living woman in the world (for the tenth year in a row). In second place was Oprah Winfrey, in third was Michele Obama, in fourth Sarah Palin and in fifth place was Condoleeza Rice. Most of the women listed were politicians or world leaders. However, several star/media personalities also made the list. Many of those star and media women are often acknowledged for their philanthropic and humanitarian efforts. On the other hand, not all fall into that category. Hollander (2010) examined America's fascination with celebrities by discussing the death of Michael Jackson in July of 2009. He explained this celebrity appeal as an emotional identification with a celebrity. Also, celebrity enthrallment and the need for entertainment are entangled with aspects of American society. America's need for entertainment is often fueled by free time, flexible income, and an attempt by some to escape personal problems.

Moving beyond who and why women admire particular leaders, other studies have focused on the behaviors and skills women must have to become successful leaders. As Vanderbroeck (2010) indicated, it is not necessary for women to imitate men to be successful. Indeed, women who do display typically masculine behaviors such as toughness, decisiveness, and assertiveness, without the balance of a characteristically feminine behavior such as nurturing, often end up with a negative label (Eagly & Carli, 2007). Fortunately as Vinkenburg, VanEngen, Eagly, and Johannesen-Schmidt (2009) observed most organizations today not only expect men and women leaders to behave differently, but also value those differences. In fact, Evans (2010) asserted that women are uniquely suited to be effective leaders as they often possess high levels of 'emotional intelligence,' defined as having empathy, self-awareness, impulse control, self-motivation, and social swiftness (Goleman, 1995).

While women's talents are being recognized as needed at all levels of leadership, the reality is that women are still heavily underrepresented at the highest levels in organizations (The White House Project, 2009). As McKay (2010) quoted in her interview of Ibarra:

“The other is the leadership gap and no matter how you measure it, or where you measure it, you have women at the entrance level in pretty healthy numbers, then ... those numbers dwindle, they start getting smaller in the middle and when you look at the top, there are very few places where you see more than 13 to 15 percent of women at the executive level” (p. 1).

Unfortunately because so few women are in top, paid leadership positions, those who are in those roles sometimes feel threatened by the success of other women. As a result these women in top leadership positions may resort to undermining tactics instead of supporting other women who follow in their footsteps (Hoyt & Simon, 2011; Rodgers-Healy, 2003). On the other hand, there are plenty of examples of women who value mentoring and/or sponsoring by other women. Both mentors and sponsors are highly visible and influential within organizations, but serve in different, but equally important roles to help women advance. A mentor is someone who has many years of experience in a particular role or position. As a mentor, this individual provides career strategies and day-to-day advice. The mentor answers questions, shares information, and provides guidance regarding how to avoid mistakes that might hold one's career back. On the other hand, a sponsor basically “sponsors” a protégé to others. The sponsor puts in good words for her protégé and informs others about her talents and abilities. The mentor helps the mentee grow and develop the necessary skills and abilities to be a leader, while the sponsor helps get the protégé into a leadership position. In today's organizations, women need both mentors and sponsors. Research has suggested mentoring leads to increased performance and upper mobility,

early career advancement, higher income, greater job satisfaction, and enhanced leadership ability (Bahniuk & Hill, 1998; Tahmincioglu, 2008). However, according to a 2011 Harvard Business Review Research Report, “the vast majority of highly qualified women don’t have political allies to propel, inspire and protect them through the perilous straits of upper management” (PR Web, 2011, p. 1). The study further stated that having a sponsor conferred a statistical benefit of up to 30 percent in terms of stretch assignments, promotions, and increases in pay. Foust-Cummings, Dinolfo and Kohler (2011) reported similar findings noting that effective sponsorship is critical to accelerating a woman’s career—from getting her noticed by senior-level executives to being considered for her company’s top jobs.

