

Coaching the ‘ideal worker’: female leaders and the gendered self in a global corporation

Female leaders
and the
gendered self

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Abstract

Purpose – Gender differences in leadership and issues around differential progression of male and female leaders are receiving more attention in the fields of human resource and leadership development. However, little is known about how interventions designed to support female leaders are being experienced within real-world contexts of global organizations. There is limited research and discussion on how such interventions are experienced at a more systemic level. This study aims to contribute at this very level.

Design/methodology/approach – This study reports on a predominantly coaching-based development program that was designed to further the careers of female leaders within a complex multi-national organization. The study was conducted in a large, global health-care corporation employing 100,000 people based in over 120 countries. The qualitative research design for this study was exploratory, involving a reflexive process at each of the two stages.

Findings – The findings from this qualitative research take the debate on “the gendered organization” further by including the voices of female leaders. They demonstrate that whilst theoretically the concept of the “ideal worker” may inhibit progression, this is not necessarily a barrier to career advancement. Coaching, both individual and group, is shown to have a powerful effect on promoting reflection, self-confidence and focus.

Research limitations/implications – There are two research limitations. While confidentiality was promised, the responses of some interviewees were nevertheless still guarded. Other limitations relate to the extent to which this study can be generalized to other contexts, as it was conducted inside a single global corporation.

Originality/value – The study addresses the complex and urgent topic of differential progression and makes a broader contribution by offering a systemic perspective on gender and development in global organizations.

Keywords Multinational companies, Coaching, Human resource development, Female leader, Gendered self, Leadership development programs

Paper type Research paper



Introduction

Despite equal pay legislation, women earn 15 per cent less per hour than men across countries that comprise The Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD, 2016). While the gender pay gap is only 4 per cent in Sweden, it is 29 per cent in the UK and 36 per cent in the USA (International Labour Organization, 2015). Women are

significantly less likely to achieve senior management positions, with globally only 24 per cent in senior roles in 2016, an increase of only 3 per cent since 2011. Amongst global businesses, 33 per cent had no women in leadership positions in 2016 a position that had not changed since 2011 (Catalyst, 2018), while the proportion of women on FTSE 100 boards stands at only 28 per cent (Vinnicombe *et al.*, 2017). It is no surprise, then, that this position has been termed either an opaque *steel ceiling*, or in neoliberal competitive work cultures, a *glass ceiling*. The difference between the two is that while the steel ceiling is impassible, for the glass ceiling the next level is visible with advancement dependent on working long hours, committing to continuous employment for the career life span and to meet or surpass excessive demands, relocating, organizing life around work and tolerating crisis-oriented and chaotic work patterns (Brumley, 2014; Kelly *et al.*, 2010). As Schein (2001) puts it, studies lend strong support to the view that “think-manager - think male” is a global phenomenon, especially amongst males, fostering bias against women in managerial selection, promotion and training (Schein *et al.*, 1996). This binary gender perspective was first identified in research stretching back to the late nineteen sixties and seventies which identified the attributes that are used to describe men and women (Browerman *et al.*, 1972; Driekman and Eagly, 2000). Broadly, these gender stereotypes designated that men are *agentive*: they are considered to be aggressive, ambitious, dominant and task-oriented. In contrast, women are thought to be *communal*: they are seen as kind, sympathetic, interpersonally sensitive and people-oriented’ (Caleo and Heilman, 2013). These binary stereotypes have contributed to discrimination in organizations as they are descriptive: they describe what men and women are like, but also prescriptive; they state what men and women should be like (Burgess and Borgida, 1999; Eagly and Karau, 2002; Heilman, 2001). This pay gap tends to self-reinforce over time because of the higher representation of men in more influential positions, the deepening socialization in gendered roles, and the similarly unequal distribution of home tasks and school careers including qualifications.

Attempts to address this gender gap have been initiated at both a national policy level (for example, equal pay and anti-discrimination legislation) and, within organizations, through human resource management (HRM) strategies. Gender-focused HRM policies and practices are designed to achieve a more gender-diverse workforce through promoting diversity and monitoring the well-being of women (Ali, 2016). An example of such a policy approach is suggested by Konrad and Linnehan (1995) who outline a range of gender-diverse initiatives which include identifying female employees for promotion, establishing a system for monitoring female representation in management jobs, as well as human resource development (HRD) initiatives such as targeting female employees to receive management development training and establishing a mentoring program for female managers. The contribution of HRD to diversity in organizations can be observed through the delivery of diversity training programs, and career development for under-represented groups (Hite and McDonald, 2010), career development of women leaders being one focus of the current research project.

