

*Full Length Research Paper*

## **Leaning In: A Phenomenological Study of African American Women Leaders in the Pharmaceutical Industry**

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Accepted February 24, 2016

**The pharmaceutical industry includes low levels of African American women in leadership positions. In 2010, according to the Equal Employment Opportunity office, African American women comprised only 1.5% of senior executives and 3.4% of first/mid-level managers. This qualitative study describes the leadership behaviors of 8 African American women leaders within the pharmaceutical industry. The approaches used by these women leaders to navigate their environments illustrate that although these women may be limited in number, they are in fact leaning into and embracing their leadership roles; and consequently impacting their organizations and communities. Seven themes are found to categorize the leadership experiences of these women as leaders. They are: 1) making a difference, 2) leveraging information and knowledge, 3) serving as mentors, 4) establishing and maintaining credibility, 5) asking for support, 6) illustrating integrity at the highest levels and 7) facing up to challenges. While the study is limited in its transferability by its qualitative design and number of participants, the findings provide insightful themes regarding the common experiences of these particular African American women leaders in the pharmaceutical industry.**

**Keywords:** leadership, women, African American, phenomenology, qualitative, diversity, pharmaceutical

### **Introduction**

According to the US Equal Employment Opportunity office 2010 job patterns for minorities and women in private industry (EEO-1), 2010 EEO-1 national aggregate report, African American women comprised 7.6% of all employees in the pharmaceutical industry, and only 1.5% of senior executives and 3.4% of first/mid-level managers. The approaches used by these women illustrate that although they may be limited in number they are in fact leaning into and embracing their leadership roles. Highlighting the strategies used by these women, from multiple functional areas, to lead and impact their organizations and communities represents an opportunity to give voice to their experiences. The purpose of this qualitative study is to describe the leadership experience of African American women leaders within pharmaceutical industry.

### **Literature Review**

#### **African American Women in Leadership**

African American women leaders use a number of strategies for communicating and navigating within predominately white environments. These include approaches such as “engaged communal orientation” (King & Ferguson, 2011), interactive communication, empowerment through challenge to produce

results, and participatory decision making through collaborative debate (Parker, 2001). While African American women in leadership are equipped with the “attributes, knowledge and skills” to perform in their positions, they may need additional strategies to overcome negative stereotypes and barriers; and these strategies may be different from their majority peer group (Epps, 2008). It is possible that the strategic responses that some African American women have to problematic encounters can be seen as methods for “transforming organizational structures” (Parker, 2001).

Byrd (2009) found clusters of meaning that described the experiences of executive and senior level African American women managers in predominately white organizations. These clusters included: disempowering encounters, being excluded from the good ole boy social network, being the only one, needing validation and dymythizing stereotypical images (Byrd, 2009). Additionally, due to their marginalized status, it has been reported that it is necessary for African American women to develop their own support systems (King & Ferguson, 2011). “These systems helped them work through psychological injury, cultivate community with and across their immediate work contexts, and develop strategies for social

change within their organizations and professions.” (King & Ferguson, 2011, p.128)

### **The Pharmaceutical Industry**

The pharmaceutical industry is a growing, dynamic and complex global industry that has become increasingly more complex over time (Green & Aitken, 2006). It seems imperative, that organizational cultures within the industry evolve to embrace collaboration and knowledge sharing to ensure their competitiveness (Rowlands & Morgan, 2006). The pharmaceutical industry is also faced with an interesting paradox that can, and perhaps has, impeded creativity and productivity previously. A number of dichotomies are highlighted due to the interaction that is required between the various areas of the organization (professional and science based). These include: team versus individual, unity versus heterogeneity, freedom versus control, and leader versus researcher (Sundgren & Styhre, 2006). While none of these dilemmas may in fact be unique to the pharmaceutical industry, they may be more pronounced or urgent due to the industry’s traditionally strong financial performance, global marketplace, technological focus, as well as other considerations (Hashemi, 2012).