Beyond mentoring and sponsorship, organizations that tend to be the most effective in attracting and retaining women leaders to and in their most senior positions have recognized that random programs which don’t target the right problem are not the answer. As Wittenberg-Cox and Maitland (2008) asserted, these poorly planned initiatives can backfire and cause resentment. Instead as Barsh and Yee (2011) noted true cultural and organizational change must occur. Such change must be systemic and intentional. Of course such change should also involve listening to what matters from the women who are in the organization. Barsh and Yee explained that one reason women choose to stay in their current positions rather than be promoted is that they feel their work needs to matter and make a difference. Senior level positions are often perceived to be political or lonely. Women value their relationships with their colleagues and don’t want to forfeit the joy they derive from that. And, as Gerdes (2010) learned in her study of senior academic women, over half her respondents sought personal fulfillment through their work. Leadership positions which prevent women from being able to pursue that which matters most to them will not retain or attract women.

While much has been written about women in leadership, there is still a need to build upon prior research so that practitioners and researchers alike can help women achieve their leadership potential. In this study the authors used a set of questions previously used in another study (Rodgers-Healey, 2003). The question set was selected because the language used was practitioner-friendly. The purposes of this study were to learn about women's views on leadership, specifically what (a) they believe makes female leaders successful, (b) they perceive is blocking them from reaching their full leadership potential, and (c) they identify as leadership development strategies really work. Additionally, the primary authors wanted to bring their students the most up-to-date information on women in leadership from women who are in leadership roles.

## **Methods**

### **Participants**

Participants were recruited from professional women's organizations in the USA who had given permission to distribute the survey link to their members. With the exception of two male respondents, all other participants who chose to participate indicated their gender were female. Over half the participants (53%) were in their forties or fifties, with an even higher percentage (62%) possessing at least a Master's degree. The average number of years participants reported working full time was 18, while the average number of years reported for holding a formal leadership position was 15. However, at the lower end of the spectrum (1-5 years of full time work experience) women ( $N=13$ ) reported that nearly all of those years involved them holding a leadership position. At the other end of the spectrum, women who reported 26-30 years of work experience ( $N=56$ ) only reported 12 years of holding a formal leadership position. After the category listed as 'other,' education was listed as the sector in which most participants worked.

## **Survey**

With the exception of one question, the survey matched one created for an often cited study on women in leadership conducted in Australia (Rodgers-Healy, 2003). Both surveys contained basic demographic questions and 12 questions pertaining to leadership. Question number four in the original Australian survey was reworded from ‘Do you believe that a woman can be as good a leader as a man?’ to ‘In what situations, if any, do you think a female would be a more effective leader than a male?’ This rewording was done as comments in the original study indicated that participants felt the question was leading. After obtaining IRB approval from the authors’ institution, the survey was distributed online using Qualtrics, a web-based research surveying software program.

## **Procedure**

Responses for each survey question were individually downloaded from the Qualtrics server into a Microsoft Excel file. The results were then imported into NVivo 9 and coded using NVivo 9 software’s word frequency explore options. The researcher was then able to obtain a list of the most commonly used words and the frequency with which they were used. For the majority of the results for each question, the exact word function was used to search through participants’ responses for the identical word. However, for questions three (why do you admire certain leaders) and four (when might a female be more effective than a male) the synonyms word function was used to search through participants’ responses for similar words. The similar word function was chosen over the exact same word function, because the top results for the exact same word function were all synonyms. Synonyms were generated by NVivo 9’s internal thesaurus. This analysis provided the researcher with a list of the most commonly used words, the frequency with which they were used, and the synonyms associated with each key word.

The researcher manually went through participants' responses to make sure the commonly used words obtained from NVivo 9 correlated with participants' actual responses. This included going through NVivo 9 software's results and deleting words that were in the actual questions or basic words (i.e. the, a, be, to, etc.). After these steps were completed, the researcher was then able to create lists containing the top three to 20 responses for each of the 12 key survey questions, frequency responses for each word or phrase, and applicable synonyms. The researchers then used axial and selective coding techniques to produce categories and themes (Strauss & Corbin, 1990).

## **Results**

The survey was opened by 183 participants with 170 people proceeding to the end of the survey. The mean response rate for the 12 key survey questions was 71 percent.

### **Results for Each Question**

#### **Question 1: How do you define leadership?**

Question one was answered by 139 participants. The top three defining words were; 1) ability, 2) others, and 3) people. Examples of participants' comments in these three categories of defining words include: (a) 'The ability to inspire others to be and do their best;' (b) 'Leadership is being of service to others; inspiring, motivating, initiating, listening and moving towards a common goal;' and (c) 'The ability to corral a group of people together for a common cause.' The category which emerged from this question is that women view leaders as people who are action-oriented. Leaders inspire, motivate, serve and bring people together.