This article, then, reports on a qualitative study of an executive coaching program within a large, global corporation that was specifically designed to promote the career advancement of women leaders. In doing this, we seek to make a number of contributions to both theory and practice. In terms of theory, we add to what is a limited research base into the application of a growing human-resource-development intervention: executive coaching, the combined individual and group coaching, uniquely to women (Skinner, 2014). We also contribute specifically to the continuing debate on the “gendered organization”, given that organization theories and research on gender are largely absent from workplaces, a factor that serves to silence the voices of women (Martin and Collinson, 2002). In terms of practice,

we present evidence of how a combined individual and group coaching program designed specifically to promote the career advancement of women executives, was developed and how program participants viewed the outcomes of their coaching on their confidence, self-belief and career-development aspirations. The study aims to provide robust research on a highly practical mechanism for developing female leaders in complex organizations that has potential transferable applications, whilst also building new theory on combined individual and group coaching of female leaders.

Literature review

The gendered organization

The term “gendered organization” was first coined by [Acker \(1990\)](#) to explain inequality at work, arguing that such inequality was built into organizations by the structure of work. Gendered organizations typically favor masculine traits while either ignoring or devaluing what are seen as female traits such as caregiving. Whilst the majority of organizations researched identify the presence of gendered characteristics, [Oerton’s \(1996\) *Beyond Hierarchy*](#) found that in “flatter” organizations ‘gender hierarchies – and resistance to them – still appeared, though in less stark forms’ ([Connell, 2005](#)). The interplay between gender relations and patterns of class, ethnicity and age, or the intersectionality of structures, contributes to the complexity of organizational studies and of isolating gender factors alone. However, [Acker \(2012\)](#) identified interlocking substructures that explain why gender inequalities persist in organizations. These substructures comprise the often-invisible processes in the lives of organizations in which gendered assumptions about women and men, femininity and masculinity are embedded and reproduced, and gender inequalities perpetuated. Gendered substructures are built into organizational processes such as job design, wage determination, the distribution of decision-making, rules and both explicit and implicit behavior at work. For example, organizations may attribute more value to jobs with physical tasks than to jobs with people caring tasks. The gendered substructure is also created by an organization’s culture, and its unexamined beliefs, attitudes and values in relation to gender differences and inequality. While the dominant text appears to be gender neutral ([Bendl, 2008](#)), underlying subtexts are not, discourses serving to reinforce the primacy of men. For example, there may be a belief amongst employees that equality exists when this, objectively, is far from the case, serving to perpetuate such inequalities. Finally, the gendered substructure includes individual gendered identities, brought into the workplace by individuals, but also constructed in the workplace. Women in professional and upper managerial positions, for example, may face pressures to “manage like a man” ([Wacjman, 1998](#)).

The “ideal worker”

One significant element of the gendered organization is the concept of the “ideal worker” characterized as a rational, strong leader, committed to work and unencumbered by family or other responsibilities ([Hart, 2016](#); [Britton, 2000](#); [Martin, 2003](#)). In contrast women, especially those with responsibilities for children or older parents, are perceived as less rational, more expressive, unable to work long hours, and less committed to work; they are viewed as less than ideal workers ([Benard and Correll, 2010](#)). In a laboratory study, for example, [Correll et al. \(2007\)](#) found that mothers were judged as significantly less competent and committed than women without children. However, men were not penalized and sometimes benefitted from being parents, being seen as more committed to paid work. Some scholars have come to suggest that the gender gap in wages may be a “motherhood gap” ([Glass, 2004](#)). This tends to be larger in developing than developed countries, but globally

the gap increases with the number of children a woman has. In European countries, having one child has only a small negative effect, but women with two and especially three children experience a significant gap in wages (International Labour Organization, 2015).

The ideal worker is socially reinforced through narratives that express how individuals understand the workplace (Ely and Meyerson, 2000a). Employees report that long hours and visibility yield status and rewards, evidence of an environment that *requires* prioritizing work, not family (Blair-Loy, 2003; Cha, 2013; Ely and Meyerson, 2000b; Kelly *et al.*, 2010). Brumley (2014) reports that, consistent with other research (Cha, 2013; Kelly *et al.*, 2010), employees demonstrate dedication through long hours. Employees also describe networking as key but rarely consider how it funnels women into positions with little decision-making capacity, fewer resources, and lower pay compared to men (Collinson and Hearn, 1996; Kanter, 1977; Reskin and Padavic, 1994). Narratives also reaffirm masculine attributes for success and ascribe women's lack of advancement to the absence of these attributes. Hart (2016), for example, shows that when talking about work and family, the women in her study rarely mentioned their children, positioning themselves to be *viewed* (original emphasis) as ideal workers, unfettered by parenting responsibilities.

