A Quantitative Analysis of the Personal Characteristics and Workplace Experiences of Women and Men as Professional and Community Leaders

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Though women and men leaders have similar backgrounds, life experiences tend to prolong the time required for women to attain leadership status.

Introduction

In the past, the subject of leadership in women has been confined to anecdotal figures who are remarkable for their small numbers. Women leaders have emerged as a more common phenomenon in American society in the last three decades, reflecting the transition in the status of women in society. According to Dye and Strickland (1982), between 1970 and 1980, the total number of women managers and administrators in the U.S. workforce increased over 100%. However, this change has not extended through all levels of leadership. Hymowitz & Schellhardt found that by 1985 only 2.7% of the top executives and directors of AT&T were women and 8.3% and 15% of division and district managers were women. In contrast, 22% of second-level supervisors and 38.7% of first -level supervisors were women.

The slow progress of women on this front has two possible explanations. One is "the glass ceiling," a term that was coined in 1986 by Hymowitz and Schellhardt, two *Wall Street Journal* reporters. This is an invisible barrier that blocks women from advancing to senior leadership positions in organizations. An alternative explanation to "the glass ceiling" might be a delay in the pipeline with appreciable numbers of women only now reaching the point in their careers where senior positions are available.

With increasing competition for leadership positions, women will likely encounter a growing number of obstacles to promotion (*Pipelines of Progress, An Update on the Glass Ceiling Initiative,* 1992). In a survey of female senior executives, one-third believed that the number of female executives in their companies would remain static or decrease (*Business Week*, June 8, 1992).

In 1991, the author was a participant in a yearlong program run by a private, nonprofit organization for women professional and community leaders. Beginning that year, the author initiated a study of these women.

The goal of this study was to discern how factors of personal background and workplace experience compare in successful women and men leaders. It was then extrapolated that these factors might influence the course of advancement for women leaders *vis a vis* men leaders.

Methodology

Study Subjects

The study group was Leadership Texas, a program of the Foundation for Women's Resources, an international non-profit organization started in 1982 in Austin, Texas to promote the achievements and advancement of women. Women selected for Leadership Texas were leaders in their communities and professions. The selection committee was drawn from the organization's Board of Directors, which included former Governor Ann Richards. The control group was The Texas Lyceum, a predominantly male organization which emerged in 1980, and was composed of a group of young Texas business, political, educational, and civic leaders. President George W. Bush, is a Lyceum alumnus. Attendees in both groups were selected from applicants by committees, which based their choices on demonstrated leadership potential, interest in civic affairs, heterogeneity of interests, and personal background.

Four hundred ninety-eight questionnaires were sent to Leadership Texas members (classes 1991 through 1995). There were 298 replies (60% response). Three hundred eighty nine questionnaires were sent to Texas Lyceum members. There were 71 replies (23% response).

Study Instrument

From 1991 to 1995, a mailed survey was made of study subjects and controls determining such demographics as age, income, family status, occupation, and

education. In addition, the author asked questions regarding workplace experience, major barriers to and facilitators of success in career development, and descriptions of individual leadership styles. There were 66 questions in the questionnaire. Sixty-two were quantitative; and some had multiple parts. Four questions were qualitative.

Statistics

Where appropriate, comparisons were made between all men and all women using the chi-square test, Student's t-test or ANOVA. For questions with binomial (i.e., yes/no, etc.) response, Fisher's Exact Test was used in addition to the chi-square test. The Fisher-Freeman-Halton test, which is an extension of Fisher's Exact test, was run when the chi-square test resulted in at least one cell of the contingency table having an expected value of less than 5. The Cochran-Mantel-Haenzel test was used in questions involving differences in workplace experiences between men and women to adjust for the somewhat different career distributions of the men and women subjects.

Results

As noted above, study subjects were selected by panels of the two respective organizations for their status as leaders. In order to verify that the subjects under study were, in fact, leaders, several accoutrements of leadership were measured: existence of subordinates, control of a budget, and the ability to hire and fire. Better than 85% of each group had direct subordinates working at their direction and over half had four or more direct subordinates. More than half of both groups had ten or more direct and indirect subordinates. There was no difference between men and women in the number of subordinates. In both groups, more than 70% of respondees controlled budgets and had the authority to hire and to fire, with no significant difference between the study and control group.