#### **Question 2: Who are the leaders you admire?**

Question two was answered by 134 participants who provided four main replies; 1) Obama, referring to the USA President Barrack Obama and First Lady Michelle Obama, 2)

Clinton, referring to former USA President Bill Clinton and current USA Secretary of State Hillary Clinton, 3) mother, referring to Mother Teresa and participants' own mothers, and 4) Ms. Oprah Winfrey, television talk host and producer. The category which emerged from this question is that admired leaders can be both personally and not personally known to the respondent.

### **Question 3: Why do you admire them?**

Question three was answered by 135 participants. Five leading responses explained their admiration; 1) have, 2) do, 3) make, 4) work, and 5) good. For this question, participants' responses were grouped according to synonyms. Using the similar word function allowed for less repetition of similar words because it grouped synonyms together into one category. One example of a participant's comment which reflects the leading responses is:

“They encourage risk and creative thinking and they have been great professional role models. They have high expectations, but not unreasonable expectations. Both of them have done a good job of hiring the best people and then empowering them to succeed.”

Other representative comments include: (a) ‘They are doing things to better the world and inspiring others to follow in their footsteps;’ (b) ‘They each inspire the action of other people to make a difference/make a change;’ (c) ‘Because of the dedication and passion with which they worked towards achieving their goals;’ and (d) ‘Tremendous courage, intelligence and communication skills devoted to the greater good.’ The category which again emerged from this question is that women admire leaders who are action-oriented. Leaders inspire, empower, and are passionate and dedicated.

### **Question 4: In what situations, if any, do you think a female would be a more effective leader than a male?**

Question four was answered by 136 participants. Five words frequently came up in the responses; 1) think, 2) have, 3) do, 4) work, and 5) require. Participants' responses were again grouped according to synonyms because the exact word function generated a list that included several synonyms in the top responses. One example of a participant's comment which reflects some of the common responses is:

“Women leaders seem to be better at gaining consensus. They really want to know what others think and they're often more open to differing opinions. So, situations that require compromise and/or a new way of doing things might best be led by a woman.”

Another representative comment of typical answers is:

“Some men seem to have relationships that are based on convenience, whereas women tend to stay in touch with other women, even after they have left a job, or moved away. Women also have the ability to show empathy more than some men do. These skills enable women to be strong leaders.”

Other representative comments are:

(a) ‘Whenever there are human needs at stake, women have the ability to work through the stuff that needs to happen to make sense. Not just come to an immediate fix;’ and (b) ‘I think in situations where group dynamics require different leadership styles for different individuals in a group.’

The category which emerged from this question is that women believe women make better leaders than men in situations where relationships are at stake and consensus is required.

**Question 5: What aspects of a woman's life do you feel develop her leadership potential?**

Question five was answered by 136 participants. The top ranking words were; 1) skills, 2)

roles, 3) work, and 4) experience. Examples of participants' comments which reflect the top ranking words include: (a) 'I feel women can develop their leaderships potential in many aspects such as analytic skills, communication channels, consulting practice, etc.;;' (b) 'I feel that a woman's leadership potential starts at home or at school by the roles she takes on;' (c) 'Working with other people from all walks of life, education in any form, and experience in the field;' and (d) 'I believe that life experiences enable women to develop their leadership skills.' The category which emerged from this question is that women believe their leadership potential can be developed in many different venues.

**Question 6: Does your workplace encourage women to develop their leadership skills? Please elaborate.**

Question six was answered by 133 participants. The top three commonly used words were; 1) yes, 2) opportunities, and 3) all. Examples of participants' comments which reflect the most frequently used words include: (a) 'Yes. My company is actively involved in a women's leadership trade organization, including participation from the top male executives (CEO, President). There is also a women's mentoring program that pairs executive women with emerging leaders;' (b) 'Women hold many of the top executive roles, and all are encouraged to develop their personal skills, further their educations, etc.;;' and Absolutely. I work in a company that is at least half female and many of our executives are women. We get every opportunity to succeed and fail as men do. We're provided mentoring opportunities, educational opportunities and job experiences, often on request. The category which emerged from this question is that women believe they are being given considerable opportunities at work to develop their leadership abilities.

