

Running Head: EXECUTIVE LEADERSHIP FOR WOMEN

LITERATURE REVIEW
Executive leadership for women: Examining the rhetoric and the reality

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Introduction

This review was prompted by the significant under-representation of women in Canadian corporate executive positions and the University of Alberta's Executive Education and Lifelong Learning department's interest in determining whether a market exists for an executive education program designed specifically for women.

I expected that I would find ample literature about the competencies required to succeed as a female corporate executive. My review of the leadership literature on women yielded copious information on feminine styles of leadership, the barriers that female leaders face, and the organizational/societal changes that must occur to facilitate the shattering of the proverbial glass ceiling; however, there appears to be limited literature about the core corporate competencies required for women to succeed at the executive level. Competencies are only alluded to by way of discussions about the values and qualities that female executives typically bring to the corporate world and by way of arbitrary comparisons of the male/female leadership behaviours and dynamics.

It became clear to me that a broad investigation of the issues related to female leadership necessarily precedes positing core executive competencies: what women need to succeed is inextricably linked to the socio-cultural operational context in which they toil, dream, and grow. Therefore, the literature review explored the current operational context of executive leadership and the impact of gender on the quest for executive leadership.

Limitations and Assumptions

I limited the literature review to peer reviewed articles and documents published from 2000 to the present. My assumption was that current circumstances would be more likely to be reflected in the recent literature, specifically articles from 2000 to 2008. Although I retrieved documents that reflect global trends and understandings, my primary focus was the Canadian context, so the literature that reflected the Canadian context, although limited, was of critical interest.

The purpose of the review was not to determine a preferred style of leadership. The purpose was to review the extant literature on the ways in which women lead and the barriers they face on the "road" to and in the offices of the C-suite. The insights gained from the literature review informed the questions I posed in the first iteration of the Delphi Survey.

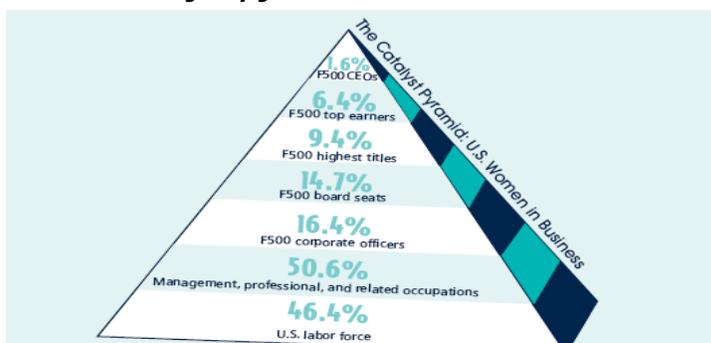
For the purposes of this review, I adopted the following definition for success, as articulated by Duffey et al (2006): "reaching a relatively high level in one's occupation or profession" (p.554). Therefore, only articles that reflected the following demographics were

included in the review: private sector female managers of managers, entrepreneurial women who have owned a business for at least three years, high ranking female government officials, and C-suite female executives.

Introducing the Context: Rhetoric Versus Reality

Several decades of workplace equity and diversity initiatives, driven by socio-political reforms, have resulted in workplaces that trumpet gender equity as a key organizational value. However, despite studies that indicate that men and women leaders are “equally effective, while peer and direct assessment rate women as slightly higher than men” (Applebaum, Audent, & Miller, 2002, p. xxx) women hold only 16.4% of corporate officer positions in the United States (Catalyst, 2006, p. 36). Figure 1 illustrates the division of roles assigned to women in business in the United States.

FIGURE 1 *The 2005 Catalyst pyramid: U.S. women in business*



SOURCE:

Catalyst. (2006). *2005 Catalyst census of women corporate officers and top earners of the fortune 500*. Retrieved June 10, 2008, from http://www.heidrick.com/NR/rdonlyres/6325D623-238C-41CD-9E59-E80791BDE7BA/0/CTLYST_2005WCOTECensus.pdf (p. 36).

The percentages are no less dismal in Canada. According to the 2004 Catalyst Census of Women Corporate officers and Top Earners in Canada, women held only 14.4 % of corporate officer positions (*2005 Catalyst census of women corporate officers and top earners of the fortune 500*, 2006, p. 98). Figure 2 illustrates the division of roles assigned to women in business in Canada.