More than 95% of both groups held at least a bachelor's degree, and over half of each group held higher graduate degrees as well. In excess of 30% of each group held doctorates. A significant difference in distribution of degrees was present between men and women due to the greater percentage of women with master's degrees and the higher percentage of men with "other" post-graduate degrees (see Figure 1).

A majority of both women and men had total annual compensation of greater than $50,000. The male respondees were significantly better compensated than the women with over 90% making in excess of $75,000 and slightly less than 40% of the women compensated at that level (see Figure 2).

Both groups were greater than 80% Anglo ethnicity. The age distribution of both groups paralleled each other, with over 80% of respondees being between the ages of 35 and 54 (see Figure 3). Curiously, the birth order of both groups again closely paralleled each other. Over 40% of both groups were oldest children, followed in frequency by middle children, youngest children, and only children (the latter representing less than 10% of each group, (see Figure 4). The number of siblings in both groups followed a similar distribution. More than 50% of men and women had

mothers who were homemakers, with no significant difference between the two groups with respect to their mothers' professional and educational levels. The professional status and educational level of fathers, however, were different between female and male leaders with the men having more fathers in business and the professions. Men also had substantially higher levels of paternal education (see Figure 5) and (see Figure 6). Parental age at the time of the subjects' births was not different between men and women.

Over 90% of both groups were not employed by their parents or friends of their parents. In general, the contributions made by parents to career advancement were similar on both groups. However, significantly more men had important contacts through their parents than women, i.e., 20% for men compared to 4.3% for women. Although they did not reach statistical significance, essentially the same percentages were found in terms of professional contacts made via the subjects' spouses.

In analyzing marital status, subjects were categorized as single, cohabiting, married, separated, divorced, remarried, and widowed. Seventy percent or more of the subjects were married or remarried at the time of the study. There was no significant difference between men and women across all of the categories. Of all married respondents, slightly less than 50% of the women were in the first marriage, in contrast to 76% of the men. The distribution of spouse age was significantly older for the women than for the men. Among the married participants, the spouses of women leaders had significantly higher incomes than those of the men leaders (see Figure 7).

A significantly higher percentage of the men had at least one child (approximately 80%) in contrast to just over 50% of the women. The men leaders had significantly more children at home, 1.6, compared to 0.7 for women. Thirty percent of the women interrupted their careers for child rearing, while virtually none of the men did so.

The distribution of time spent in volunteer activities was similar in the two groups.

The final area of study was that of career and workplace experience. Although majorities of both groups were employed by others, more men were self-employed than women (35% of men compared to 24% of women). There was a somewhat different distribution in career fields. The classifications of career fields were business, professional, health, education, government, non-profit-salaried, and other. More men were in business and the professions, while more women were in education and government (see Figure 8). [All workplace questions statistically compensated for this varying mix of career fields]. A majority of both groups worked between 41 and 60 hours a week. On average, the men worked a greater number of hours per week than the women (see Figure 9). The distribution of time employed was essentially the same in the two groups (see Figure 10). However, the men were in their present position longer than the women (see Figure 11). Furthermore, the men appeared to have assumed a leadership position earlier in the course of their career and had maintained it longer (see Figure 12).

The two groups differed regarding their perception of their treatment by their

superiors *vis a vis* colleagues of the opposite sex. When asked about credence given opinions, performance judgment, promotion opportunities, and advice given, it was found consistently that approximately 30% of women leaders did not believe that they were given treatment equal to that given men leaders. When all questions concerning treatment by superiors were considered together, 51.2% of the women leaders felt that they had received unequal treatment in at least one way. An overwhelming majority (greater than 80%) of respondents who felt that there was a difference in treatment given to the two sexes believed women to be at a disadvantage (see Figure 13, Figure 14, Figure 15, Figure 16, Figure 17). Both groups felt that the two sexes received equal treatment from subordinates.