**Question 7: What forms of support would you like to see in your workplace to help**

**women develop leadership skills?**

Question seven was answered by 121 participants. In answering this question, the three main words used repeatedly were; 1) mentoring, 2) programs, and 3) training. Examples of participants' comments which reflect these words include: (a) 'More mentoring programs that involve women outside our company and industry;' (b) 'Programs on leadership;' and (c) 'Training that is consistently looking at new ways to develop and not merely for the most assertive, but for all who are placed in supervisory roles and administrative positions.' The category which emerged from this question is that women are seeking more and different mentoring and training opportunities to develop their leadership skills.

**Question 8: Do you feel that women in a work and personal setting help each other become leaders? Please explain.**

Question eight was answered by 124 participants. The top answers included the words; 1) yes, 2) more, 3) competitive, 4) some, and 5) sometimes. Examples of participants' comments which reflect the top words include: (a) 'Yes the older we get the more we see the value in helping other women not in competing with them;' (b) 'I find more women today are interested in helping other women in goal setting and career planning;' (c) 'I think this goes both ways. I think there are many women who encourage other women to be good leaders. I have also been aware of other women who didn't want the competition;' (d) 'In some cases, I feel that women do help promote other women but I do not feel that this is the norm in corporate America;' and (e) 'Sometimes-- it depends on each of their priorities.' The category which emerged from this question is that the majority of women feel other women do help them become leaders. The situation and individual personalities sometimes create exceptions.

**Question 9: In what area of your life do you see yourself as a leader?**

Question nine was answered by 126 participants with two leading words; 1) work and 2) personal. Tied for third place was; 1) family and 2) others (in regards to helping others in general). Closely following were; 1) community, 2) all, and 3) professional. Examples of participants' comments which reflect the most frequently used words include; (a) 'At work and in my professional organizations;' (b) 'In my personal life and in the business office at work;' (c) 'I'm definitely a leader in my family;' (d) 'As a neighbor/member of my community and in my connections across the globe;' and (e) 'All areas; although the leadership takes different forms depending on the situation.' The category which emerged from this question is that women believe they can and should be leaders in all areas of their lives.

**Question 10: In what area of your life would you like to become a leader?**

Question ten was answered by 120 participants who noted three main areas in which they would like to become a leader; 1) work, 2) life, and 3) all. Examples of participants' comments include: (a) 'In my profession, when I gain more experience, knowledge, and eventually recognition for my work, I hope I will be a leader that others look to for advice and support.:' and (b) 'I would like to be more of a community leader and speak out on issues that matter to me.:' (c) 'All places, home, family work and relationships with friends,' and (d) In every area. Even at those times when my role is to be a follower, someone is observing my actions. We are always leading by example, whether we are leading or following.' The category which emerged from this question is similar to that in question nine, women desire to be leaders in all areas of their lives.

**Question 11: What is your vision as a leader?**

Question 11 was answered by 121 participants. Top ranking visions included the words 1) people, 2) others, and 3) doing. Examples of participants' comments which reflect the

participants' top visions include: (a) 'To have people enjoy working with me. For people to feel championed by my enthusiasm and take initiative to do a job without explicit direction on my part;' (b) 'My vision is to awaken possibility in others--to help them expand their own vision of themselves and lead richer, fuller, happier lives;' and (c) 'Lead by example and by always doing what is right- not what is popular.' The category which emerged from this question is that women cast their leadership visions with regards to others.

### **Question 12: What forms of support do you need to make this possible?**

Question 12 was answered by 120 participants who listed five main areas of support suggested by the key words; 1) help, 2) family, 3) leadership, 4) other (in reference to people and opportunities), and 5) time. Examples of participants' comments which reflect the top five needed areas of support include: (a) 'People to help me get the detail work accomplished so I can focus on training and support;' (b) 'Leadership programs in general for business organizations;' (c) 'Other people with energy, vision and skills;' and (d) 'support from my husband, and good preparation, scholarship, and plenty of uninterrupted time.' The category which emerged from this question is that women seek support from people who are important to them in all aspects of their lives.

