



# ADVANCING WOMEN IN LEADERSHIP

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VOLUME 39, 2019  
ISSN 1093-7099

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EDITORS: BEVERLY J. IRBY, BARBARA POLNICK, NAHED ABDELRAHMAN

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*Full Length Research Paper*

## **Women Leaders and Narratives: The Power of Reflecting on Purpose and Career**

**Deborah Nelson Smith & Sallie Suby-Long**

**Deborah N. Smith**, Department of First-Year and Transition Studies, Kennesaw State University, [dsmith1@kennesaw.edu](mailto:dsmith1@kennesaw.edu)  
**Sallie Suby-Long**, Interdisciplinary Leadership Doctoral Program, Creighton University, [ssubylong@comcast.net](mailto:ssubylong@comcast.net)

Accepted April 06, 2019

**In this qualitative study, we explored ten women leaders' perspectives about the processes associated with constructing their leadership and purpose stories or narratives. The study participants first wrote, and then talked about their stories in a semi-structured interview. An overarching theme emerged from the data - narrative sharing was a challenging, yet beneficial process for the participants. Three sub-themes also emerged from the collective narratives. First, the process of reflection helped women identify times when their actions and decisions were purposeful, even though they may not have recognized it at the time. Second, reflection on purpose led participants to a clearer identification and articulation of leadership philosophy. Third, citing that sharing their narratives helped them identify times of leadership authenticity, participants indicated they intended to use similar practices to make current and future leadership/career decisions. Recommendations are included for organizations, educational institutions, and individuals who are interested in using narrative sharing as a leadership development tool.**

**Keywords:** leadership, women leaders, career paths, purpose, reflection, narratives, story

### **Introduction**

Researchers have studied multiple aspects of women in leadership, with findings about continued inequity being reported in both academic and popular venues (Barsh & Yee, 2011; Gerdes, 2010; McKay, 2010; McKinsey & Company, 2012; The White House Project, 2009). In response to research findings, many organizations created women's networking sessions, mentoring programs, flex schedules, resource centers, and/or leadership development programs (Clark, 2011; Foust-Cummings, Dinolfo, & Kohler, 2011; Jyothi & Jyothi, 2012; Linehan & Scullion, 2008; Pyrrillis, 2011; Singh, Vinnicombe & Kumra, 2006). Overall women have made substantial gains in education and wage earnings (Slaughter, 2012), yet despite well-intentioned and sometimes successful organizational efforts, women are still underrepresented in senior leadership roles (Carter & Silva, 2010; Eagly & Carli, 2007; Howard & Wellins, 2009; Kellerman & Rhode, 2007; Roebuck & Smith, 2011; Smith, Roebuck, & Maendler, 2013; Sandberg, 2013; The White House Project, 2009).

### **Underrepresentation of Women in Senior Leadership Positions**

Multiple possible explanations for the lack of representation by women in senior leadership roles have been posited by researchers. Schein (2001), for example, suggested that leadership is often equated with masculinity, while Chin (2004) reported society in general values and rewards masculine over feminine modes of leadership. A wage gap, which increases with age (The White House Project, 2009), or the glass ceiling, a term Hymowitz and Schellhardt (1986) used to describe the barriers women seeking workplace leadership experience, have also been identified as reasons women are underrepresented in senior leadership roles. Meyerson and Fletcher (2000) theorized that the glass ceiling still existed nearly fifteen years later in their study because gender discrimination is deeply, yet subtly, embedded within organizations. Ibarra, Ely, and Kolb (2013) concurred describing the "subtle gender bias that persists in organizations and society" (p. 62). Similarly, Hannum, Muhly, Shockley-Zalabak, and White (2015) reported subtle discriminatory practices of higher education institutions that served as barriers for women seeking senior leadership roles. According to Eagly and Carli (2007) many women leaders' paths can be described as a labyrinth with multiple confusing options often resulting in dead-ends. Slaughter (2012) asserted

that until women are equally represented at the highest ranks of government, and have the power that comes with those types of positions, women will not be significantly represented as senior leaders across the board. Still other researchers contended organizational programs intended to promote women failed or never really offered women what they needed (Birigwa & Sumberg, 2011). Conversely, Sandberg (2013) suggested that it is not others who hold women back, but it is often women themselves. She stated:

Women rarely make one decision to leave the workforce. Instead, they make a lot of small decisions along the way, making accommodations and sacrifices that they believe will be required to have a family. Of all the ways women hold themselves back; perhaps, the most pervasive is that they leave before they leave. (p. 9)

Shambaugh (2008) and Frankel (2004) agreed noting that women in their study engaged in sub-conscious behaviors that hindered career success. Similarly, Babcock and Laschever (2003) found that women didn't ask (for opportunities, promotions or raises), or they were ineffective in their use of the formal and informal career networks (Van Emmerik, Euqema, Geschiere, & Schouten, 2006).

An often-cited reason for the underrepresentation of women in senior leadership positions is that women, more so than men, struggle with work-life balance (Guillaume & Pochic, 2009; Roebuck, Smith, & ElHaddaoui, 2013; Schueller-Weidekamm & Kautzky-Willer, 2012). Consequently, some researchers have concluded that women are more likely than men to decline leadership positions or as Belkin (2003) put it, *opt-out*. However, in Fine's (2009) study none of the women she interviewed left a leadership position in order to achieve work and family/life balance. Instead, she reported:

A common theme that runs through my conversations with women about their decisions to continue or not continue to climb the organizational ladder is that the traditional (i.e. male) definitions of leadership, success, and professional fulfillment are not consonant with their values or how they want to live their lives. Many of them talk about the emptiness of organizational life, about how organizational success doesn't always provide the personal satisfaction that they expected it would. (p. 198)

### **Leadership and Purpose**

Fine (2009) further described the motives for leadership most often cited by the women in her study – believing they had the skills and characteristics needed to effectively lead and the desire to make a positive contribution to the world. Other researchers agreed with Fine's findings reporting that many women in their studies made career decisions with their perceived callings or purposes and benefitting others in mind (Dahlvig & Longman, 2010; Dahlvig & Longman, 2014; Ibarra, Ely, & Kolb, 2013; Wresniewski, 2003).

The literature often uses terms such as purpose or calling interchangeably. However, calling is typically associated with religious contexts (Dik & Duffy, 2009; Conklin, 2012). Historically the work of clergy, who were thought to be supernaturally called to their work by God, was considered superior to the work of lay people. However, in modern terms calling is more closely aligned with purposeful work (Dik & Duffy, 2009; Hall & Chandler, 2005). Hall and Chandler defined calling as “a sense of purpose, that this is the work one was meant to do” (p. 155).

As work became more central to people's lives, researchers began to examine the intersection of purpose and work. For example, Ryff and Singer (1998) stated that having a sense of purpose was a critical factor in well-lived lives, and work environments were places where purposeful living could be expressed. Gazica and Spector (2015) studied the opposite effect finding that individuals who did not follow their occupational callings suffered from physical and physiological distress. Other researchers concluded that ascribing meaning to work was closely associated with individuals' definitions of self (Berg, Grant, & Johnson, 2010; Hall & Chandler, 2005; Hirschi, 2011), as well as increased satisfaction and purpose (Dik, Duffy, & Eldridge, 2009; Haney-Loehlin, McKenna, Robie, Austin, & Ecker, 2013; Steger & Dik, 2009).

Personal purpose is often considered by employees who pursue, obtain and/or leave workplace leadership roles (O'Connell, 2014). For women in particular, Ibarra, Ely, and Kolb (2013) noted that one effective way to support women as they moved into leadership positions was to “anchor women's development efforts in a sense of leadership purpose rather than in how women are perceived” (p. 63). Dahlvig and Longman (2010) similarly found the women leaders in their study felt it was important they stood up for something, and that leadership and service were synonymous terms. In a later study conducted by Dahlvig and Longman (2014), women participants reported being more inclined to accept leadership roles if they felt a relational responsibility for others or would have an opportunity to mentor or be a role model. Similarly, Fine (2009) concluded from her research that “moral purpose is a guiding principle of leadership” (pg. 190). Purpose, however, is not singular (Baumeister & Wilson, 1996), nor an isolated discovery made in one's youth. Callings and purposes can change over time and determining callings or purposes is a dynamic process that is experienced rather than found (Dobrow, 2013; O'Connell, 2014).

