

Challenges Women Face in Leadership Positions and Organizational Effectiveness: An Investigation

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Abstract

This study was undertaken to discover working public thoughts about roles of United States women in leadership positions and to test the relationship between managerial leadership styles and organizational effectiveness. A survey of perceptions of leadership roles and effectiveness distributed 700 randomly selected entities from industries in the United States. Findings suggest approximately 50% of women leaders perceive barriers that prevent women for

entering management positions and lower advancement rates for women. This study shows that aspiration in women exists whether or not they take action and motivate themselves to advance for top management positions. However, barriers like discrimination, family-life demands, prejudice, and stereotyping result in fruitlessness in many cases. The majority of women and men felt education and training could increase the preparedness of women for leadership roles. Respondents expressed overwhelming support for a participative leadership style. A positive association existed between participative leadership style and organizational effectiveness.

Introduction

The role of women in the United States has changed dramatically in the last 50 years. The proportion of women attending college, matriculating from graduate schools, and obtaining doctorate degrees has increased dramatically. No longer are women associated with low expectations both in education and the workforce. Women now seek and obtain the highest leadership roles in education, professions, and business. For example, according to Laff (2006), in the banking industry the ranks of women in senior level management positions have increased from 19% to 31% during 2003 to 2006. This is an extraordinary 63% increase in a mere three years. Even more importantly, the percentage of women at the corporate executive level in the banking industry has increased 37% (from 27% to 37%) in this same three-year period. Given these large percentage increases, one might conclude that this migration of women towards leadership roles has been widely accepted.

However, this is only one employment sector. How have women fared throughout the economy? The overall societal response is accepting, yet some sectors have remained male dominated. Specifically, only 1.8% of Fortune 500 companies had women as CEOs in 2005 (Helfat, Harris, & Wolfson, 2006). Only 13% have female corporate board members and only 16% have female corporate officers (Laff, 2006). In other words, women are still struggling to obtain business chief executive leadership roles.

There are still many obstacles preventing women from obtaining this leadership level (e.g., glass ceilings). Many organizations are implementing leadership development programs aimed solely at women leadership success. These programs identify barriers and obstacles and then suggest strategies for women to circumvent these barriers. The goal of these programs is to facilitate excellent women leadership abilities.

In this paper we discuss (a) the development of the glass ceiling, (b) common situational barriers women face as they excel within an organization, (c) personal

challenges women face as they excel within an organization, (d) stereotyping and leadership styles, (e) the leadership styles of surveyed respondents, (f) our examination of the relationship between women leadership styles and organizational effectiveness, and (g) explains the conclusions and implications of our study.

Understanding these issues will greatly aid organizations to increase women along the corporate ladder. Women, men, and organizations can work together to improve women participation levels throughout the corporate hierarchy. As more and more women continue to enter in the business world and experience the obstacles and elements that men do not face, solutions to these hurdles must be found. We hope that this study is part of the solution.

Literature Review

According to Helfat, et al. (2006), women in top management positions were nearly non-existent from the 1970s to the early 1990s. Information from Powell (1999) and Helfat, et al. (2006) shows a dramatic increase of women in business leadership roles (see Table 1).

Table 1
Women in Management Positions

Period	% of Women in top management positions		
	Fortune 100	Fortune 500	% Increase
Prior to 1990		0%	-
1990		3%	-
mid 1990's		8.8%	193%
1998		11.2%	27%
2000		12.5%	12%
2002	7.3%	15%	20%

As of 2005 women accounted for 46.5% of the United States workforce, but for less than 8% of its top manager positions although at Fortune 500 companies the figure was a bit higher (*The Economist*, 2005). Female managers' earnings now average 72% of their male colleagues' (Emory, 2008).

Often cited as the reason for why women are not represented in top management positions is the "glass ceiling." The glass ceiling effect is defined as an unofficial barrier to opportunities within an organization or company preventing a protected classes of workers, particularly women, from advancing to higher positions (*Glass Cliff*, 2008; Olin, et al., 2000). According to Helfat et al. (2006), the percentage of women in executive positions is gender specific. For example, industries with the

highest percentage of women executives include publishing and printing (15.8%), transportation equipment (15.7%), securities (14.8%), healthcare (14.6%), temporary help (14.5%), airlines (13.8%), and food Services (13.6%). In contrast, industries with women holding the least amount of executive positions include semiconductors (1.3%), energy (2.8%), waste management (3.6%), trucking (3.8%), aerospace (3.8%), mail, package, and freight delivery (3.8%), and pipelines (3.9%).