Two overall themes emerged from the data; 1) United States women leaders value action over vision, and 2) they seek to be leaders in all areas of their lives, not just at work.

### **Discussion**

In order for the reader to better understand the two overall themes, the authors will discuss each of the survey questions in some detail. Participants' responses to question one (how do you define leadership) revealed that the majority of participants thought leadership was an ability; the ability of a woman to inspire others to share her vision. Examples the participants

shared of women they admired (survey question number two) and their definitions of leadership were consistent with previous research in that inspirational and political figures (Jones, 2011) and their own mothers were listed (Rodgers-Healey, 2003).

Participants' responses to question three (why do you admire the leaders you listed) offered insights as to why they looked up to the leaders they listed. It was intriguing that the top four out of five responses were verbs (have, do, make and work). This indicated that participants in this study admired leaders who took action and made things happen. The notion of United States Americans valuing action is supported by Posner and Schmidt (1992) who surveyed 1,000 managers to learn that the most admired leaders were those who used their talents to accomplish goals. Additionally, the global leadership and organizational behavior effectiveness (GLOBE) studies of 17,000 managers in 950 organizations in 62 cultures reported findings that leaders in the Anglo cluster (in which the USA falls) were considered to be effective if they were results driven and competitive (House, Hanges, Javidan, Dorfman & Gupta, 2004).

Participants' responses to question four (in what situations, if any, do you think a female would be a more effective leader than a male) revealed that women believe they are more effective than men in leadership roles that entail getting group consensus on a project. Participants also stated that women had a greater ability than men to listen to individual's needs, show empathy, and be innovative in creating long term solutions instead of short term fixes. These findings are in congruence with the previous research of Isaac, Griffin, and Carnes (2010) which reported that faculty enjoyed working for female chairs because they listened to others' opinions and used consensus before taking action. Additionally, these results were also consistent with Rodgers-Healy's (2003) study in which their participants believed women could

be more effective leaders than men because women are typically better listeners, more compassionate and helpful, and better at communicating.

Participants' responses in this study to question five (what aspects of a woman's life do you feel develop her leadership potential) indicated that a woman's life roles, whether at home, in the community or at work, all develop her leadership ability. The fact that women feel they can develop leadership skills in all areas of their lives indicates that leadership development does not have to be limited to just the work place. For example, Camplin (2009) draws upon these principles in his article exploring how to incorporate the leader-member exchange theory of leadership to develop volunteers to be leaders of other volunteers.

Participants' responses to question six (Does your workplace encourage women to develop their leadership skills? Please elaborate) and seven (what forms of support would you like to see in your workplace to help women develop leadership skills) overlap. The majority of participants' reported that their workplaces did encourage women to develop their leadership skills, yet the participants wanted more and different kinds of programs on leadership and training. Sponsorship and mentoring were specifically mentioned many times. There appears to be many different kinds of mentoring and sponsorship programs. Respondents noted that programs in which a mentor is assigned a mentee did not work. Instead, the respondents felt that a more natural progression of a relationship between two women was more effective. Sponsorship, however, could come from anyone in the organization. Respondents also appreciated organizational efforts to provide networking opportunities. This is important; if women are going to stay with a company long term they need to be provided with networking opportunities early in their career within an organization (Evans, 2010).

Participants' responses to question eight (Do you feel that women in a work and personal setting help each other become leaders? Please explain) were particularly intriguing to the authors. Women in the younger age brackets frequently answered 'yes.' Women in the older age brackets tended to use clarifying terms such as 'depends.' What remains to be determined, however, is whether or not this supportive pattern will continue as the younger women compete for a scarcity of top leadership positions. However, since over half of the participants in this study were at least in their forties or fifties, the authors are encouraged by this report from those who have been in the work force for a while. It is also heartening that only 15 percent of participants in this study believed a threat of competition determined whether or not a woman decided to help or not help another woman develop as a leader. This finding supports the work of Roebuck and Smith (2011) who interviewed executive women leaders who stated that women must stop seeing other women as competition and women should take every opportunity to advance and support other women. The interviewed executive women further emphasized the importance of relying on one another so women could break into leadership positions in sufficient numbers so that a women's presence at the top would be no longer remarkable.