### **Reflection, Narratives, and Leadership Development**

Binks, Smith, Smith, and Joshi (2009) further suggested it is not the experiences themselves, but rather the reflection on those experiences and the resulting informed decisions that enable learning. For leaders in particular, Tunheim and Goldschmidt (2013) found “critical reflection is necessary when leaders are hearing a calling or interpreting data that suggests they move in one direction or another” (p. 33). Other researchers asserted that providing a space for critical reflection is a crucial component of

effective leadership development programs (Longman, Dahlvig, Wikkerink, Cunningham, & O'Connor, 2011).

Reflection can be accomplished by utilizing a variety of tools (e.g. portfolio creation or journaling), but Binks et al. (2009) concluded that the reflective process was most effectively developed when the participants in their study engaged in structured storytelling. As opposed to traditional career assessments and measurements, the construction of stories or narratives is a post-modern approach to career counseling. Narratives emphasize connections, meaning, and growth (Savickas, 2005), and allow individuals to reveal, deconstruct or unpack, and re-author their stories (Brott, 2011). Narrative building typically involves having individuals create a life timeline that includes major events, with someone such as a counselor, facilitator, or researcher asking reflective questions about the major events (Bennis & Thomas, 2002). The process of writing about and articulating one's narrative brings a consciousness to behaviors and decisions that subsequently helps one see life themes and patterns (Corso & Rehfuß, 2011). Additionally, through narrative/story creation "individuals become empowered to construct their careers in a proactive manner as they adapt to the numerous transitions, adjustments, and career dilemmas throughout their lifetime" (Corso & Rehfuß, 2011, p. 335).

For leaders in particular, Kegan (1983) concluded life-stories provide a meaning system that enabled them to act authentically and provided a structure for thoughts, feelings, and actions. Other researchers posited that the reflective component of a leadership narrative was crucial for leaders as they needed time to consider how various events (both positive and negative) worked into their stories and how those events changed, if at all, their identities and actions (Avolio & Gibbons, 1988; Luthans & Avolio, 2003; Pallus, Nasby, & Easton, 1991). Shamir and Eilam (2005) agreed stating:

From a narrative perspective, leadership development is the development of life stories, and therefore the construction of life stories is what leadership development studies should focus on. This construction can be assumed to be an ongoing process, which is performed not in isolation but in interaction with others, and which is influenced by others' responses to initial versions of the story. (p. 26)

In later research Shamir and Eilam (2005) similarly postulated that:

It is through life experiences and the way they are organized into life-stories that people can develop a self-concept of a leader that supports and justifies their leadership role because the life-story not only recounts but also justifies.... They include at least implied answers to the questions, "how have I become a leader?" and "why have I become a leader?" In other words, in constructing their life-stories leaders explain and justify their present self, which includes their leadership motivations. (p. 403)

Narrative development aligns with transformational learning theory which Brooks (2000) defined "as learning that leads to some type of fundamental change in the learner's sense of themselves, their worldviews, their understanding of their past, and their orientation to the future" (p. 140). In Merriam and Caffarella's (1999) definition of transformational learning theory there are three components related to life experiences: (a) construction and engagement; (b) critical reflection; and (c) development and action toward trying out new skills or roles. Mezirow (1991) noted that transformational learning cannot be guaranteed, it can only happen when individuals feel they are in a safe environment, such as women's only leadership development programs that allow women to claim their own voices (Brooks, 2000; Debebe, 2011).