According to Laff (2006), while this information can be explained in part by female preferences, it can also be attributed to educational choices. Some analysts believe that the educational choices women make explain the low number of executive and managerial women in tactical, science, and engineering fields. According to Nelson and Lavasque (2007), women in the United States only comprise 25% of the doctorates in math and science and less than 17% in engineering and computer and information sciences. The figures suggest education is an enabler of the glass ceiling.

Organizational Barriers

Some argue that the glass ceiling is more of a societal blocker than an individual barrier. Still others argue that corporate culture or organizational barriers are to blame (T&D, 2006). Organizational barriers refer to the organizational-level factors that affect the differential hiring and promotion of men and women. While these barriers vary significantly from organization to organization, they can create a huge roadblock preventing women from advancement to top management. (Baker, 2003).

Selection Process. One of the most common and well known barriers to career advancement is that of the selection process used by most companies. As indicated previously, the pool of women that are qualified for promotion to executive positions is quite small and therefore women simply cannot be promoted. According to Burke and Nelson (2000), 82% of firms stated that lack of general management skills and line experience was a major contributing factor in their decisions not to promote women. However, another study finds some firms have a large pool of qualified women and simply do not consider them for the position (Burke, et al., 2000). Another rationale is that existing top management positions are held by men who tend to promote other men who are similar to themselves (Van Vianen & Fischer, 2002).

Workplace Relationships. Another organizational barrier is the relationships many women have with their mentors, bosses, and female co-workers. Most employees tend to bond through similar interests. Since there tend to be few executive women; many women are unable to find a female mentor. Laff (2006) finds that women are inhibited in the workplace because of their limited access to

capable mentors. Many people prefer to have mentors of the same gender because they tend to understand the challenges most commonly faced. Men do not face the same barriers, have the same family issues, and many times simply do not want to mentor a woman. The needs of women from their mentors also tend to differ from the needs of men. Many women claim to need more encouragement, an example to follow, and simply more tasks to complete. Male mentors tend to be resistant to mentor a woman because they perceive women as more emotional, not as skilled at problem-solving, and because of the risk of workplace sexual harassment issues (Hanson, 2008).

Globalization. Globalization presents many new barriers for women. Senior level managers and top executives now have even more responsibility and higher expectations than before. Due to the time pressures and relocations of many businesses, top executives have had to move to new towns, cities, and countries. This presents a large barrier for many women with families and a working spouse or significant other (Wellington, Kropf, & Gerkovich, 2003).

Perhaps more surprisingly, the largest problem, however, has not been family issues; it has been adoption of new cultures and social norms. While the natural ability of women to adapt is higher than that of men, a large number of women have been unable to accept the culture shock and fail in their new environments. Similarly, women may also experience resistance in other cultures to female leadership. Many countries will simply not deal with a women executive because of their beliefs and perceptions that women are incapable of doing business effectively (Strout, 2001).

Internal Motivation. Many senior executive and top management claim that women simply do not have a desire to excel in their current job positions. However, a recent study indicated that 55% of women not in management positions desire to be in the top most levels of their organizations. Annis (2008) finds many women lose their drive to excel due to the many obstacles met along the path of becoming a manager. These obstacles include discrimination, stereotyping, prejudice, family demands, and lack of opportunities (Emory, 2008).

Life-style Conflicts. For many women, in addition to the roles they hold in their companies, they remain the primary caretakers for their families (Hughes, Ginnett, & Curphy, 2009). As the time constraints and demands of a job become more important upon, promotion forces many women to choose between family and career. According to Jack and Suzy Welch (2007), very few women CEOs and women executives have children due to the affect it would have on their career. Conversely, many women have voluntarily left their jobs due to family decisions (Baxter, 2000; Wallace, 2008). While a decreasing number of women are taking pregnancy or childcare leaves, 32% of women still leave their jobs once they have children. Also, once a woman has children she is much more reluctant

to travel and work long hours due to their responsibilities at home further hindering her promotion likelihood (Woodard, 2007; Hewlett, 2002; Lyons & McArthur, 2005).

Stereotyping and Leadership Styles. Past perceptions of leadership skills, competence, and assertiveness may hinder the ability of women to succeed in management. Many companies associate masculine characteristics with success and achievement. These include assertiveness, aggressiveness, and task-oriented leadership abilities (Jogulu & Wood 2006; Envick, 2008). Other stereotypes of women include the expectation of being modest, quiet, selfless, and nurturing (Eagly & Carl, 2003). These simple characteristics may be seen as non-executive material. Entities desire a leader who will execute, take criticism, and do what is best for the company at all cost (Nelson & Levesque 2007).