Participants' responses to question nine (in what area of your life do you see yourself as a leader) indicated that the majority of participants thought they were a leader at work. Many participants also considered themselves to be a leader in all aspects of their lives, including their homes and the community. This result is in alignment with statistics reported by the Center for American Women in Politics (2011) that stated in the past two decades, there has been a dramatic increase in the number of women holding elected office. In 1979 women held 10 percent of state legislature positions, 11 percent of elected offices at the state level and only three

percent of US Congressional seats. In 2011, those numbers have increased to 24 percent, 22 percent and 17 percent respectively.

Participants' responses to question 10 (in what area of your life would you like to become a leader) revealed similar findings to those of question nine. Participants wanted to be leaders in all areas of their lives, with 'work' leading the list. This is not a surprising finding considering women often do not compartmentalize their lives. Goals women set for themselves in one area of their lives often trickle over into other areas. In their communities, however, women continue to seek leadership positions but there are not many formal opportunities or programs in place designed to attract and support women as community leaders. Instead, as Bazata, Cressy, Warren, and Evans (2011) noted:

"It is essential to recognize that leadership is practiced daily by women and often goes unacknowledged. It frequently happens in ways not located within a title or position. For example, women's leadership is practiced in families, churches, PTAs and community gardens. It is practiced in a wide variety of places where work gets accomplished, often quietly and without fanfare" (p. 6).

For question 11 (what is your vision as a leader) participants expressed the need to help others/people in their vision as a leader. These results are not unexpected given that women are often described as relationship builders and collaborators (Vinkenburg et al., 2009). The women in this study expressed notions of servant leadership (Greenleaf, 2002) as well. Servant leaders are those who behave ethically and encourage others to succeed personally and professionally. They acknowledge a moral responsibility to help all involved in a project or event. A true desire to serve comes first; leadership is something which flows out of that desire to serve. Beyond serving others, many of the respondents noted that they wished to truly empower their followers.

In doing so they were practicing the transformational leadership that Eagly and Carli (2007) described as being more naturally suited to women.

Participants' responses to question 12 (what forms of support do you need to make this possible) revealed that participants needed better training programs and continued or increased support from their employers and families to make their leadership visions become a reality. Responses also indicated that participants desired recognition, encouragement, leadership experiences and more time in their schedule to achieve their leadership visions. These findings contrasted with Evans (2010) study which listed that women most needed better networking opportunities and child care facilities to further achieve their leadership goals. While networking is alluded to, child care is not mentioned as a concern in this study. The authors surmise that because 72 percent of the participants in this survey indicated that they were at least 41 years of age, it is quite possible that concerns about child care for young children was no longer an issue for most of these women.

### **Implications of the Study**

In general, the women in this exploratory study stated that they believed leadership is an ability which can be cultivated through time, experience and mentoring. One way female leaders can help younger women who aspire to leadership roles is to participate in women's leadership development initiatives found on college and university campuses. With a record number of women earning college degrees, female leadership development programs are critical for helping women find their way through the labyrinth of leadership (Eagly & Carli, 2007).

At one point, one of the authors of this study served as Chair of the Department of Leadership and Professional Development, which was an interdisciplinary faculty team that taught only in the Executive MBA program. The female students came to the Chair and asked

what programs could be developed to help them as women who aspired to leadership roles. Out of that request, a model of women's leadership (see figure 1) was developed, as well as a new "Women's Leadership Lab" graduate course.

### **Women's Leadership Model**

This model takes an inside out approach to leadership. Each section of the model is discussed in the following paragraphs.

#### **Understanding Self.**

It is impossible for women to lead others if they do not first examine who they are, what they have learned through life, and how those lessons have helped shaped who they want to become. Women must start with a clear concept of who they are and what they stand for to have the best chance of leading others. Understanding self is at the core of the women's leadership model because it is the foundation upon which the model is based. Understanding self is something that is formed across a lifetime and the elements of understanding self can be discovered and developed at any time. Women leaders need to examine their own strengths, weaknesses, values, and beliefs. Self-knowledge enables women aspiring to leadership positions to recognize their strengths and weaker areas and either take corrective action or develop strategies to compensate for those weaknesses.