The evolution of the pharmaceutical industry seems well underway. And, there is recognition that new approaches to the leadership and business will be required; approaches that are more collaborative and empowering for employees. The industry seems ripe for a study exploring how African American women leaders perceive and experience their roles as leaders with these organizations.

### **Method**

The strategy of inquiry used for this qualitative study was phenomenology. A series of open ended questions were asked during the interviews in order to gain an understanding of the participants’ experiences, values and behaviors in the context of their leadership positions within the pharmaceutical industry. The phenomenon studied is African American women in leadership. Additionally, all participants were employed in the pharmaceutical industry at the time of the study. Given the research question, this methodology is appropriate. “.....A phenomenological study describes the common meaning for several individuals of their lived experiences of a concept or phenomenon.” (Creswell, 2013, p.76). Additionally, phenomenological studies require that the researcher abstain from making suppositions on the specific topic, and instead approach the topic ‘freshly and naively’ (Moustakas, 1994, p.47). Through this approach, the researcher “derives findings that will provide the basis for further research and reflection” (Moustakas, 1994, p.47).

### **Recruitment**

Participants in the study were recruited utilizing a snowball strategy. “Snowball sampling is arguably the most widely employed method of sampling in qualitative research in various disciplines across the social sciences” (Noy, 2008, p.330). This

method also leveraged the researcher’s personal contacts. A total of twenty-three individuals were contacted for assistance with identifying the participants for this study. Participants were required to meet the following criteria: at least four years of employment in the pharmaceutical industry, currently employed in the pharmaceutical industry, and holding a position of leadership in which they are responsible for influencing direct reports or other individuals or groups of individuals toward completing a common goal (Northouse, 2013). Eight interviews were completed with African American women in leadership positions in the pharmaceutical industry from three different global pharmaceutical companies. Participants were recruited from multiple functional areas within the industry and included participants from human resources, marketing, sales, corporate services and research and development.

### **Data Analysis**

The data gathered from all of the interviews were summarized with respect to the participants’ experiences as leaders within the pharmaceutical industry. The texts of all eight interviews were analyzed and findings organized thematically in order to highlight themes that were essential to the constitution of the lived experiences of the participants as African American women leaders in the pharmaceutical industry (Creswell, 2013). Verbatims were used to demonstrate support for the themes (Moustakas, 1994). This was also done in order to ‘bring in the voice of participants in the study’ (Creswell, 2013). Paragraph length quotations were used along with embedded quotes (Creswell, 2013).

### **Trustworthiness**

To increase the trustworthiness of this study, triangulation of field notes, transcripts and audio tapes was performed in the analysis of the data. “Triangulation is also to “member check”: to ask the woman quoted if that is what she said.” (Stake, 2010, p. 123). It involves providing the participant with a copy of the interview transcript and asking for comments (Stake, 2010). Participants in this study were provided with a copy of their own transcripts for review and comment.

### **Results**

The results of this qualitative phenomenological study follow. To maintain confidentiality, the companies represented in this study are referred to as Company X, Y and Z, and participants will be referred to as Participants A, B, C, D, E, F, G and H.

### **Participant Demographics**

While six of the eight participants are employed by the same company (Company X), two additional companies are represented in the study (Company Y and Company Z). Consequently, the participant pool represents the experiences of African American women leaders in three different pharmaceutical companies, each of which is ranked among the top fifty pharmaceutical companies globally. Additionally, multiple functional areas are represented by the participants (human resources, marketing, sales, corporate services and

research and development), along with four geographic locations. These factors reflect a degree of diversity that is important to providing a broad view of the experience (Lavery, 2003). The titles of the participants included that of manager, director, and vice president. The participants in this study are experienced with their years in the pharmaceutical industry ranging from ten to twenty-seven and one half years. The women in this study

Table 1

report having managed people for five years or more (with one exception where a participant indicated having one direct report for one year). Each of the participants reports currently having direct reports (with one exception), and all (with one exception), have been in their current position for at least two years. This information is summarized in Table 1.