One of the most significant barriers to women's career advancement is exclusion from informal networks, since matters of power and influence often take place in informal, rather than formal, organizational settings. Networks can give women a sense of collective power and confidence to advocate and act for organizational change (Schein, 2005), since the organizational-political network is where managers gain power and influence. Networking is also one of the means whereby workers identify opportunities for advancement both inside and outside the organization (Williams *et al.*, 2012). Within these informal networks, shared experiences serve to generate bonding and trust amongst men, and also promote norms such as the exclusion of women from these networks (Perrewé and Nelson, 2004). In her study of women academics, Hart (2016) found that a lack of networks left many women adrift and disconnected, a factor which they understood negatively affected their careers. Bierema (2005), however, examined the creation of women's networks at a US Fortune 500 company, and found that they had potentially negative consequences for women's status and promotional prospects. Many, for example, viewed participating in the network as potentially career damaging, partly because no one wanted to be thought of as someone who needed extra help. Some women also appeared "gender unconscious", not viewing gender as impacting on their careers. Others recognized inequalities but wanted equal – *but not special* (original emphasis) – treatment for women. As Metcalfe (2008) comments, Bierema's study highlights the difficulties of developing positive diversity strategies in organizations and how masculinist work ethics are internalized by both men and women. Hence, women participants showed some awareness of gender inequalities, but were unwilling to challenge these disparities openly and, as a result, were not committed to action or change.

In a significant study of gender representation in the Australian higher education sector, Winchester and Browning (2015) identified the policies and factors that have had a positive impact on female representation. These include demonstrated leadership from the most senior levels – the vice chancellors of Australia's universities, commitment from the members of the academic staff unions, the setting and monitoring of appropriate targets, transparency of analysis and the sharing of data to enable intervention strategies and initiatives to be deployed and actions based on research (Winchester and Browning, 2015). In individual universities, successful policies and strategies have included the setting of institutional key performance indicators in corporate plans, transparent processes for recruitment and promotion, and career development programs and support networks for women. In the UK, Mavin and Grandy (2012) assert that in organizations, women can "do

gender well” if they act both in congruence with the female role expectations and simultaneously engage in behaviors associated with masculinity.

Challenging the gendered organization

Change initiatives to build a more diverse and less gendered organization have a long history, with a distinction made in the literature between traditional and transformative approaches (de Vries and Van den Brink, 2016). Traditional approaches mainly focus on individual women, seeking to teach women appropriate skills and traits through WO leadership and management development programs, mentoring and networking so that they are better equipped to compete with men. Such interventions have long been criticized as merely constituting a “salve to the organization conscience” (Knight and Pritchard, 1994, p. 57) while leaving organizational gendering processes unchanged, assuming that women will succeed only if they adopt the characteristics of white male managers (Better-Reed and Moore, 1995), that is, they also become “ideal workers”. In contrast, transformative approaches cannot be imposed externally, and need to be based on a process of change that grows from within (Plantenga, 2004). However, such programs are often high in “scary radicalism” (Benschop and Verloo, 2011, p. 285) meaning that the approval of senior executives may be difficult to attain, because of the unsettling nature of the proposed changes which may challenge organizational substructures (Acker, 2012). For this reason, a small wins strategy rather than radical change has a better chance of success, as it is less likely to trigger resistance, part of what Eveline and Bacchi (2009) term “the politics of doing”, applying attention to the practices, processes and procedures through which initiatives are developed. These initiatives must also be as participatory as possible, so as to lower the odds of resistance (Benschop and Verloo, 2011). In acknowledging some of the challenges associated with transformational strategies, De Vries and Van den Brink (2016) recommend a “bifocal” approach which moves organizations towards a transformational approach using a traditional intervention such as a women only (WO) program. The bifocal metaphor plays with the notion of bifocal spectacles which can focus on the near (individual women and men) and the distant (the organization) while linking the two. The transformative agenda is dependent on building individual’s critical gender insight, enabling individuals to act as change agents that disrupt and change workplace practices (De Vries and Van den Brink, 2016).