#### **Developing Interpersonal Communication Skills.**

Leadership requires relentless communication, and women who employ effective interpersonal skills build commitment and trust. Communication is the most important "soft skill" necessary in today's ever-changing organizational landscape. All other skills will be much easier to acquire if the focus begins with communication skills. Therefore, a female leader should focus on honing skills such as giving and receiving feedback, mastering nonverbal

communication, employing emotional intelligence, choosing the right type of listening for the situation, asking relevant questions, negotiating, understanding conflict and the use of different strategies, and employing mentoring, coaching, and counseling. Women need to learn to be confident in these interpersonal communication behaviors so they will be perceived as powerful and self-confident.

### **Leading Through Words and Action.**

Leaders spend a vast amount of each day communicating with others to build trust. When trust doesn't exist between a leader and her direct reports, they will look for someone else to follow, inside or outside the organization. Trust is based on integrity; comprised of being honest, keeping promises, and being fair. Leaders are judged by what they do every day. Building trust can be one of the most powerful actions a female leader can take to grow her team. The first step to building trust is being authentic. When a leader says she will do something, she should do it. Her team will see that her words and actions are in alignment. A leader role models the way for others by her actions. If she asks for feedback, engages her employees in dialogue, and seeks ways she can do to support her team, they will learn from her actions. On the other hand, if she lies or keeps information from her team, she will break down trust. A leader's trust erodes when others perceive that she is not **walking her talk**. Trust is something that must be earned and should not be taken for granted.

When a female leader understands her role is to guide, coach, influence and persuade, she will choose to surround herself with a team of subject matter experts. The focus switches from having to "know everything" to having a team that "knows everything." Most often the input for making decision comes from others. So as a leader, a female must give credit where it is due.

### **Continuing to be a Lifelong Learner.**

Growing in leadership ability, just like growing in other areas of life, will continue as long as an individual commits to improvement and follow ups with action. A woman leader should be a learner who is engaged in continuous lifelong learning. As a woman leader, the attitude should be that growth and learning lead to being a role model for other women leaders.

### **Women's Leadership Lab Course**

In this class, the students focus on personal and professional leadership development while working on a semester long project that requires them to partner with a non-profit organization that either helps women or is led by women. The students interview executive level female leaders and network with various women leaders from the community. Many female leaders volunteer to come to class to share their lessons learned.

Some students who just completed the Women's Leadership Lab course provided the following observations, which echo comments made by interviewees in this study:

“The future of Women Leaders myself included is bright. The number of women leaders is increasing each day. However, there is still a lot of work to bridge the leadership gap between women and men. The most important thing we can do as women is to learn from the mistakes and successes of the past. Women need to look back to identify what works and what does not, understand why certain things do not work, and figure out how to overcome the obstacles that caused failure in the past. Women have to continue making the necessary personal and professional modification in their thought processes and behavior in order to keep evolving in leadership. The greatest resource women can use is other women. Through mentoring and nurturing, women can create a succession plan that allows women leaders to grow and flourish both in quality and quantity.”

“As the semester closes and I look at myself today, I am proud of the growth that I have undergone in such a short time. I have lots of room for growth and development. I have lots of learning to do. I am certain there are things that I still have no knowledge of. However, the tools and resources that I take from this class and from my team project are great starting points to help me grow in the right direction as a leader. I am more open to listening and calmer as a person. I appreciate success and view not so successful moments as great learning opportunities. I feel like I am remembering my childhood dreams while developing new dreams to complement the old ones. I am in a good place in my life right now and I am thankful to God, family, new friends from this semester and old friends for bringing growth and happiness to my life. It is difficult to put in words that in this one semester I have faced the most difficult moment in my life and also felt the most growth and change in myself as a person, a friend, sister, daughter, and especially as a leader.”

To support young, aspiring females more colleges and universities should focus on developing women’s leadership programs that would bring together accomplished women willing to serve as mentors. Our Women’s Leadership Lab course is open to all graduate students from all the various colleges, and we are exploring the option of cross listing it so that undergraduate students could also enroll. We believe a joint-enrollment program would provide mentoring opportunities between the graduate and undergraduate female students.