*Summary of Participant Demographics – Years in Industry, Functional Area, Leading People and Years in Current Position*

	Years in Industry	Functional Area	Years Leading People (in the industry)	Number of Direct Reports	Years in Current Position
Participant A	19	Sales	5	0*	2
Participant B	14	Sales	9	17	4
Participant C	20	Corporate Services	1	1	7
Participant D	10	Research and Development	10	7	2
Participant E	17	Research and Development	12	2	<1
Participant F	17	Marketing	17	4	3
Participant G	16	Human Resources	16	4	5.5
Participant H	27.5	Human Resources	25	3	3

\*Note: This participant had no direct reports; however she has had 5 years of experience leading people in the pharmaceutical industry.

### Leadership Experiences

The experiences of these particular African American women leaders in the pharmaceutical industry, in general has been good, although not without challenges. These women have all prepared themselves well for their roles. At times this has included the support of their companies through training and development and/or the support of mentors and others within the organization. They have excelled in their particular areas of the industry, with some achieving recognition not only from their organizations, but also from their communities.

Upon multiple reviews of the interview text, the following themes emerged with respect to the leadership experiences of this group of women: 1) making a difference, 2) leveraging information and knowledge, 3) serving as mentors, 4) establishing and maintaining credibility, 5) asking for support, 6) illustrating integrity at the highest levels and 7) facing up to challenges.

**Making a difference.** Participants report being fulfilled by the work that they do as part of the pharmaceutical industry. For some, this extended beyond the particular positions that they hold in their organizations, and included added fulfillment through their association with an industry that contributes to

improving the health of those that use the medicines their companies develop and market. They recognize the pharmaceutical industry as one that plays an important role in the everyday lives of many people. It is also interesting to note the multiple functional areas that are represented with respect to this characteristic.

I didn't create the medication, but by extension, me ensuring that physicians were educated about it, I know that I am directly impacting how people live and work and are able to spend time with their grandchildren or be on the earth longer. So for me working in this industry, there are many, many stories like that. (Participant B, personal communication, June 21, 2013)

I've had the privilege to work on so many drugs that do mean so much to people. Drugs that were developed for diseases where there was not another option. And even in the case where the drug may not have been successful in making it to market, it was so incredible to be a part of trying to deliver that; and for the patients that it did work for, to understand what a difference it made in their lives. (Participant F, personal communication, June 25, 2013)

Others report being fulfilled by their work on products that directly impacted the African American community along with the ability to influence the allocation of resources to communities they perceived as being in need. For example, Participant D reported “I’m working at a pharmaceutical company and I have the opportunity to spend their money in a community that I know needs this product”. (Participant D, personal communication, June 22, 2013)

Still others discuss the opportunity they have, by virtue of their level in the organization, to influence policy, practice and the culture of the organization at the highest levels. This is viewed as an advantage, a motivator, and in some sense validation of their leadership position. One participant states “I’ve been most impactful as [title omitted], because it’s given me the opportunity to influence at the very senior levels of the organization, from the CEO on down.” (Participant G, personal communication, July 2, 2013)

So I’ve gotten a lot of satisfaction out of my leadership experience because I feel like I’ve been able to do a lot to grow the business, to grow and develop my people, and to really shape the corporate culture. That’s a very satisfying part of my job. (Participant B, personal communication, June 21, 2013)

**Levering information and knowledge.** Participants ascribe an inherent value to being a leader in the pharmaceutical industry due to the information they have access to by virtue of their leadership positions in the industry and the knowledge they have acquired. For some participants, the higher levels of medical and scientific information and knowledge to which they have access were associated with being able to better assist their family or friends who may have cause to access the health care system. As a derivative of their participation in the pharmaceutical industry, participants report being able to contribute relevant and impactful information in such situations due to their increased level of knowledge and/or ability to understand information provided by medical professionals, as well as their understanding of how to navigate the health care system.