FIGURE 2 *The 2004 Catalyst pyramid: Canadian women in business***SOURCE:**

Catalyst. (2005). 2004 Catalyst Census of Women Corporate Officers of Canada. Retrieved June 10, 2008, from <http://www.catalystwomen.org/files/fact/2002%20Canadian%20COTE%20Fact%20Sheet.pdf>

The future does not bode well for aspiring female executives: at the current almost imperceptible rate of change, the number of women reaching the top ranks in corporate Canada will not reach a critical mass of 25% until the year 2025 and will not reach 50% until 2043 (Catalyst, 2003, p. 8). There is ample literature on the differences and similarities between male and female leaders. Applebaum, Audent, and Miller (2002) note that much of the contemporary literature “conceptualizes a feminine style of leadership that is singularly different than its male counterpart” (p. 48) while Vikinas (2000) posits that the differences in effectiveness are negligible. Some studies (Applebaum, Audent, & Miller, 2002; Regine & Lewin, 2003) project that because women are typically more relational than men that they are poised to become significant leaders in the 21st Century.

It may be, however, that the a single-minded focus on gender distribution of roles, and the assumptions that appear to be drivers of the rates,—albeit with the best of intentions—distracts researchers from studying how female executives succeed. Duffey, Fox, Punnett and Gregory (2006) assert that despite ample research examining the similarities and differences in leadership style, there is a paucity of research with respect to what specifically contributes to success for female business leaders (p. 553).

Findings

Figure 3 summarizes the themes investigated in the literature review and indicates the associated primary references. For the purpose of this summary, only those references that investigated each theme in significant detail are listed beside each theme.

FIGURE 3 Leadership themes investigated in the literature

LEADERSHIP THEMES INVESTIGATED	PRIMARY REFERENCES INVESTIGATING DESIGNATED THEME	
Limitations of literature methodologies	Stelter (2008) Duffey, Fox, Punnett & Gregory <i>et al</i> (2006),	Maloney (2003) Billing & Alvesson (2000)
Reasons for limited access to executive leadership	Christman & McClelland (2008) Stelter (2008) Catalyst (2007) Eagly & Carli (2007) Weyer (2007)	Greenburg & Sweeney (2005); Billing & Alvesson (2000) Hatcher (2000)
Feminine styles of leadership	Stelter (2008) Weyer (2007) Oakley (2000)	Olsson (2000) Billing & Alvesson (2000)
The female advantage perspective	Applebaum, Audet & Miller (2003) Regine & Lewin (2003)	Hatcher (2000);
Leadership barriers for women	Christman & McClelland (2008) Stelter (2008) Catalyst (2007) Eagly & Carli (2007) Jacobs (2007) Weyer (2007)	Castalyst (2006) Applebaum, Audet & Miller (2003) Domeisen (2003) Ohlott, Bhandry & Tavares (2003) Oakley (2000) Vikinas (2000)
Leadership metaphors	Stelter (2008) Eagly & Carli (2007) Jacobs (2007) Maloney (2003)	Hatcher (2000) Oakley (2000) Olsson (2000);
Leadership vocabulary	Stelter (2008) Applebaum, Audet & Miller (2003)	Billing & Alvesson (2000); Hatcher (2000)
Beyond gender differences	Christman & McClelland (2008)	Billing & Alvesson (2000);
Importance of hearing the female voice in leadership	Christman & McClelland (2008) Trinidad & Normore (2008) Greenburg & Sweeney (2005)	Oakley (2000) Olsson (2000)
Future implications for women aspiring to leadership	Christman & McClelland (2008) Stelter (2008) Trinidad & Normore (2008) Jacobs (2007) Weyer (2007)	Maloney (2003) Regine & Lewin (2003) Wood (2003) Oakley (2000)

The literature points to some significant limitations with respect to study methodologies. Stelter (2008) and Duffey et al (2006) report that too often female leaders are operationalized as a homogenous group. Billing and Alvesson (2000) caution that “the review literature is rather general” and that “no distinctions are made between groups of women or historical and culturally different settings” (p. 148). Duffey *et al* (2006) propose that sampling methods need to be developed that are “appropriate and practical for each location” (p. 567). The implications for future research are profound: do regional, ethnic, professional experience terms of service, age, and other variables impact access to C-suite positions? Do the narratives of executive women speak to similar themes in spite of these variables?