Leadership styles are closely associated with common perceptions and stereotypes of women leaders (Goff, 2005; Henderson, 2004). In early 1990 studies found that men emerged as task-oriented leaders more frequently than women who emerged as social leaders more frequently than men (Marrujo & Kliender, 1992). Due to the demands of leadership positions, it became a socially accepted tendency for men to assume leadership because their task-oriented style was more widely accepted (Ryan & Haslam, 2007). As time moved on, the social leadership style of women was more accepted and valued in some circumstances (Jogulu & Wood, 2006).

The study of leadership topics has been a fascinated historians and social scientists for centuries, and more recently resulted in enormous amounts of research on the subject. Nevertheless, one cannot find a generally acceptable universal-comprehensive theory of leadership. Instead, one finds competing theories emerging from several behavioral disciplines. For instance, Gibson et al. (1973) state it appears there are three broad leadership theory categories reflecting the research and opinion on the topic, including trait, personal-behavioral, and situational theories.

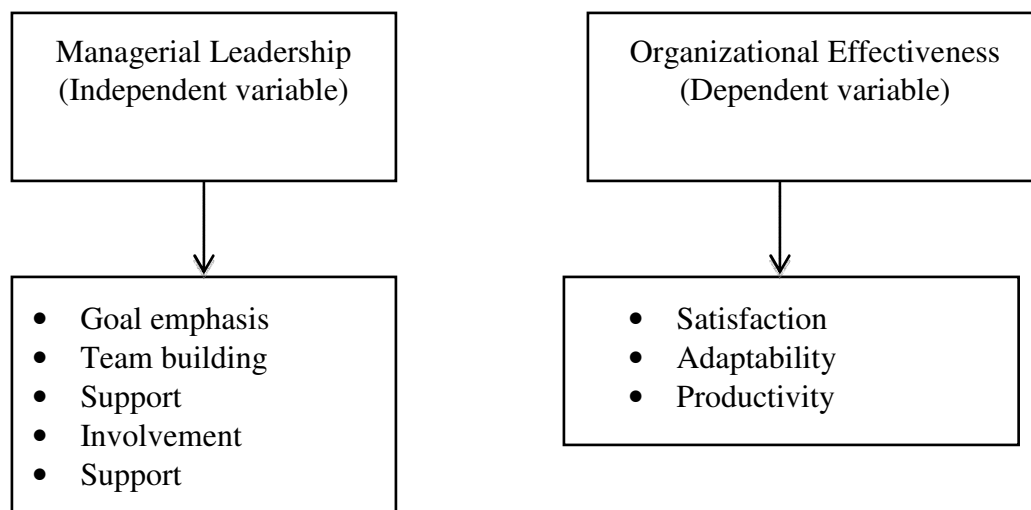
One of the most comprehensive inquiries into personalities and leadership issues is the “Big Five” personality traits. The five factors include openness, conscientiousness, extraversion, agreeableness, and neuroticism. Cross-cultural researched has concluded there is a universal pattern of sex differences on responses to the Big Five Inventory. Women consistently report higher neuroticism and agreeableness, and men often report higher extraversion and conscientiousness. Sex-based differences in personality traits are larger in prosperous, healthy, and egalitarian cultures in which women have more opportunities that are equal to those of men. (VonGlinow, et al.,2006; Wikipedia, 2008)

On the other hand, Likert, (1961) building on the findings of the Survey Research Center and the Research Center for Group Dynamics at the University of Michigan describes five conditions for effective leadership behavior. The items include (a) Principle of Supportive Relations, (b) Group Method of Supervision, (c) high performance goals, (d) technical knowledge, and, (e) coordinating, scheduling, and planning.

Research Framework

This study employs Likert's (1967) *model of human organizational dimension* known as system 4. Likert believed in the importance of the interaction-influence process and the team approach to leadership. Likert's research formed the foundation for subsequent studies in areas of participative leadership or interactive leadership (Rosener, 1990; Eagly & Carli, 2003). Several variables were identified as being significant for the purpose of this research. First, there are the elements to measure the independent variable that is managerial leadership. Second, there is the dependent variable model which includes organizational effectiveness. The research model views these variables as important elements of effective leadership which are linked to organizational effectiveness as shown in Figure 1.