I have a child who turned eighteen and developed a chronic illness and he was going off to college and because I was in healthcare and because I work on the reimbursement side, I knew that he had to maintain a fulltime academic status to maintain healthcare coverage. And, I remember reaching out to other parents of children who had chronic illness [to inform them]. (Participant F, personal communication, June 25, 2013)

Personally, again, just being with my family, my parents, my siblings, just kind of knowing what our options are when maybe a doctor doesn’t know, or a doctor’s telling us one thing and we’re like, “That doesn’t even match, what are you talking about?”, and being knowledgeable to kind of go back to them and say, “Here, this is what I’ve read, here’s an article that I’ve looked up, here’s what the latest

researcher says about this. Are you sure?” (Participant D, personal communication, June 22, 2013)

For others, the organizational knowledge they are able to acquire which is often inherent with more senior levels of leadership, allows them to navigate the environment internally in a manner that helps them further their careers as well as improve the organization.

Because when you’re in leadership there’s information that comes ... that you are a part of. You sit around a table where you hear data that 99% of the time won’t ever be heard again out of that room.... (Participant H, personal communication, July 9, 2013)

**Serving as mentors.** Mentoring is reported as an important part of the leadership experience for these African American women leaders in the pharmaceutical industry. Nearly all spoke about the contribution that mentors have made to their careers and the need to have strong mentors help them rise through the organization’s ranks. “To get to that place [in leadership], you are going to need in a number of individuals that can mentor you for different aspects” (Participant G, personal communication, July 2, 2013). The advantage of having been mentored is clearly acknowledged by the participants. “I’ve been fortunate that I’ve had a lot of great mentors who have encouraged me to stretch quickly, and to advance and grow and develop my career” (Participant B, personal communication, June 21, 2013).

While having the support of a mentor is reported to be an important component of the leadership experience, the opportunity and responsibility that these women have to serve as mentors was often a common point of discussion regarding their leadership experience in the industry. The opportunity to serve as mentor to other African American women (and other individuals) interested in learning from their experiences, seemed to be an aspect of the leadership experience that was embraced by the participants in this study.

I’m always honored when people call me and say, “Will you mentor me”. I never turn people down. I mean I could have so much to do I can’t even see straight, but because someone took time with me early on in my career, that’s my way of giving back, is to help others navigate. (Participant H, personal communication, July 9, 2013)

I consider myself a mentor, as well as a coach for others coming along in this industry because it’s so important for us to pass along what we’ve learned, not just to take it and keep it and hold it close to our vests, but to make sure that we reach out to others and share.... Very often they are African-American women. I’m not opposed to reaching out to men or majorities at all.... I make it a point to reach out to all of those that touch me. (Participant F, personal communication, June 25, 2013)

One of the women in discussing her role as a mentor presented it as a commission that she gives to those that she mentors, in

which they are encouraged and expected to excel, and consequently charged to seek out others to mentor.

I always make sure that I leave them [mentees] with the charge and commission to find somebody else who hasn't made it along as far as they have, and mentor them the same way I just provided them with mentorship. So, it's kind of like, really helping folk understand that we have a very significant role to play in lifting ourselves up through this organization. (Participant G, personal communication, July 2, 2013)

**Establishing and maintaining credibility.** This theme encompasses the idea and necessity of being well prepared with respect to the participants' particular functional area, the business as a whole and industry trends; and being able to communicate this information. Providing a clear rationale that illustrates that an appreciation and understanding of the business accompanies a particular response or recommendation is reported to be important for maintaining and enhancing credibility, and to achieving broader organizational support for ideas. "You can't just come to the job every day; you have to understand 'how does it work'? How does this intersect and interface with this to really get those long term results for the organization?" (Participant H, personal communication, July 9, 2013).