Three-fourths of male respondents believed that the social connections made through their parents or spouses were of value in their career advancements, while only half of the women believed this to be the case. Thirty percent of the women believed that being female interfered with the opportunities for professional advancement made through social relationships. Only 10% of the men believed that being a male was disadvantageous in career-advancing social relationships. When asked, "In which type of social function was your sex a disadvantage?" over 90% of male respondents said none. Nearly 40% of female respondents said none. Just over 40% of female respondents cited participatory sports as an area of disadvantage.

When asked if they had been the target of a sexual approach by a superior, equal, or subordinate in the workplace, the answer was in the affirmative among 41%, 37%, and 10% of the women, respectively, and 1%, 24%, and 39% of the men (see Figure 18). Women received direct sexual advances predominately from superiors. Men received direct sexual advances predominately from subordinates.

Three fourths of both male and female respondents believed that a mentor was important in their career advancement. Of those who had mentors, 98% of the men had a male mentor, and 67% of females had a male mentor (see Figure 19).

Both groups viewed themselves as ethical in their workplace behavior. Ninety per cent or more of the leaders surveyed denied being dishonest in their job responsibilities (see Figure 20). More than 80% of both groups denied taking unfair advantage of others (see Figure 21).

Discussion

The subjects of this study were selected by distinguished panels as leaders in their professional fields and/or communities. That they were in fact acting in positions of leadership was supported by validating questions in the survey concerning control of budgets, authority to hire and fire, and the number of subordinates who answer to them. This study focused on women occupying positions of leadership in the post-training world. A review of the literature revealed that previous studies of women leaders looked at students and/or managers (e.g., Feather & Simon, 1975; Gutek & Stevens, 1979; Heilman & Saruwatari, 1979). An exception was Rosener's (1990) unpublished Leadership Study, commissioned for the International Women's Forum,

which also utilized post-training women leaders as subjects.

Whether the subjects in the current study acted as leaders, or were simply managers of personnel, cannot be reliably determined from the opinions of the subjects themselves. What could be said of the subjects was that they were either leaders or they had the opportunity to act as leaders.

The purpose of this study was to determine quantitatively the background characteristics of these men and women leaders as well as the personal and work life experiences which might be important in facilitating or inhibiting their advancement as leaders. Ease in advancement to a position of leadership was implied by the time required to reach such a position. This study demonstrated that, in general, the women's path to leadership required a longer time course. Those differences in background characteristics, personal life experiences, and work place experiences demonstrated in this study between men and women leaders were hypothesized as partial etiological explanations for this longer time course to leadership. Demonstration of the importance of these characteristics and experiences in determining the opportunity to function as a leader requires the repetition of this study in other populations and a comparison of the effect of these factors within each gender.

A thorough search of previously published quantitative leadership studies failed to discover other reports that attempted to explain the differential ease or difficulty of men and women in reaching a position of leadership.

The groups of men and women compared were similar in many aspects of their backgrounds. These similarities included age, high level of education, birth order, number of siblings, parental age at the time of their birth, professional and educational levels of their mothers. Rosener (1990), likewise, found similar age distributions and education levels in men and women leaders.

In the current study, both men and women leaders tended to be first born children. In contrast, other authors have found this to be a characteristic peculiar to women. For women, but not for men, Sandler and Scallia (1975) found a significantly greater likelihood for firstborns to serve as presidents or other officers of organizations. Hennig & Jardim (1977) observed that being firstborn was a common characteristic in a sample of 25 successful top-level women leaders.

The two groups that were the focus of this study differed in the professional and educational level of their fathers, with the men as a whole having fathers from higher socioeconomic class and level of education than the women.

In general, both groups appeared to be mostly self-made as leaders, rather than "inheriting" leadership positions by virtue of their families. Twenty percent of the men furthered their careers through contacts made through their parents; a similar percentage of men made important contacts through their spouses. In contrast, less than 5% of the women had career-advancing contacts provided by parents or spouses.