I found no study that spoke exclusively to the Canadian female executive experience and context. My study of female Albertan executives may help to reduce the paucity of information in this knowledge area.

Unpacking Limited Access

While the extant limited access to C-suite positions is patently obvious, the reasons for those limitations are anything but precise. Hatcher (2000) notes that “the sense of fragmentation and multiplicity of meaning-making that now characterizes contemporary society” is problematic” (p. 395). She posits that equal employment opportunity and affirmative action in the workplace rely “squarely on confounding the differences between men and women” (p. 397). The literature identifies several theoretical assumptions that trigger and sustain—perhaps in tandem with one another—numerous barriers to C-suite positions for aspiring female executives: biological assumptions, sociological assumptions, structural/cultural assumptions, and line experience assumptions. While gender differences in leadership styles and perceptions of leaders can be accounted for using various theoretical frameworks, it is likely that these assumptions work in a complex interdependency that is not easily unpacked.

Biological assumptions. The biological assumption rests on the notion that men and women are, to put it simply, different. They are built differently, they think differently, they behave differently. The basic premise under this assumption is that “leadership is biologically determined” (Applebaum, Audet & Miller, 2003, p. 44).

Oakley (2000) notes that women’s linguistic styles constitute another language for many men and that these styles are often “devalued by men” (p. 325). However, the

premise of biologically determined leadership propensity can not be deduced from the existence of markedly different linguistic styles.

Studies that operate from this theoretical framework investigate the deficiencies of female leadership. They imply that acquiring male leadership values, qualities, and skills are necessary to succeed in leadership.

Sociological assumptions. Despite sweeping socio-political changes in the last forty years, significant sociological assumptions continue to deter, if not prevent, success for females in the executive echelons of business (Eagly & Carli, 2007; Weyer, 2007; Duffey et al, 2006). Weyer (2007) notes, for instance, that the last half decade of reforms has not been accompanied by marked changes in gender stereotyping. Social role and expectation theory are rooted in sociological assumptions: “individuals react to leaders with gendered expectancies...in return, leaders respond because of their internalized gender role” (Wyer, 2007, p. 489).

Studies that operate from the sociological theoretical framework investigate the sociological drivers for leadership and provide evidence that significant social change is necessary to facilitate female leadership success. Aspiring female leaders may be forgiven, however, for asking the question, “Now what?”—the sociological framework leaves little hope, much less direction, for women aspiring to leadership positions today or in the near future.

Structural/Cultural assumptions. Some researchers argue that masculinity and femininity are culturally rather than sociologically or biologically defined (Stelter, 2008; Billing & Alvesson, 2000; Oakley, 2000). Arguing from a feminist mode of inquiry, Billing and Alvesson (2000) propose that structural and cultural assumptions “reproduce global inequalities” (p. 145).

Studies that operate from this theoretical framework investigate the organizational and cultural drivers of leadership. Within this framework, women are typically expected to “cultivate more masculine methods” to fit an organizationally or culturally predefined male leadership model (Christman & McClelland, 2008, p. 20).

Line experience assumptions. It appears that many would-be female executives are caught in the “experience wanted” trap: line experience is valued but all too often not made available to female managers aspiring to executive status (Weyer, 2007). Eagly and

Carli (2007) and Oakley (2000) posit that the “scarcity of female corporate officers is the sum of discrimination that has operated at all ranks” (p. 65).

This theoretical assumption belies a flaw in the glass ceiling metaphor which supposes pre-determined—albeit invisible—limits that block executive aspirations for women. The implication for future research is that there may be some value to investigating the regional experiences of female executives to assess the extent to which line experience facilitates, or conversely lack of line experience impedes, professional advancement.

Defining a Feminine Style of Leadership

The question, “Does a feminine style of leadership exist?” may be moot in the new millennium. There is increasing evidence that an androgynous style of leadership is emerging as a pragmatic style of leadership for the new millennium (Jacobs 2007; Stelter, 2008). This trend is examined in more detail in the section of the review entitled, “Rejecting binary gender norms”.