But when I raise an objection where I might say, "You know what; we might be heading down the wrong path." I will always give some perspective on why I think a different idea or a different approach is needed, or who I pulled into that discussion, and what is the possible downside, right? Because you always want your conversations to have been vetted, and you want your ideas to have the credibility of "Okay, well, maybe this could go off the rails and I've thought about it, but I still think it's worth a lot for us to consider." (Participant B, personal communication, June 21, 2013)

There can be the perception of women that we are emotional or we're speaking from the heart ... instead of taking into account the facts and data. So I always make sure, if it's something that is a data-driven decision, that I have done my homework, because there's nothing that will dispel your credibility faster than if you haven't and if the numbers don't support your rationale so I think that's part of it. (Participant B, personal communication, June 21, 2013)

Additionally, participants recognize that in their roles as leaders, they may need to bring knowledge to the table that has been acquired from experience outside of their current organizations. At times they may need to leverage knowledge they have acquired from their own research as well as outside, yet related experiences. Participants' abilities in this regard can be closely linked to their credibility.

Just being able to use your full knowledge—so your business acumen—really leveraging the business acumen

that you have. So that way you can be able to think in a diverse and broader sense versus just what some of the team members may have.... They [other team members] may not have a depth of experience and so what I was able to really leverage was the broad base experience and the even outside of the industry experience. (Participant A, personal communication, June 20, 2013)

I think there's always a question of credibility and whether or not I should be the person to give advice in an area, or whether it should be someone else. I've definitely seen men with less experience and less time at the company have more walking-in-the-door credibility than me - with more experience and more time at the company. (Participant C, personal communication, June 22, 2013)

"Being substantively prepared" (Participant C, personal communication, June 22, 2013) and "being able to use your full knowledge" (Participant A, personal communication, June 20, 2013) and having "very clear, well thought out, strategic" communication (Participant B, personal communication, June 21, 2013) represent important aspects of this leadership experience theme.

A lot of people that are coming into the industry now are not science oriented but they may have great managerial skills. It doesn't make for a great pharmaceutical project manager; you need to know the science. So you still need to read, you still need to attend conferences, you still need to be abreast of what your compound or what your drug is doing. You need to know your competitors, [and] what they're doing. You need to collaborate. (Participant D, personal communication, June 22, 2013)

I think that's the important way for leaders to—particularly black women—to communicate, because there are people who come to the table with certain judgments about what you're saying and why you're saying it and how you're saying it, so communication, your communication has to be very, very, very clear, well thought out [and] strategic. And you have to be courageous enough for when you get push backs ... to have that discussion or debate in a very respectful and positive way. (Participant B, personal communication, June 21, 2013)

When you challenge somebody you need to have your data and not just have these philosophical discussions. I think that's where people get in trouble. They want to have these, 'Well this is what I see ....' Well yeah you see it, but where are the facts? Because when you are dealing with a senior leader, they want facts. (Participant H, personal communication, July 9, 2013)

Some of the participants spoke about the importance of establishing and maintaining their credibility particularly when establishing new relationships. "Coming into a new setting, people want to make certain that you know what you're talking about" (Participant C, personal communication, June 22, 2013). Participant A provided an example in this regard when she

outlined her experience in transitioning to a new company within the industry.

“When I transitioned from one company to the next, I really had to prove myself all over again. The second company really didn’t appreciate the experiences that I had because they didn’t see me experience them. ....basically, my resume didn’t exist.” (Participant A, personal communication, June 20, 2013)

The extent to which these African American women leaders are able to establish and maintain their creditability is crucial. Interestingly, this validation may come from multiple sources, both inside of and outside of the company and, when it takes place can be rewarding and satisfying to the participant.

**Asking for support.** Many of the participants report that it is important to ask for organizational support in furthering their careers as leaders within the industry. These women recognize the value of continuous learning and learning agility as they manage their careers as leaders.

The one thing that I do recognize is that there’s a very distinct responsibility for the individual to.... very proactively address their career and proactively go after.... the knowledge and the experiences, training, that will help them move to that space where they want to be. (Participant G, personal communication, July 2, 2013)

I think I was lucky at the time when I started that I had the confidence to speak up and ask for the development that I sought and that I desired....We women, we, African American women especially, are courageous in asking for what we want....and as much as you can co-opt others into feeling invested in your success and your development, that’s a really important thing. (Participant B, personal communication, June 21, 2013)

One of the participants in the study relayed the following situation when she was offered her current leadership role; a role that would position her to directly influence the policies and practices of the company and place her in the ranks of the company’s senior leadership for the first time.