### **Purpose and Rationale for Study**

While a significant amount of literature is focused on purpose/calling or women in leadership, there is a literature gap about the intersection of all three constructs – women, leadership, and purpose. Dik and Duffy (2009) suggested a need for more research on gender, calling and work experiences over time. Additionally, while a modest amount of research has been conducted on the benefits of storytelling/narrative sharing, Shamir and Eilam (2005) concluded from their study on life-stories as an authentic leadership development tool:

Research on leadership from a life-story point of view is still scarce in general, and virtually non-existent with respect to the topic of authentic leadership development. Both the explicit arguments and the implied propositions presented in this paper need to be substantiated and tested. (pp. 412-413)

Thus, the purpose of this study is to further contribute to the literature by examining how women leaders might benefit from sharing their purpose and leadership narratives, particularly as related to career decisions.

### **Method**

#### **Theoretical Framework**

To explore women's sense of purpose as related to leadership and career decisions, the authors used narrative survey methodology (Shkedi, 2004), a type of narrative analysis. Narrative analysis refers to the phenomenon or story itself, as well as a method of inquiry (Clandinin & Connelly, 1998). Taylor (2003) noted that the use of interviews is a common element in narrative analysis. A small number of interviews is appropriate for a narrative survey (Fine, 2009), as the goal of narrative survey methodology is not to present each narrative separately or generalize to a larger population, but rather to find commonalities across the narratives which can be connected to broader theoretical constructs (Shkedi, 2004).

#### **Participants**

The authors used a purposeful, convenience sample, with one of the authors personally inviting women in her professional and

personal network to participate in the study. Ten women accepted the invitation to participate in the study. All of the women were mid to senior level leaders ranging in age from 40-72 years old. The participants were of varied religious affiliations, races, ethnicities, and sexual orientations. All participants were parents, both married and single. The participants also represented multiple professions and industries including education, non-profit organizations, small businesses, and the corporate sector.

### Procedures

The researchers asked the study participants to write about times and ways in which they believed their personal purpose(s): (a) were developed; and (b) how those purposes had an impact on the choices they had made as leaders in their careers. Participants were instructed there were no writing parameters, and were encouraged to write about what they thought was important, taking as much space as they needed. Following the submission of their written narratives, participants were invited to engage in a follow-up interview.

### Interview Protocol

The authors developed their interview protocol with the literature findings in mind. For example, Dik and Duffy (2009) suggested using simple open-ended writing exercises to encourage participants to broadly consider purpose, while Fine (2009) stated using open-ended questions allowed participants to authentically share their stories and not be steered towards pre-determined categories. Additionally, the authors of the current study used a semi-structured interview. The questions they developed served as a starting point for conversation, a qualitative strategy suggested by Conklin (2012) and Gibson (2008).

The semi-structured interviews conducted by one of the authors included the following questions:

1. Besides the story you recently wrote, had you ever formally written about your personal purpose(s) as it relates to leadership and your career? What were your thoughts about the process(es)? Any initial reactions, likes, dislikes or surprises?
2. You probably wrote about this in your purpose story, but how in general have you determined your purpose in the past?
3. Are you or do you think other women leaders are intentional about taking their purposes into account in their career decision making processes?
4. How, if at all, does your purpose help you make decisions about leadership roles and commitments such as: (a) when is it the right time to leave a leadership position; (b) accept a promotion; or (c) move to another leadership experience?

5. Is writing or verbally sharing your purpose, leadership and career story or narrative something you might do again in the future? Why or why not?
6. Is there anything else you would like to add to this conversation?

### Data analysis

Each of the interviews were recorded and analyzed using qualitative data analysis techniques. The authors identified keywords and phrases, and built a scaffolding of themes until they deemed the data had been saturated and no new themes emerged (Boyatzis, 1998; Corbin & Strauss, 1998; Liebllich, Tuval-Mashiach, & Zilber, 1998; Shamir, Dayan-Haresh, & Adler, 2005). The authors also discussed the possibility of researcher bias, since both authors had personal and professional experiences similar to those of some study participants. To deflect possible researcher bias the authors discussed and noted their potential biases with one another, a technique suggested by Gibson (2008). Additionally, the authors utilized a student assistant to conduct her own analysis of the data. Finally, the authors employed member checking and sent the draft of findings to each of the participants for verification. The utilization of such measures helped ensure data trustworthiness (Boyatzis, 1998; Corbin & Strauss, 1998; Gibson, 2008; Hoshmand, 2005).