Currently, however, gender perceptions about leadership styles persist (Billing and Alvesson, 2000; Oakley, 2000; Olsson, 2000; Stelter, 2008; Weyer, 2007). Gender specific leadership labels abound, but in general terms, female leadership style tends to be transformational while male leadership style tends to be transactional (Billing & Alvesson, 2000; Oakley, 2000; Olsson, 2000; Stelter, 2008; Weyer, 2007). Female leadership styles are typically described as communal with associated nurturing, facilitative behaviours while male leadership styles are typically described as agentic with behaviours associated with achievement behaviours (Applebaum, Audet & Miller, 2003; Eagly & Carli 2007; Weyer, 2007). Jacobs (2007) describes this gender leadership dynamic as “Men think ‘can do, will do’ while women think ‘have done, will do’” (p. 3). These gender stereotypes contribute to considerable barriers to female leadership, including the proverbial double-bind dilemma. Christman and McClelland (2008) note that the “choice to move too far within or outside feminine social constructions can be detrimental to the perceived competence of the woman’s leadership” (p. 23). How far is too far is a question for further research.

The literature supports the following inventory of female leadership qualities: 1. openness, 2. flexibility, 3. empathy, 4. relational strengths, 5. inclusiveness, and 6. a preference for collaboration. Greenburg and Sweeney (2005) note that male leaders can also be exceptional in demonstrating these qualities (p. 34) but their findings indicate that women outperform men in their ability to incorporate these qualities into their leadership style. Of relevance to the research question driving this review, “What core corporate

competencies are required to succeed as a female executive in Alberta?", Greenburg and Sweeney (2005) explicitly—although briefly—indicate that these qualities can be “identified and developed” (p. 34). Further research is required to identify the competencies banked under these qualities.

Exploring the female advantage perspective. Some theorists suggest that the female advantage perspective is beginning to mitigate the barriers to female leadership (Applebaum, Audet, & Miller, 2003; Hatcher 2000; Regine & Lewin, 2003). This line of discourse claims that traditional masculine styles of leadership are being discarded and that new millennial models “synchronous with feminine ways are becoming desirable” (Hatcher, 2000, p. 398). This emerging new millennial model perspective has significant implications for further research, specifically for a study on leadership competencies. If a feminine leadership dynamic is synergizing with traditional leadership models, the implication is that feminine qualities, values, and skills—cumulatively defined as competencies—can be identified and learned.

Deconstructing Leadership Barriers

There appears to be unanimity in both the academic and applied literature acknowledging that significant barriers exist for women pursuing C-suite leadership positions (Catalyst, 2007; Christman & McClelland, 2008; Eagley & Carli 2007; Stelter, 2008; Weyer 2007). Figure 4 outlines the barriers to female leadership as identified by Catalyst (2006):

FIGURE 4 *Barriers to female leadership*

With this level of representation at work, why are only 16.4 percent of corporate officers women?

- ◆ Catalyst research suggests that many stereotypes hold women back from top positions.²⁴ Common stereotypic perceptions include:
 - ❑ Women lack ambition.
 - ❑ Women don't have the right work experience.
 - ❑ Women don't have the leadership skills.
 - ❑ Women don't have the problem-solving skills.
 - ❑ Women won't make the necessary sacrifices.

- ◆ Other barriers Catalyst research shows contributing to women's slow advancement include:²⁵
 - ❑ Lack of access to informal networks
 - ❑ Lack of mentors
 - ❑ Lack of access to influential colleagues
 - ❑ Lack of role models
 - ❑ Lack of stretch assignments
 - ❑ Limited flexible work arrangements

SOURCE:

Catalyst (2007). *The double-bind dilemma for women in leadership: Damned if you do, doomed if you don't*. Retrieved June 10, 2008, from <http://www.catalyst.org/files/full/2007%20Double%20Bind.pdf> (p. 12)

Women entrepreneurs are the fastest growing sector in both Canada and the U.S; in Canada, their numbers have increased an astounding 200% in the past twenty years (Domeisen, 2003, p. 11). The growth in female entrepreneurship may indicate that the first set of barriers is flawed. An absence of ambition, leadership propensity and skills, and experience would hardly bode well for success in the entrepreneurial arena. In any event, each of the barriers identified by Catalyst (2006) has profound implications for the extrapolation of competencies required for females aspiring to executive leadership. The gap in the literature with regard to core corporate competencies for women could be addressed by a narrative inquiry that conversationally investigates how successful female executives have conquered these barriers. The section of the review entitled, *Breaking the silence*, explores the research in this area in more detail.