So I asked for two things coming into the role. I knew the transition from individual contributor to leader was going to be something new for me. I did not want to be set up to fail. And so I asked for an executive coach.....The executive coach would be that person, somebody who had the expertise to help me in my transition from individual contributor to leader of a group of people. And so I requested to go to the HR executive program .....both of those experiences, helped a tremendous amount. (Participant G, personal communication, July 2, 2013)

I haven’t been afraid to knock on doors and to ask the questions that people may not want to ask. They may say it outside of the senior leader presence, but I’ve always had the courage really to speak up and not have that fear, so it’s allowed me to really get opportunities because I have been

... just forward with asking for those opportunities, and that’s kind of the way I’ve continued in my career. (Participant A, personal communication, June 20, 2013)

Personal support systems are also part of this theme of ‘asking for what you want’. Some of the women made this point with the following comments.

It’s so important too to have a support system within your own network to help you; people that you can go to when you’re feeling vulnerable; either in or out [of the organization], wherever that support system lies for you, it’s important that you reach out to it. I think sometimes we ... as women of color think that because we’re strong, we’re little warriorettes, so therefore you don’t want to seem like you’re vulnerable. (Participant H, personal communication, July 9, 2013)

I would just say we talked a lot about this environment, the professional environment and how I’ve navigated here, but I have to say that I would not be able to do half of what I’ve been able to do professionally if I did not have a very strong home team.... a partner. So, my husband, partnered with me, he’s my partner in life, and he partnered with me and we decided what we would do with our lives in order to support my ability to be successful in this major pharmaceutical company. (Participant G, personal communication, July 2, 2013)

**Illustrating integrity at the highest level.** These women are committed to and exercise the highest level of integrity in their leadership approach. Not only due to the regulatory requirements of the industry, but also due to their personal standards. The importance of doing things as they should be done and acting with integrity is paramount.

These leaders also indicate that they are transparent, genuine and authentic in their approach to leadership and, as a consequence, ethical considerations are very much a part of their leadership experience.

Honesty is always best. I can’t expect someone to know or be on my side if I’m not honest. I don’t have to be mean, I don’t have to be rude, I don’t have to be deceitful, I can just be honest. So honesty is my best policy.....I think you have to be honest with whomever, wherever, whenever....you don’t have to give it to them all at once. Sometimes you have to be smooth, but you always have to be honest.... honesty and integrity kind of [go] together. (Participant D, personal communication, June 22, 2013)

Multiple acknowledgements of the continual and critical focus on maintaining high levels of integrity and ethical standards are noted, as an important part of the leadership experiences of these women. Statements from participant D and H illustrate the importance of ethical leadership. “You want to be ethical at all times.... There are ways to skip and cheat and beat the system, but in the end it doesn’t work. (Participant D, personal communication, June 22, 2013)

I really believe when you're a true leader, sometimes you have to let your ego [go], put that away and do what's right. Again it's about your ethics and your values. It's letting that show up, because lots of times people do things out of fear (Participant H, personal communication, July 9, 2013)

**Facing up to challenges.** In addition to the themes previously presented, these women highlighted various challenges that related not only to race and gender, but other factors as part of their leadership experience. The leadership positions these women hold can be described as "not for the faint of heart" (Participant B, personal communication, June 21, 2013 and Participant G, personal communication, July 2, 2013). While participants make it a point not to dwell on the challenges they face as African American women leaders in the pharmaceutical industry, they report multiple challenges as part of their leadership experience. For example, Participant B reports, "I felt very supported from early on. It wasn't without challenges but I certainly felt like I had a chance to go on and do great things if that's what I wanted to do" (Participant B, personal communication, June 21, 2013).