An example of a transformative approach based on growth from within the individual is executive coaching, a targeted, purposeful intervention that helps executives build and maintain positive change in their personal development and leadership behavior (Grant, 2012). The leadership-development literature sheds some light on the progressive increase in the use of coaching as part of a blended learning approach. In his study of integrated leadership-development programs, Coates (2013) concludes that deploying “a combination of 360 feedback, experiential learning, peer feedback, reflection and one-to-one coaching is the ideal combination” (Coates, 2013, p. 43). He stresses the importance of having a high level of coaching at each step – “from dyadic through group/team coaching and possibly peer/co-coaching” (Coates, 2013, p. 43). His study concurs with previous studies (Ladyshevsky, 2007; Weiss and Molinaro, 2006) on the importance of the alignment of the leadership-development program with organizational strategy in developing competency, supported by coaching to align with the individual leader’s agenda at the same time.

However, while there has been some empirical research on the effectiveness (or otherwise) of executive coaching, there have been few studies, to date, that explore the executive coaching of female leaders (O’Neil *et al.*, 2015). Indeed, an annotated bibliography of workplace, executive and life coaching by Grant (2009) revealed that less than 2 per cent

of the studies of executive coaching relate to women in organizations (Skinner, 2014). Exceptions include the work of de Haan *et al.* (2016) whose study of 875 male and 918 female coachees, found better coaching effectiveness for female coaches as compared to male coaches, as reported by coachees. However, although the differences were statistically significant, the magnitude of the effects was small. In another study, Bussell (2008) found that in maternity coaching, where once women had successfully maintained separate work and home lives, the impact of maternity made it more difficult to distance the effects of one upon the other. The danger period seems to follow their return to work and after the coaching support has finished when questioning and reflection begins as the needs of their children shift and change. Pendleton (2018), in an experimental study using a control group, found that executive coaching had a statistically significant impact on women executive's levels of job satisfaction and leadership self-efficacy. In two further doctoral dissertations, Galuk (2009) reports on a study of women executives who talk about using executive coaching to be more effective with people, achieve more work-life balance, and work more effectively with their boss, while Starman (2007) found that through coaching, executive women changed their job behaviors and improved their job performance.

Group coaching has increasingly been deployed within organizations and a "long list of purported benefits of group coaching" is reported by Brown and Grant (2010, p. 33) and includes, but is not limited to, the understanding of and self-regulation of acceptable group behaviors, development of trust and support within the group, increased emotional intelligence and the prevention of organizational silo formation. However, as Brown and Grant (2010) acknowledge, much of the reported benefits are anecdotal and there appears to be little outcome research on the effects of group coaching. The literature also cites one of the key benefits of group coaching as being the systems-level thinking that it engenders (O'Neill, 2000; Paige, 2002). From a systemic perspective the argument for group coaching appears compelling as it not only deals with the individual goal attainment, but also with cognition and affect within the overall organizational system (Kets de Vries, 2005).

This dearth of studies on coaching women leaders, whether individually or in groups may be due to what Stead and Elliott (2009) refer to as a gender-neutral approach within leadership development programs. Even worse, the leadership and coaching literature has a strong tendency to draw on role models of male leaders in traditional organizations, perpetuating an implicit belief that leadership is a male activity.

Methodology

Research questions

The above analysis led us to pose the following research questions

- RQ1. How do women leaders experience the "gendered organization"? What are the perceived barriers to their career development?
- RQ2. What impact can a leadership development program, such as executive coaching, have on women leaders' self-confidence, self-esteem and career development?
- RQ3. Can such programs develop women leaders as change agents capable of inspiring transformational organizational change?

Research context

The study was conducted in a large, global health-care corporation employing 100,000 people based in over 120 countries. The organization had an equal ratio of female to male