For the purposes of this review, the barriers can be categorized as follows:

1. Preponderance of male leadership metaphors/Absence of female leadership metaphors

2. Preponderance of male leadership vocabulary/Absence of female leadership vocabulary
3. Preponderance of male leadership conversation/Absence of female leadership conversation
4. Preponderance of binary gender leadership norms/Absence of androgynous leadership models

There is ample literature on the barriers to female leadership and considerable extrapolation from the data about the implications for social and cultural change. However, there appears to be minimal data with respect to the specific competencies required to prevail in spite of the barriers.

Deconstructing leadership metaphors. The leadership tradition is replete with distinctly male metaphors. Jacobs (2007) notes the abundance of sport and warrior metaphors in the literature and in practice. “Metaphors matter because they are part of the storytelling that can compel us to change” (Eagly & Carli, 2007, p. 64). The sport, warrior, and hero metaphors, drawn from both mythological and current storytelling traditions, reflect a transactional—AKA male—style of leadership rather than the transformative style with which women are typically identified. Applebaum, Audet and Miller (2003) note that organizations are “structured to protect male power and reward masculinity accordingly” (p. 47)—metaphors that are predominantly male in content and texture serve to reinforce these structures.

Stelter (2008) uses George Bernard Shaw’s infamous quote from *Pygmalion* to capture the essence of the female leadership paradigm: “why can’t a woman be more like a man” (p.94). In other words, if a woman wants to succeed in the upper echelons of leadership, she must consistently exhibit masculine characteristics and behaviours. Herein, however, lies one of the most impenetrable of barriers to female leadership: the double bind (Catalyst 2008; Maloney, 2003; Oakley, 2000; Stelter, 2008). A double bind is a no-win situation, in the context of this review, one where “a woman leader must act tough and authoritative (i.e. masculine) in order to be taken seriously but may be perceived negatively” (Stelter, 2008, p. 90) or as a “bitch” (Oakley, 2000, p. 324). While the double bind is well documented, there appears to be little research on what competencies women might use to overcome—or at least not be trounced by—the double bind.

Oakley (2000) uses the novel *Catch-22* as a metaphor for the double-bind: suggesting Neanderthal leadership prototypes that stubbornly persist in spite of the misery

that they propagate may capture the tenacity of the barriers to female leadership. This is hardly an inspirational, transformative metaphor.

Even the metaphor of the glass ceiling, long held up as a symbol of the challenges to female leadership, is grounded in masculine imagery and language. The glass ceiling is absolute, it conveys that “women are unable to see [impediments] from a distance” and that there are some roles that women have “virtually no chance” of attaining (Eagly & Carli, 2007, p. 64). Even more problematic, Eagly and Carli propose, is that “the glass ceiling fails to incorporate the complexity and variety of challenges that women can face in their leadership journeys” (p. 64). In other words, this male-oriented metaphor fails to acknowledge the multi-faceted layers of the barriers to female leadership.

Operationalizing a female leadership metaphor. Metaphors, at their best, are often operationalized in inclusive corporate structures, values, processes, and leadership styles; at their worst, they can be traps, speaking to bastions of tradition that block change by stifling change agents. Eagly and Carli (2000) propose that the labyrinth is a better metaphor for female leadership. They note that “for women who aspire to top leadership, routes exist but are full of twists and turns, both expected and unexpected. Because all labyrinths have a viable route to the center, it is understood that goals are attainable” (p. 64). This metaphor appears to more accurately reflect literature findings with respect to the female leadership quest. Measuring the viability of this metaphor is fodder for future research.