In addition to race and gender, other factors that present periodic challenges for some of the participants include, generational differences, the lack of specific training as a health care provider along with inherent challenges associated with having few African American women as colleagues or being the only one.

I think everyone has challenges, right? I think it's not for the faint of heart. If it's hard for you to be one....to be the only, to be the first, all of that, then there's probably a sense of intimidation that you might feel"...I'm sure there are people who have made assumptions about me and my capabilities based on the fact that I'm a woman, or the fact that I'm Black, but to me, those are their limitations, not mine, so I don't spend a whole lot of time thinking about that". (Participant B, personal communication, June 21, 2013)

Being the only African American women leader presents challenges that extend beyond discussions related to the business particularly given the expectation of interactions in social settings (which is often the case with senior levels of leadership) where issues related to current events may arise. Participant H presents an interesting and telling perspective on this point.

When you're in leadership you get socially exposed to things, and people see how you're going to react to being put in socially awkward situations, and it's very tough when you are lots of times....the only woman in that scenario, and if you're a person of color in that scenario. (Participant H, personal communication, July 9, 2013)

While the women in this study are successfully managing the multiple challenges they face as African American women leaders in the pharmaceutical industry, there is acknowledgement that the challenges facing these women are

not likely to subside particularly in light of an increasingly competitive job market.

## Discussion

The results of this research study suggests that the attainment of and potentially the retention of, leadership positions held by African American women in the pharmaceutical industry require focused preparation and learning that is constant and ongoing. The research further suggests that not only is a high level achievement and competence within one's functional area (e.g., marketing, research and development, human resources, sales) needed for success, but also the ability to manage and influence organizational factors related to hierarchy, policies and procedures and data-driven decisions.

While the study is limited in its transferability to a broader population by its qualitative design and number of participants, the findings provide insightful themes regarding the common experiences of these particular African American women leaders in the pharmaceutical industry. Many of the leadership practices and experiences of the participants in this study align with strategies reported to be used by African American women leaders in navigating predominately white environments. For example, strategies related to the need for African American women to achieve a high levels of preparedness is supported by the themes noted by participants in this study of leveraging information and knowledge, and establishing and maintaining credibility. Strategies related to driving social and organizational change are aligned with the themes reported by participants of: making a difference, and serving as mentors. Strategies related to the need for African American women to develop support systems are aligned with the theme of asking for support. The commitment to operate with high levels of integrity, another theme identified by participants in this study, is relevant and supportive of all strategies highlighted. Additionally, the participants' discussion of the challenges they face provides a broader view of obstacles that extend beyond race and gender, the two areas which are often used to frame the challenges encountered by African American women within various organizations.

The implications related to the findings of this study would be of interest to leadership scholars, practitioners and others charged with succession planning and leadership development. The study has also illuminated a number of areas that represent additional research opportunities.

## Future research

The results of this study highlight several areas for future research. Further research that seeks to describe and compare the leadership experiences of the most senior women (of various ethnicities) within the pharmaceutical industry would be informative. Additionally, building on the work that has been conducted in this study, further inquiry regarding mentoring views and practices of African American women as both a requirement and as a responsibility across multiple industries where they represent a relatively small percentage of

the leadership presents an opportunity. Mentoring as a responsibility was a theme that emerged to characterize the leadership experiences of African American women leaders in the pharmaceutical industry. It is expected that a multi-industry quantitative research study that explores the topic of mentoring as both a requirement for success and as well as a responsibility, would be of interest to multiple audiences including management and leadership scholars, industry leaders and practitioners, women in corporate settings (both current and those who have aspirations in this area), as well as training and development professionals.

US Equal Employment Opportunity Commission, 2010 job patterns for minorities and women in private industry (EEO-1), 2010 EEO-1 National aggregate report by NAICS-4 code 3254: Pharmaceutical and Medicine Manufacturing. Retrieved from <http://www1.eeoc.gov/eeoc/statistics/employment/jobpat-eeo1/2010/index.cfm#centercol>

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