leaders at middle manager level. However, at senior levels of leadership the ratio of female to male leaders diminished with each level until at Exco minus one level the female percentage was approximately 30 per cent. Following an internal study, the senior management of the organization took the strategic decision to increase the ratio of female to male leaders in the organization at all levels of seniority. To achieve this, they commissioned a program, Accelerating Difference (AD), that comprised a blend of coaching (individual and group), plus sponsorship by senior line managers. For the individual coaching, each female leader received a maximum of 12 individual one-hour coaching sessions, which were conducted either in person, or by Live Meeting, a web conferencing service via webcam or by telephone. Due to work pressures and scheduling difficulties, in approximately 10 per cent of cases, coachees received 10 or 11 coaching sessions. The group coaching comprised six sessions spread over 14 months with between five and eight participants in each group. The first group session was six hours in length, with the remaining sessions four hours, all being face-to-face. However, some participants were geographically spread and faced flight times of over three hours. Hence 10 per cent of groups met face-to-face for two days, and then participated in five virtual, Live Meeting webcam-based group sessions spread over 14 months, followed by another two days face-to-face as a closing meeting. An example of this is a South American group with participants from Mexico, Argentina and Chile. Attention was paid to the gender mix of the coaches. No groups had two male group coaches, 12 had one male and one female coach and 18 had two female coaches. The group coaching sessions took place in the USA, the UK, Dubai, India, China, Switzerland, Nigeria, Singapore and Mexico. For the group coaching a small team of external executive coaches was selected to lead the sessions and they were each paired with an internal coach. The sessions covered themes such as building trust, self-belief and self-esteem, power presence and impact, becoming a challenger and developing ones' own authentic leadership brand.

Research design

The qualitative research design for this study was exploratory, involving a reflexive process at each of the two stages (Hammersley and Atkinson, 2007). Stage 1 involved the running of four focus groups (two in the UK, one in Belgium and one virtual – see sample recruitment process below) as a way of developing a draft set of themes. These themes, in conjunction with the extant literature, were used in Stage 2 to inform the sets of questions for the interviews which were conducted over the telephone or via Skype. Hence, the focus groups were used to develop the research themes and the interviews to deepen knowledge of them.

Participant details

Coaches. The coaches involved in the individual coaching comprised the organization's internal Job Plus Coaches (JPCs), internal Coaching Directors and Internal Executive Coaches. JPCs are line managers who have normal managerial responsibilities within the organization but who have passed an assessed internal coach training program, comprising three days of experiential classroom training, followed by three months of peer coaching and three virtual webinars. They have also undergone regular professional group supervision and undertaken three days of professional development per year. The Internal Coaching Directors have completed all of the above criteria and had received additional coach training comprising at least 20 professional development days, five months of peer coaching and written assessments, as well as monthly in-depth internal coach development sessions. The Internal Executive Coaches were accredited with external coaching bodies to the International Coach Federation's (ICF) Professional Certified Coach (PCC) standard. They also have a minimum of two years' experience of coaching at executive level within the

organization and have engaged with supervision on a regular basis. Coachees were assigned a coach based on the seniority of the coachee, the more senior being assigned an Internal Executive Coach or an Internal Coaching Director. A total of 109 coaches were involved in the program.

Coachees. Participants were all female leaders who had been nominated by their line manager and their human resources business leader to join the accelerating difference program. The criteria for nomination comprised:

- future potential: the participant had the potential to progress at least two levels within the organization as a leader;
- ambition: the participant actively wanted to progress her career and to take advantage of the development opportunities offered to her; and
- personal circumstances: the participant had the personal circumstances that enabled her to participate in development opportunities and to progress in the organization.

The resulting nominations ranged from Grade 7: Junior Manager (6 per cent), through Manager (30 per cent) and Director (61 per cent) levels, to Grade 3: Vice President (2 per cent). A total of 212 female leaders took part in the Accelerating Difference program.

Line managers. All participants had a direct reporting relationship to a line manager who was briefed about the aims of the program. They were required to engage in three formal meetings with their female direct report and their coach; the first of these meetings also had a representative of human resources present and was used to agree the objectives for the individual coaching sessions. The second meeting reviewed progress and discussed how the line manager could support the coachee. The third meeting again included a representative from human resources and was designed to review progress against the coaching objectives, review the overall development of the female coachee and plan further development support at the conclusion of the program.

Sponsors. Sponsorship refers to senior leaders who acted as sponsors by promoting the careers of high-potential and high-performing employees within the business. They did this by staking their own reputation and belief in the individual in critical conversations, such as talent reviews, by creating opportunities for them to demonstrate their potential and by investing energy in their development. Sponsorship as a mechanism may overlap with certain features of mentoring, such as sharing wisdom and experience, but sponsorship is designed to have a more direct impact on a person's career.

Sample recruitment process

A total of 212 female managers were recruited to the program, based in 20 countries and clustered into 28 geographically matched groups of between five and eight people, to facilitate the opportunities for group coaching. Participants were based in the UK, US, France, Belgium, Switzerland, Germany, Italy, Singapore, Australia, Egypt, Poland, Brazil, Czech Republic, Turkey, India, Spain, The Netherlands, Cambodia and Malaysia. For the focus groups, four groups were selected to achieve a range of seniority levels and geographical spread. Hence, two groups were held in London, one comprised eight senior and the other five junior female managers; one group was held at the company's manufacturing facility in Belgium with eight participants and one virtual session, with 10 participants from Belgium, UK, Switzerland, France, Spain and The Netherlands. The London groups were purposefully selected, one as an example of a "successful" and one a "struggling" group to offer a range of perspectives; these groups were identified through their group coaches.