Figure 1
The Research Model



Research Methodology

This study is an exploratory study that examines women's leadership roles and tests for the existence of relationships between women managerial leadership styles organizational effectiveness. The population of our study is working United

States citizens. Seven-hundred individuals were randomly selected from a variety of resources. From the 700 individuals it was determined that 400 were useful responses (193 females, 204 males, and three did not indicate sex of the respondent). The response rate (57%) was high due to follow-up letters and email notes to the sample population urging questionnaire completion within three weeks. Participants hold a multitude of jobs in many industries and organizations such as education, financial services, retail, and health care establishments throughout the United States.

Measures

The three instruments used in this study are (a) Likert's (1967) Profile of Organizational Characteristics, (b) Mott's (1972) Characteristics of Effective Organizations, and (c) perceptions of Leadership role. These three questionnaires were used to classify the type of managerial leadership utilized by survey respondents and examine the effect of each Leadership Style on measures of organizational effectiveness (satisfaction, adaptability, and productivity). Likert's (1967) questionnaire is used because it emphasizes the relationship between leadership style and effectiveness. Mott's (1972) questionnaire deals with productivity and is used for the data confirmation of information from Likert's (1967) instrument. The Mott (1972) instrument is based on the 1 through 5 Likert-type rating scale with 5 as the most productive and 1 as the least productive level. Although Likert's (1967) indices of managerial styles have been tested for validity and reliability by Taylor and Bowers (1972), a reliability test was conducted for these indices to confirm reliability. The alpha coefficient for this study was .72. Most researchers consider alpha at .70 to be an acceptable criterion for adequate scale reliability. The perceptions questionnaire is used to discover what the working public thought about women's roles in leadership positions.

The Likert (1973) instrument evaluates eight organizational attributes. These attributes define the leadership process – motivational forces, the communication process, goal setting, the control process, performance goals and training. The Likert questionnaire thus yields a profile of these eight variables using a systems continuum. These systems are shown along with their identifying range of scores for each category in Table 2.

Table 2
Systems of Leadership Styles

	System 1	System 2	System 3	System 4
Name of System	Exploitive-Authoritative	Benevolent-Authoritative	Consultative	Participative Group Approach
Range of score	1.00-1.99	2.00-2.99	3.00-3.99	4.00-4.99

Hypotheses

Two hypotheses have been developed to test the data from this study.

H1: The most predominant leadership style among women in the surveyed population in this study will be classified as Likert’s system 3 (consultative) or system 4 (participative group) leadership styles category.

H2: There is a positive significant relationship between participative group leadership styles and organizational effectiveness.

The hypotheses are stated in a way that seeks to determine linear relationships.

Research Questions and Results Analysis

A major objective of this study is analyze what the working public in the United States of America thinks about women’s roles in leadership positions and their personal challenges faced as they excel within an organization. To answer these queries the results of the survey were analyzed on a scale from -2 to 2 based on whether participants strongly disagreed or agreed. The survey responses were then weighted accordingly: -2 and 2 were given 1 full credit, -1 and 1 were given .5 credit, and 0 was given no credit (neutral). The data from the surveys are analyzed and summarized in the following tables (2 through 8) in accordance with the objectives mentioned earlier.

Analysis of Research Questions

Q1: Determine perceptions of whether men and women have equal opportunities in professional development and upward mobility in organizations.

Table 3
Perceptions of Equal Opportunities

	Female	Male
Disagree	22%	18%
Agree	26%	34%

The results show that men fluctuate more on agreeing whether both genders have equal opportunities for upward mobility. Interestingly, more women think there are equal opportunities than not.

Q2: Determine perceptions of whether existing barriers prevent women from entering management positions and cause lower advancement rates for women.

Table 4
Perception of Barriers to Managerial Positions

	Female	Male
Disagree	14%	19%
Agree	46%	29%

There is a significant difference (17%) between the percentage of men and women who agree to the existence of barriers for women to advance.

Q3: Determine perceptions of whether most women leave organizations because they desire more flexibility in their jobs.

Table 5
Perceptions of Female Turnover in Organizations

	Female	Male
Disagree	8%	6%
Agree	40%	31%

The results of this question show at least 30% of both men and women agree that women leave organizations due to flexibility issues.

Q4: Determine perceptions of whether women benefit and advance as leaders by having more sensitive and encouraging leadership characteristics than men.