### Results

An overarching theme emerged from the data - narrative sharing, as related to leadership, career, and decision-making, was a challenging, yet beneficial activity for the study participants. When participants took the time to reflect and share their stories they found it to be crucial, even cathartic. The interviewer detected peacefulness and acknowledgement of courage and resilience among the participants through the process of writing, reflection, and conversation. As one woman shared:

So, it was a really interesting process. It was an emotional process. After I wrote the first paragraph, I just started crying. I started sobbing crying. I am not exactly sure why, whether it was just looking back over my life and seeing what I had done with it. That's looking back at a lot of years; that's probably a twenty-eight year career, so that's a big chunk of your life.

In speaking about the process, another woman indicated:

It was challenging at first, because I didn't know the answers to the questions. I didn't think I knew the answers, but I think it was really beneficial and productive to kind of narrow what you think you know and identify what kind of drives you.

Yet another woman stated:

I felt the narrative piece was engaging for me. Just right away the narrative of leadership gave me permission to tell a story and I appreciate that because that's probably what I

do best is to share a story of what has happened in my life in terms of leadership.

Other women also commented on the narrative sharing process noting, “You have to stop and think about it more. As I am writing, I am finding myself listening to myself and thinking, ‘Well I didn’t think I was going to write that, or I wonder what does that mean?’” and “I think even the word ‘purpose’ is specific. I have been thinking and writing why I am here or who I am more. But, using the word ‘purpose’ - my ‘life purpose,’ that was new and specific.”

From the general theme, three sub-themes became evident. First, through the process of reflection, the participants named and discovered that the guiding principles from which they made decisions and acted were purpose related, even though they may not have recognized it at the time. Structured reflection helped women see that patterns of purpose may have always existed and perhaps their career and life choices were not random. As one woman articulated, “I think the process was very interesting because I really didn’t think there was a purpose that was guiding my career or the work that I did, but, as I wrote it down I realized there was and that I can see the purpose more clearly after writing it.” Another participant agreed noting:

No one has ever asked me about my personal purpose before. This is an interesting question. It’s hard to pinpoint how and when my sense of purpose developed, because I think it has evolved over time. In fact, it is still evolving and perhaps only now, as a graduate student making a transition in my 50s, can I reflect on a lifetime of experiences and see patterns of purposefulness.

Other women made comments such as “So, in fact, I did have a bigger purpose than just earning money. And it seems that purpose certainly has been reflected in my leadership, and my role as a business owner,” and “Looking back I can recognize, in my job and life, the times I was probably living this purpose and that the purpose was present, but again I was not pursuing a career or leadership role consistent with recognizing a guiding purpose.”

Second, reflection on purpose led to a clearer articulation of leadership philosophy for the participants. Patterns of purpose in leadership were illuminated through choices the participants made and the accepting and rejecting of opportunities. As one of the women stated, “Writing and reflecting on purpose brings clarity about decisions I’ve made as a leader in a professional setting and what made me thrive in that setting.” Another participant shared, “I strongly believe

having a defined mission and purpose creates a better equipped and successful leader. In addition, leadership is more fulfilling and invigorating when the project is aligned with a clear purpose.” Other illustrative statements supporting this sub-theme include “Good leadership is about being honest, respectful and having a clear vision of the purpose of the organization,” and “Leadership is a quality that can’t be defined by a title or salary range, I feel it is a piece of a person’s character that is developed

over a lifetime.” Finally, as one woman mused, “I step back from time to time, and again it’s that reflective thinking. You kind of think, ‘What is going on here? Why is this?’ And, when I do that, I know I am a much better leader.”

Third, discovering that narrative sharing helped them identify times when they felt most authentic as leaders, participants indicated they intended to use the process again to make current and future leadership/career decisions. Several women shared they were in a state of career transition. As leaders, they were used to taking action and not accustomed to being reflective or still. One woman concluded, “It’s okay just to be; you don’t always have to do.” Yet another participant stated, “There is that constant question of ‘Am I doing what I am here to do?’” Pondering the value of being an authentic leader, one woman surmised, “Once you start living that way you don’t ever want to go back,” while another stated “I learned that when I am in alignment with my true self, my contributions and performance will be at the highest level.” With the exception of one individual, who had already gone through several reflective exercises due to her profession, all participants concluded that intentional narrative sharing was a powerful leadership development tool.