While Eagly and Carli’s (2000) proposed metaphor of the labyrinth may reflect the female leadership paradigm, it presents significant challenges for future research in the area of the competencies required to navigate the labyrinth. Eagly and Carli posit that the metaphor can “help us to effectively improve the situation” through management interventions, but their investigation circles around the issues of stereotyping, structural/cultural resistance, and leadership style without landing on the dilemma of identifying the core corporate competencies required to succeed as a female leader. Additional research will be required both to confirm the validity of this metaphor and the implications for professional development for prospective female leaders.

Deconstructing leadership vocabulary. One might argue that the preponderance of male leadership metaphors is bulwarked by a preponderance of male leadership vocabulary. Rudolph Giuliani’s (2002) book, *Leadership*, makes no apologies for the title of Chapter 9 (Be Your Own Man) or for the exclusionary pronouns that pepper the chapter:

Giuliani writes, for example, that “a leader is chosen because whoever put him there trusts his judgment, character, and intelligence” (p. 207, emphasis mine).

Oakley (2000) notes that female executives are more likely to ask questions while their male counterparts are more likely to issue orders (p. 325). A woman will request a task using considerate, option laced vocabulary, while a man will use more command-oriented vocabulary; “in the almost all male world of upper management, therefore, women are forced to change their linguistic style to a more command-oriented form in order to be perceived as strong, decisive, and in control” (Oakley, 2000, p. 325). Oakley offers the examples of former Canadian Prime Minister Kim Campbell and the UK’s Prime Minister Margaret Thatcher, respectively known as “brittle, defensive, and haughty” and “the Iron Lady” as evidence of yet another double bind barrier.

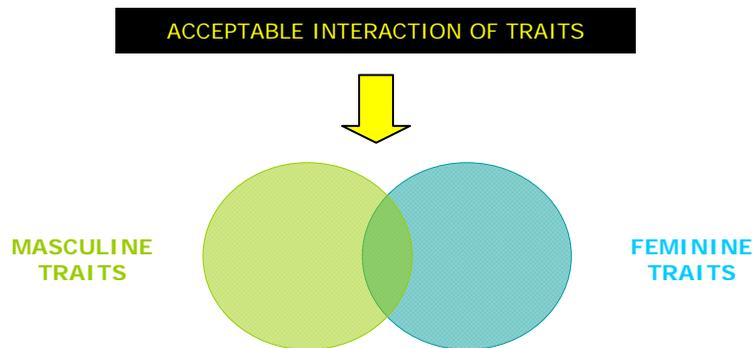
Contradictions abound, however. Regine and Lewin (2003) cite a Gallup poll of roughly two million people that shows that “a majority of [people] would prefer to have a caring boss than more money or perks; and those that do are more productive and stay longer with their organizations important measures of business success” (p. 349). The 2008 Catalyst study on female leadership extrapolates three double-binds from their data on leadership vocabulary and linguistics (p. 7) and they are as follows; 1. Extreme perceptions: too soft, too tough, and never just right; 2. The high competence threshold : women leaders face higher standards and lower rewards than male leaders; and 3. Competent but disliked: women leaders are perceived as competent or likeable, but rarely both.

While the Catalyst report (2008) identifies the structural and organizational characteristics that influence and sustain the above double binds, and offers strategies/tools for building awareness of and addressing bias (p. 7), it offers no recommendations as to the competencies that female executives might acquire to mitigate against these biases. Catalyst reports that women corporate officers use a variety of strategies to succeed including “being committed to building the corporate business, developing effective relationships with coworkers, working well on teams, and learning from others within the corporation” (p. 29) but provides no direction as to the competencies required to effect these strategies.

Rejecting binary gender norms. The literature points to the following question: Does the notion of a feminine style of leadership inadvertently reinforce stereotypes? The binary gender leadership norms that helped to sustain the glass ceiling may no longer apply in the new millennium. Billing and Alvesson (2000) put forward that researchers and corporate stakeholders need to “find ways other than using female leadership as a slogan