Table 6
Perceptions of Benefits of Leadership Characteristics

	Female	Male
Disagree	18%	15%
Agree	45%	34%

The results show that at least 30% of both men and women agree that the more encouraging leadership characteristics assist women. While there are many that agree with this statement, there is a significant percentage of men and women (at least 15%) of both men and women who disagree that the increased sensitivity helps women succeed.

Q5: Determine perceptions of whether education and training can help women be more prepared for leadership roles and management positions in organizations.

Table 7
Perceptions of Value of Education and Training to Women

	Female	Male
Disagree	8%	6%
Agree	65%	66%

This is the most significant result. Over 60% of both men and women feel that education and training can help prepare women for leadership positions. There were also a low percentage of people who disagreed with this statement.

Q6: Determine perceptions of whether women more likely than men to feel that their family takes priority over their jobs.

Table 8
Perception of Multiple Roles for Women

	Female	Male
Disagree	14%	18%
Agree	46%	36%

Perhaps obvious to some, more women than men believe that women feel family has a greater priority than careers. More men than women thought this statement was not true.

Q 7: Determine the perceived percentage of women who hold upper and middle management positions.

Table 9

Perceived Percentage of Women in Upper and Middle Management Positions

Female Average: 29%
Male Average: 33%

While both of these averages are higher than the actual statistic, women feel the average is lower than men. Surprisingly, the averages are close in number. These findings complement previous studies (Helfat, et al., 2006; Baker, 2003) regarding some of the barriers that may create a huge road block preventing women from advancement to top management.

Relationship Between Leadership Styles and Effectiveness

Another major objective of this study is to identify the leadership styles among the surveyed respondent presently operating in the United States. H1 predicts that the leadership style pattern of practices, behavior, and beliefs as perceived by respondents most predominant in the surveyed firms will be classified as falling within Likert's system 3 or system 4. Mean scores were used for this hypothesis to classify leadership styles as 1, 2, 3, or 4 according to Likert's (1967) profile of organizational characteristics.

As predicted in H1, the data indicates that the leadership most dominant in the respondents was system 3 (consultative) or system 4 (participative). The average mean scores range from 3.10 for firms in system 3 (consultative) to 4.20 for firms in system 4 (participative). Equally significant is the finding that all respondents located within the range of system 4 were women. These respondents scored the highest means on the leadership dimensions among all respondents. In addition, 62% of the respondents expressed an overwhelming support for participative leadership style.

The participative leadership approach is a leadership style where subordinates and superiors exhibit mutual confidence and trust in all matters. Decision making is widely dispersed throughout the organization. Communication is extensive and mobile. It flows not only up and down the hierarchy, but also among peers. Teamwork is encouraged in this atmosphere and there is a high degree of worker satisfaction. This supports the contention of Jogulu et al. (2006) and Rosener, (1990) regarding the social-interactive leadership style of women.

The consultative leadership approach has substantial but not complete confidence and trust in subordinates. Subordinates are permitted to make minor decisions at

lower levels. Communication flows both up and down the hierarchy. Teamwork is not encouraged in this type of leadership style.

Leadership Styles and Effectiveness

A third objective of this study is to test for the existence of a consistent relationship between leadership style and organizational effectiveness. H2 predicts a positive relationship between participative leadership style and organizational effectiveness among some of the respondent. An analysis of variance of organizational mean scores for dimensions of leadership styles and effectiveness is used to test the significance of the difference between means at a .05 significance level for the respondents surveyed.

The average mean scores for those respondents that do have participative style were 4.20 for leadership dimensions and 4.5 for effectiveness respondent dimensions. The average mean scores for those respondents that do not have participative styles were 3.10 for leadership dimensions and 3.25 for effectiveness dimensions. The average mean scores is based on a scale of 1 through 5 (a Likert-type rating scale) with 5 as the most effective and 1 as the least effective.

Further analysis and evaluation of the relationships between participative leadership style and organizational effectiveness were done using a multiple regression analysis. This analysis determines the proportion of variance in organizational effectiveness scores explained by the scores of the participative leadership style. The multiple regression analysis indicates a positive relationship between the measures of participative leadership style and effectiveness. Fifty-two percent of the variation in effectiveness is explained by linear regression on the participative leadership style dimensions. The F-ratio of 4.70 indicates that these linear relationships are statistically significant at the .05 level.