In reflecting on leadership, purpose, and career choices, participants frequently used the following key words - claiming, balance, reflective, authenticity, intentional, and integrity (cited most frequently). These key words appeared in all three sub-themes. The key words also provided a framework for discussion of additional findings including the influence of parenting, work/life balance, leadership challenges, and faith/spirituality in women’s leadership.

## Discussion

A discussion of the study follows including examination and interpretation of results, recommendations for practice, limitations of the study, and recommendations for further research. The purpose of this study was to explore women leaders’ perspectives associated with constructing leadership and purpose narratives. The gathered data demonstrated an overarching theme articulated by all ten participants – narrative sharing was a challenging yet beneficial process. This finding affirmed the collective findings of other researchers that had indicated reflection and narrative story-telling as crucial for women’s leadership development experiences because they emphasize connection, meaning, and growth (Binks, Smith, Smith, & Joshi, 2009; Corso & Rehffuss, 2011; Dahlvig & Longman, 2010; Debebe, 2011; Fine, 2009; Savickas, 2005). The three sub-themes that emerged from the combined narratives suggested specific aspects of narrative sharing that were beneficial for women in this study.

### Sub-theme One – Actions and decisions were often purposeful, even when not planned

The process of reflection helped women identify times when their actions and decisions were purposeful, even though they may not have recognized it at the time. The participants found

the process of writing about and talking about their leadership actions and decisions helpful in identifying presence of purpose throughout their careers. This pathway to recognition of purpose in actions and career decision-making may contribute to the sense of meaning that Ibarra, Ely, and Kolb (2013) found as supportive to women's development as leaders.

Several women discussed the fulfillment they experienced as they recognized how their leadership decisions had been in alignment with their purpose(s) throughout their careers. As they reflected, they were able to claim this reality and the accompanying knowledge of their leadership authenticity in decision-making. Women in the study noted this knowledge as meaningful and supportive for their leadership endeavors.

As stated by Binks, Smith, Smith, and Joshi (2009), opportunities to reflect on purpose can result in informed decision-making and can also enable learning. Through narrative sharing, women in the study discussed meaningful learning regarding purpose formation. The participants' written stories and interviews pointed to three factors contributing to formation of purpose. These factors included relationships, events, and circumstances.

The women in the study clearly noted relationships as a strong and relevant factor in formation of purpose. Several participants spoke of meaningful relationships with people who modeled qualities they valued such as integrity, hard work, respect, and courage. The women in the study were subsequently inspired to incorporate these values to guide them in their lives and in their leadership. Parents, grandparents, and trusted mentors were most often named as people who helped participants form their core values. While writing their leadership narratives, several participants became aware of the specific values that were central aspects of their purpose. One participant noted engagement with colleagues in professional organizations as supportive in recognizing her purpose and career path. Parent-child relationships were central in nearly all of the women's stories and had an impact on the participants' formation of purpose and leadership decision-making. In addition, many women spoke of a commitment to modeling the leadership qualities they wanted their daughters and sons to learn.

Participants also told stories of significant life events that had shaped them and influenced their formation of purpose. For example, one individual discussed her struggle with a serious health concern as a source of learning that gave her clarity of purpose. Another individual noted becoming a single parent as a primary event that formed the core of her purpose. A third individual reflected on how a series of difficult events in her workplace were instrumental in shaping and affirming her purpose. One participant noted; "Crises are turning points in making professional choices." According to women in the study, valuable learning comes from both good and bad experiences. Life events, perhaps especially the difficult ones, appeared to be instrumental in shaping purpose.

Another factor related to formation of purpose for the women in the study was life circumstances. One participant referenced new professional opportunities as one of the primary contributors to her purpose and leadership. Another woman identified her parents' experience of discrimination as a key factor in her realization of purpose. Still another participant named the social and political circumstances during her early career as meaningful in the formation of her purpose.