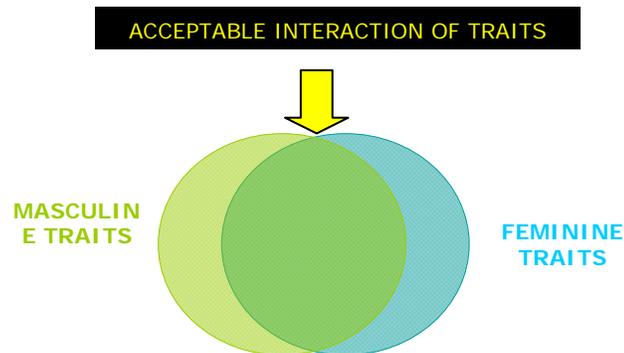
for promoting equality" (p. 144). Christman and McClelland (2008) maintain that today's leaders need to adopt a leadership style that morphs "dynamically and fluidly to sustain themselves in the complexity of today's organizations" (p. 23). Under a binary gender leadership model, acceptable androgynous behaviours are minimal. Figure 5 illustrates the acceptable interaction of gender-related leadership traits in a binary gender model as identified by Christmas and McClelland (2008).

FIGURE 5 *Acceptable interaction of gender-related leadership traits in a binary gender model*



In an era of global economic collegiality, however, a more androgynous leadership style appears to be emerging (Jacobs 2007; Oakley, 2000). Figure 6 illustrates a perspective of an acceptable interaction of gender-related traits in an androgynous model.

FIGURE 6 *Acceptable interaction of gender-related leadership traits in an androgynous model*



Regine and Lewin (2003) speculate that this move beyond a binary gender style of leadership may indicate that women may be poised, by virtue of their experiences learning to adopt and adapt masculine traits to their leadership styles, to become important leaders in the new millennium (p. 349).

Breaking the silence. Another significant barrier is the femininity/competency double bind (Catalyst, 2008; Oakley, 2000; Stelter 2007). In this double bind, femininity is associated with incompetence, and masculinity is associated with competence. Maloney's (2003) time-use data shows that "women work longer hours (paid plus unpaid) than men work" (p. 12) and still lag behind their male counterparts in perceptions of competency. As a result of this significant dissonance, researchers are calling for more opportunities for women to speak to their experiences in leadership (Christman & McClelland, 2008; Greenburg & Sweeney, 2005; Oakley, 2000; Olsson, 2000; Trinidad & Normore, 2008;). Oakley (2000) cites psychologist Carol Gilligan who laments that women "have listened for centuries to the voices of men and the theories of development that their experience informs, so we have come more recently to notice not only the silence of women but the difficulty in hearing what they have to say when they speak" (p. 332). Olsson (2000) concurs, stating that female narratives "need to be used to break through the constraints of male executive culture and, in so doing, begin to bring to the surface and celebrate the female archetype of leadership for women in management" (p. 7).

Greenburg and Sweeney (2005) find that female executive narratives suggest that a “new paradigm is evolving, and that women are in the forefront of creating it” (p. 33). The narratives of female executives—of both their successes and the failures that “could have derailed their careers” (Greenburg & Sweeney, 2005, p. 33) but didn’t—can inform the identification of core corporate leadership competencies for women. The paucity of substantive Canadian data to this effect speaks to the need for future research in this area.

Conclusion

Visualizing the Future

This review focused on investigating the theoretical assumptions that sustain limited access to leadership opportunities for females. Additionally, the review explored the traits that are commonly attributed to a feminine style of leadership and the barriers that challenge, if not impede, female executives. A brief exploration of the metaphors, vocabulary, binary gender norms, and enforced silence supplemented the exploration of access issues by providing evidence of the profound multi-dimensionality of gender issues in leadership.

The value of innovative, timely, and appropriate professional development opportunities for aspiring leaders, regardless of their gender, is not likely to generate heated debate—especially in an era of unprecedented global economic and knowledge growth, and opportunity. However, despite more than twenty years of investigating theoretical perspectives on leadership and the impact of gender “none of these theoretical perspectives have unequivocally provided adequate answers to enhance understanding or provide a platform for lasting change” (Wood, 2003, p. 122). If leadership is the most studied but least understood of human endeavours, it may be that the time is right for researchers to go beyond the rhetoric of gender differences in leadership and to move towards pragmatically identifying the competencies required to facilitate closing the extant gender gap for today’s executive leaders and for those who would follow.

Constructing a competency model for women aspiring to executive leadership.

Since the literature review did not yield a single competency model for women aspiring to executive leadership, it appears that the research question that prompted this review is pertinent. The literature review also points to the value of an investigation that proposes focusing on a singular group of women with similar demographics.

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