### **Limitations of Study**

The major limitation in this study is that the sample is not representative of the US population as a whole in that 92 percent of the respondents had at least a Bachelor’s degree and

respondents were recruited from professional women's organizations. While there was a good representation of different industries in which the participants worked, the education sector accounted for 25 percent. Thus, all the answers might not be generalizable to all industries or society sectors.

As is true of all surveys, people who elect to answer a survey are somewhat different from those who do not answer the survey. Thus it is difficult to make wide generalizations about the results. There is also the possibility that without specific definitions provided for terms such as *admire*, *leadership* or *vision*, participants may have answered the questions differently based on their perceptions of what those terms mean. Finally, the response rates to each question varied between 64 and 76 percent, with the highest response rates occurring in earlier questions and lower response rates occurring in later questions. Had questions been presented in reverse order to half of the participants, it is possible a more even response rate for all questions would have resulted.

### **Suggestions for Future Research**

Any one of the twelve leadership questions posed in this study could be a stand-alone study which would benefit from a more in-depth examination. This could be accomplished by following up with participant interviews or focus groups.

Future studies might examine such topics as what types of mentoring programs have shown the most long-term effectiveness or whether or not younger women will obtain leadership positions with more authority over time.

In addition, the finding that women are more inclined to help each other than they previously were is certainly a research topic worth pursuing. Future related research studies could include questions such as (a) do women today perceive that they have more opportunities

than their predecessors and thus feel less threatened by other successful women? or (b) is there truly a generational difference with younger women being more willing to help each other than perhaps their mothers were?

In conclusion, there seems to be change on the horizon for women in leadership in the United States. Across the board, the respondents indicated a greater willingness to help other female leaders than has been noted in the past (De la Rey, 2005; Heilbrun, 1993). This finding is helpful for colleges and universities calling upon women leaders to support their women's leadership programs. In addition, the participants in this study were interested in being leaders in all aspects of their lives, not just at work. They also expressed the need for their leadership to matter or make a difference.

To achieve their goals, the participants cited the need for support from their employers and families. Fortunately, over 50 percent of participants felt that their workplace encouraged women to develop their leadership abilities. While this statistic is encouraging, the participants in this study noted that there is still a need for more, and better, leadership training programs, which would be another area in which institutions of higher learning could help. Organizations can only benefit from building up women. As noted in McKinsey and Company's (2007) research "companies where women are most strongly represented at board or management level are also the companies that perform best" (p. 3). The knowledge and skills women typically possess, such as caring, collaborating, being inclusive, and sharing decision-making, are viewed as necessary for effective leadership (Werhane, 2007). The kind of leadership that many women bring to the table is just the kind of leadership that organizations in today's global economy need to succeed.

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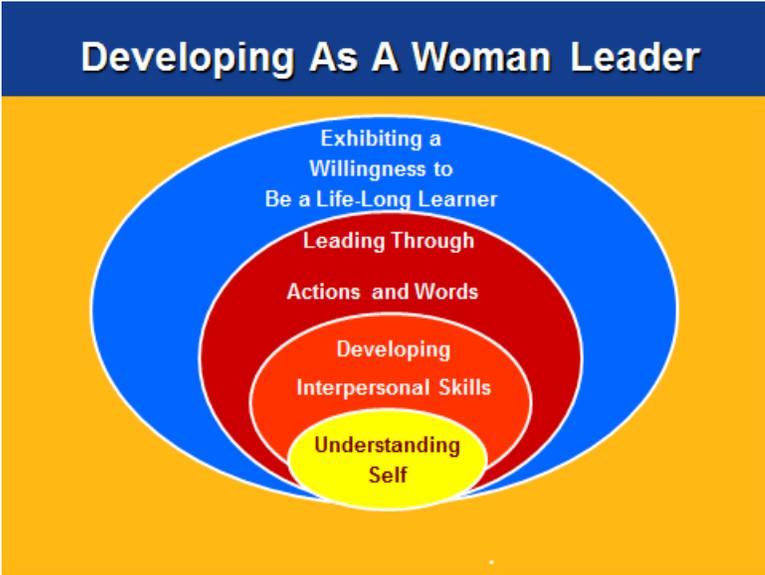


Figure 1. Women’s Leadership Model©