The participants' comments suggested that narrative reflection assists women in claiming their purposeful leadership actions. Each of the women in the study appeared to be encouraged and energized as they shared stories of how their purpose was formed. By telling their stories, they recognized greater meaning in their careers and their leadership. As noted by Ibarra, Ely, and Kolb (2013) securing women's development in purpose is an effective way to support women as they engage in leadership positions.

### **Sub-theme Two – Reflection helped leaders identify and articulate their leadership philosophies**

Women in the study clearly named reflection as a powerful tool that helped them identify, recognize or affirm their leadership philosophy. The women also noted reflection as a process that either did help them or would help them develop greater intentionality and clarity regarding leadership and life choices. Every woman in the study articulated her leadership purpose and philosophy through the writing and interview process. As the participants discussed their experiences, they expressed their philosophies with clarity. The dialogue allowed the women in the study to hear and claim their own voices.

By providing women with a safe space to share their stories, reflection can be an important tool for women's development as leaders. At least two participants used this reflective process for discernment and, after using reflection on purpose as a tool, made deliberate leadership decisions. Another participant reaffirmed her leadership philosophy through the narrative reflection process and began intentional planning for her next personal and professional actions. As posited by Sandberg (2013), intentionality in women's leadership is necessary. Sandberg further affirmed the importance of constructing and reflecting on narratives and creating a safe space in which they can be shared. Regarding the power of reflection on leadership purpose and philosophy, one participant offered a clear recommendation; "Once you know your purpose, it is time to act!"

### **Sub-theme Three – Leaders intend to use intentional reflective practices to make future career and leadership decisions**

Citing that narrative sharing helped them identify times of leadership authenticity, participants indicated they intended to use similar practices to make current and future leadership and career decisions. In both writing and conversation, the participants were able to identify how their past leadership practices had been successful and in alignment with their

purpose(s). The knowledge of this alignment was helpful for many of the women as they recognized how previous authentic leadership actions could be applied to their current and future leadership responsibilities and challenges. Taking ownership of successes may strengthen women's acknowledgement of their leadership expertise and thus empower them in future leadership decision-making.

### **Additional Findings**

In addition to the primary theme and the sub-themes that emerged in the study, some other findings are worth noting. Nearly every study participant referenced the following factors as influential in their career and leadership decision-making: (a) parenting; (b) work/life balance; (c) embracing leadership challenges; and (d) faith/spirituality. Following are observations on these factors.

Parenting was a central contributing factor in leadership decision-making for all participants. The women leaders noted their commitment to their children's needs as a primary consideration in making career decisions at various phases in their lives. Similarly, work/life balance was noted as important for creating a fulfilling life. More than a focus on building a career, participants referenced building a life and spoke of their leadership and lives as fully integrated. This commitment to integration of personal, professional, and community involvement appeared to strongly influence participants' career decisions.

Embracing leadership challenges provided growth for the majority of the study participants. There were multiple examples of participants "leaning in" (Sandberg, 2013) to new professional challenges that helped them gain clarity of purpose and clarity regarding leadership abilities. Through embracing leadership challenges, the women in the study learned what they loved and what they did not love. Learning based on professional challenges, complex organizational dynamics, and stepping into increased responsibility shaped the participants' leadership decision-making. Several women said jumping into roles for which they were not fully prepared generally led to growth and realization of greater leadership capacity.

Finally, faith/spirituality was noted as an important factor in participants' awareness of leadership purpose and decision-making. As noted by Dik and Duffy (2009), purpose or calling is typically associated with religious contexts, however more recent definitions of purpose or calling are defined as having a *sense of purpose* (Hall & Chandler, 2005). The majority of the women in this study discussed faith/spirituality as a factor in identification or formation of their purpose. Faith/spirituality was also noted as influential in the participants' leadership decision-making.