Research Findings and Discussion

Four significant findings emerged as a result of this study. According to the survey results, 45% of women surveyed perceived that there are existing barriers which prevent women from entering management positions and cause lower advancement rates. The causal link between barriers such as discrimination, family-life demands, prejudice and stereotyping and women's advancement to top management in the workplace were statistically significant, confirming prior expectations and complementing previous studies (Baker, 2003; Wellington, et al., 2003; Hewlett, 2002; Helfat, et al., 2006).

Other findings emerged from this study indicated that women are perceived by most men and women as more sensitive and encouraging leaders than men. Most

males indicated that they feel women do not have equal opportunities in professional development and upward mobility in organizations. At the same time, the majority of men and women felt that education and training could help women be more prepared for leadership roles. This supports the contention of Nelson et al. (2007) regarding the importance of education, classes, seminars, and even support groups can help women with this process.

The research data indicated that the predominant leadership styles among respondents are system 3 (consultative) or system 4 (participative). Equally significant is the finding that most respondents located within the range of system 4 in this study were within women dominated positions. These respondents scored the highest means on the leadership dimensions as well as on the effectiveness dimensions among most of the respondents investigated. In addition, the research data indicated that 62% of the respondents expressed an overwhelming support for participative leadership style and 38% expressed support for consultative leadership style. These findings complement previous studies (Rosener, 1990; Von Glinow, et al., 2006; Wikipedia, 2008).

Statistical analysis of the sample data indicated that a positive association exists between the participative leadership style and organizational effectiveness among some of the respondents investigated in this study.

The data of this study supports the conclusion that group interactions through participatory leadership activities such as team-building, goal-setting, participation in decision-making and problem solving, and sharing information often increases organizational effectiveness. Further, the findings indicate that there is a positive relationship between participatory activities led by managerial leadership and organizational effectiveness. This supports the contention of Jogulu and Wood (2006) regarding the social leadership style of women.

The findings also support Likert's thesis (1973) that leadership styles which approach system 4 (participative) tend to be more effective and yield more favorable results than other systems.

Conclusions and Implications

Several significant findings were discussed briefly in the previous section of this paper. From these findings, it is possible to draw several conclusions. First, it is important to know that statistics evidence of gender equality is inaccurate. Some of these inequality issues come in the form of pay and promotions. Equality may eventually be achieved, but it will take great effort from organizations and women alike. Organizations must offer equal pay, training, and recognize the steps to overcome the "glass ceiling" barriers. Women must recognize the potential

barriers caused by gender discrimination. Some of these barriers that women control are a lack of education, training, and experiences. The barriers women must recognize within organizations are discrimination, stereotyping, and negative preconceptions.

There is hope for gender equality in corporations. Future implications for gender equality indicate that the number of women CEOs will increase. In 2007 the percentage of women CEOs was 2.4% and it is projected to increase to 6.4% in 2010 and to 10.4% in 2016 (Helfat, Harris, & Wolfson, 2006). Interestingly, stocks of companies with the 12 female CEOs were up 165% in 2007 (Annis, 2008). However, only women held one in three of all managerial positions in 2007.

The research findings indicate an overwhelming support for participative leadership styles. According to the findings, people of all genders, races, colors and nationalities have a universal desire to participate in the decisions that affect their life. The literature on participation strongly supports the positive effects of participative leadership on organizational effectiveness. Therefore the present study can be seen as making a valuable contribution to that literature.

One major implication of this study is that in order to show positive results organizational effectiveness has to be planned, structured, and carefully monitored. Lasting effectiveness gains will be realized only through effective utilization of people and the system within which they operate. With women's increasing knowledge of how to balance life and work, it is making it easier for them to climb to the top while still raising a family.

Limitations

There are obvious limitations to the self-reported data collected in this study and to the surveyed responses from the key managers in several industries in the United States. Results and responses can contain inherent biases among individuals for programs that may have personally requested or supported. In addition to these limitations, the sample size in this study is so small across a limited range of industries such as education, financial services, retail, and health care industries. Therefore, a more comprehensive study covering a cross-wide range of industries and countries would provide us with a better understanding of challenges women face in leadership positions.

Despite these limitations, this exploratory empirical investigation provides avenues for increasing the probability of success of women in leadership positions and identifies styles and effective organizational effectiveness dimensions in limited sectors of the United States economy. Nevertheless, further work is needed in a variety of industry settings and to confirm linkage between leadership

styles and other corporate activities and functions. Although many more issues remain to be investigated, this study consolidates much of the previous work into a base from which additional studies can spring. It represents a beginning rather than an end. More research will be needed in this area.

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