All in all, no enormous differences in personal background appeared to distinguish between women and men leaders.

While a large majority of both men and women leaders were married at the time of the questionnaire (70%), a much larger percent of the men had children then did the women. The average number of children at home was greater among the men than among the women. These findings agree with Rosener's (1990) study. A possible interpretation of these results might be that women leaders were forced to sacrifice more in their personal sphere than men. Perhaps this finding resulted from greater obstacles to overcome in their career pathways than those faced by men. Alternatively, spouses of men leaders may have been more helpful in providing for the basis for a family life than were the spouses of the women leaders. It is notable that nearly one-third of the women interrupted their career for childbearing, while virtually none of the men did so. Some 36% of women felt that the availability of childcare affected their career choices. Carroll (1987) argued that the biggest obstacle married women leaders faced was coping with the conflict between career and family.

Women respondents appeared on average to achieve their leadership status at a later point in their career than did their male counterparts. This may have reflected either discrimination or self-imposed obstacles to advancement. In all questions relating to treatment by superiors, a fairly constant 30% perceived unequal treatment by their superiors. Alternatively, they may have had a lower drive for advancement. The distribution of hours spent at work was weighted somewhat higher in men compared to women in this study. This finding contrasted with Rosener's (1990) findings that both sexes worked approximately 55 hours a week.

Approximately 30% of female respondents believed their sex put them at a disadvantage with regard to social functions that were important to career advancement, with participatory sports being the most cited example. Hennig & Jardim (1997) found that women's lesser experience with team sports than men's limited their ability to participate effectively in management teams.

While the issue of sexual harassment was not specifically addressed in the questionnaire, large percentages of both men and women leaders had been the objects of sexual approaches, desired and undesired, in the workplace. For the women, the preponderance of those approaches were by superiors or equals. For the men, the targeting was by equals and subordinates. This may have reflected the relative proportions of women and men in the roles of superiors and subordinates, or it may have reflected the differing role of power relationships and sexual approaches between the two sexes.

Both groups believed mentoring to be important to career advancement. Nearly all of the male leaders had mentors of the same sex, while only one-third of the women had mentors of the same sex. "Fewer high-level women are available to serve as mentors (Bass, 1990, p. 716)."

Questions of ethics and values were not extensively explored by this study. However,

questions concerning honesty and fairness on the job indicated that both groups viewed themselves as ethical and fair individuals. This is in contrast to a 1987 *Wall Street Journal* article that noted one-fourth of the 671 executives surveyed by a leading research firm believed that ethics can impede a successful career, and that over 50% of all the executives they knew bent the rules to get ahead (Gini,1996).

Study Limitations

Several limitations must be considered regarding the significance of this study. Respondents were from a geographically limited area of the US. The validation of whether respondents were bona fide leaders was based on indirect criteria (selection committees, income, number of employees, etc.). No effort was made to confirm the honesty of respondents' self-assessment. Subjects and controls had non-symmetrical distributions of career stages, although their age distributions were symmetrical. This could have influenced their perceptions of workplace experiences. Subjects and controls had different career field distributions. Answers reflected a snapshot in time of the respondents' careers (a longitudinal follow-up would be desirable). Some bias may have resulted from non-universal responses of subject and control groups. No attempt was made to contact non-responders as many of the questionnaires were returned in an anonymous fashion. Different selection panels functioned for the two groups (however, the similar demographic characteristics of the two groups suggested this may not be a severe problem).

Conclusions

Men and women leaders in this Texas-based study had similar personal backgrounds. Nevertheless, a large proportion of women leaders perceived that they had a steeper climb to success due to discrimination and conflicts between personal and workplace life. By definition, the women who are subjects in this study managed to overcome the unique barriers to success posed by their gender. However, Figure 22 depicts the effect of various factors influencing career advancement. It suggests that the different experiences of men and women regarding personal life, treatment by superiors, and social connection resulted in a delay for women compared to men before a leadership role was achieved . One could hypothesize that other women who failed to become leaders were impaired by the same factors.

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