### **Recommendations for Practice**

In light of the study findings, the following recommendations are suggested for women leaders, employers, supervisors,

organizations, and educational institutions interested in narrative reflection as a leadership development tool:

1. Provide safe, confidential environments for women to write about and discuss their stories related to leadership, purpose, career, and decision-making.
2. Create intentional support for women to write their leadership narratives by providing coaches and mentors to be present with women as they tell and reflect on their personal and professional stories and leadership experiences.
3. Encourage women to take on leadership responsibilities that are beyond their current experience since these roles often develop greater leadership skills and create realization of extended leadership capacities.
4. Encourage women to reflect on their formation of purpose and leadership decision-making related to relationships, life events, and life circumstances (both good and bad) and to the factors of parenting, work/life balance, leadership challenges, and faith/spirituality.
5. Engage women in reflective discussion regarding their leadership and life experience and how their experiences have shaped their purpose and influenced their leadership and career decision-making.
6. Develop focus groups within women's leadership development programs, organizations, and academic programs that encourage personal/professional narrative and story-telling related to leadership experiences.
7. Create multiple opportunities for women to claim their voices and leadership abilities by writing about and reflecting upon purpose related to leadership and by engaging in increasingly challenging leadership responsibilities.

### **Limitations of Study**

The study served as an initial endeavor to explore women leaders' perspectives about the processes associated with constructing leadership purpose and narratives. While the qualitative research methodology was effective overall and provided useful data about narrative and reflection related to purpose and decision-making in women's leadership, the researchers noted possible study limitations:

1. The research results may have limited transferability based upon the small sample size.
2. The study participants represented only Generation X and Baby Boomers therefore limiting access to the perspectives and experiences of younger women leaders.
3. The study participants knew the researcher who conducted the interviews. Familiarity with the interviewer may have influenced participants' comfort or lack of comfort in openly discussing their narratives.



4. Some of the research participants were familiar with the leadership and theoretical constructs included in the study. This may have had an impact on how participants responded to the questions.
5. Researcher bias could have been a factor in the study since the researchers were in life situations similar to some of the participants. The researchers may have heard and analyzed responses through an unintentionally biased lens based on their own experiences.

### Recommendations for Further Research

For enrichment of practice and literature on narrative reflection related to purpose in women's leadership, the authors offer the following recommendations for further research:

1. To enhance transferability, the research could be replicated with a larger sample size.
2. To ascertain the validity of the findings for groups other than Generation Xers and Baby Boomers, the study could be replicated with a sample of Millennial leaders.
3. To determine whether results are consistent among women leaders, the study could be replicated with larger numbers of women in a variety of age groups, professions, industries, geographic locations, and career phases.
4. Future research could replicate this study with women leaders representing greater diversity in race/ethnicity to note any differences that may exist.
5. According to Fine (2009), narrative surveys provide conceptual ideas that can inform theory building. The findings from this study could serve as a foundation for the creation of further theoretical knowledge on women's leadership development.
6. Future research on this topic could be conducted with prescribed questions rather than open-ended questions to determine whether different responses would be elicited.
7. To expand this study, further research could investigate the actions women leaders take as a result of identifying or recognizing their purpose through narrative reflection.

### Conclusion

Effective development and engagement of women leaders' expertise is crucial for organizational success and for the vitality of communities. For transforming leadership to emerge, and to build a strong economy and better institutions, it is crucial to have outstanding female leaders (The White House Project, 2009). In spite of well-intentioned and sometimes successful organizational efforts, women continue to be underrepresented in senior leadership roles. Therefore, highly effective women's leadership development experiences are critical.

Narrative reflection supported the women in this study to identify times when their actions and decisions were purposeful, helped women identify and articulate a clearer leadership philosophy, and assisted women to identify experiences of leadership authenticity to inform future leadership decisions. The women in the study identified written and verbal narrative as a process that helped them identify or affirm their purpose in leadership and in life.

In addition, the women experienced purpose as integrated in all areas of their lives and held integrity as a vital aspect of their individual leadership philosophies. Experiences that effectively support women's advancement and representation in leadership are needed to access the talents women contribute toward stronger and healthier organizations and communities (Ruderman & Ohlott, 2005). Employers, supervisors, educators, and all who are interested in the development of women leaders can play an important part in creating relevant practices, such as narrative reflection, that fully engage the leadership expertise of women.

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The authors acknowledge and thank SaVannah Bronson for her assistance with data analysis.