For the interviews, 31 participants were selected to achieve a gradation of levels of seniority, and geographical location. Above all, they were selected as information-rich cases with the potential to provide detailed information on their experiences as women leaders, including the progress and challenges in their careers, an example of what [Gray \(2017\)](#) calls an intensity sampling approach. In terms of location, 10 of the participants were based in the UK, 4 in Belgium, 3 in Switzerland, 2 in Germany, 1 in the Czech Republic, 5 in the USA, 2 in India, 2 in Cambodia and 2 in Singapore. The sample size of 31 was considered suitable since it was not too large to make the analysis of a rich data set problematic ([Onwuegbuzie and Leech, 2007](#)) nor too small that it becomes challenging to achieve data saturation ([Flick, 2006](#)). It was also, broadly, within the range of expert recommendations by research methods scholars of between 12 and 30 participants for heterogeneous populations (as summarized by [Saunders, 2012](#)).

Instrument design

The focus group schedule was designed to elicit data on the demographic profiles of participants, including their name, the part of the business they worked in, their job title and something interesting about themselves that was not work-related (as an ice-breaker). Questions included:

- Q1. Do people enjoy swifter career progression if they have no external responsibilities (for example, child care, looking after parents, etc.)?
- Q2. How far does your own experience corroborate this?
- Q3. Following your participation in the AD program, has your perception about power and politics in the organization changed?
- Q4. What are the ongoing barriers to career progression?

The interview schedule followed a similar pattern but allowed for more focused individual questions and probes that emerged during the interview process. In line with the advice proffered by [Saunders et al. \(2017\)](#) that it is incumbent on researchers to report the difficulties experienced in the research process so that others can learn from it, we acknowledge that in five cases Skype connections did not work because of organization firewalls. Respondents either did not have their own Skype connection or did not want to share it. The fallback position was the use of telephone but here again, the quality of the connection was sometimes variable, particularly when calling the Asia Pacific region or South America.

Analysis

Analysis of the data adopted a thematic analysis approach. Care was taken to ensure a consistent, widely used and rigorous approach was taken and the process for conducting thematic analysis used in the research study followed a recursive pattern to ensure data was analyzed across and between themes ([Braun et al., 2017](#)).

Positionality and the research team

Positionality represents a space in which objectivity and subjectivity dialectically meet ([Freire, 2000](#)). However, to claim to achieve objectivity is naïve, while researchers need to be mindful of their personal subjectivities ([Bourke, 2014](#)), particularly when negotiating insider and outsider status. In this project, our team combines members with both external and insider positions. From a positivist perspective, outsider status is considered the objective

norm, with insider status being seen as fraught with potential bias which threatens research quality (Merriam *et al.*, 2001). In contrast, some qualitative paradigms such as participatory and emancipatory research, value the role of insiders as producing effective and ethical research (Heron and Reason, 1997). The potential benefits of insider research include ease of access to field participants, taking into consideration the norms and values of the organization and richness in the interpretation of data in the light of deep knowledge of the social, political and historical context (Ross, 2017). Yet insider status can also bring with it challenges. For example, issues related to power may arise when the researcher holds multiple roles (e.g. program designer/champion and researcher) that are differentially situated in relation to participants (Merriam *et al.*, 2001), or the nature of preexisting relationships between researcher and participants may make discussion of key topics uncomfortable (Chavez, 2008).

With these issues in mind, it is important to consider the composition of the research team. As Table I shows, three of the research team were outsiders and one an insider, the latter both the director of the AD program and the commissioner of the research. The two external university researchers were approached by the company because both have a long-standing publication record in the field of executive coaching. The research assistant had worked successfully on two previous qualitative research projects. In line with Thomas *et al.* (2000), our insider-outsider research team, shared responsibilities for research design and for decision-making, meeting as a team on a regular basis. However, in contrast to Thomas *et al.* (2000), our insider was not a supervisor, coworker of participants or a source of data, but part of the research side of the process. She was, for example, able to provide guidance as to how interview questions might be interpreted and understood by participants, given that she was familiar with the culture and politics of the organization, having worked there for 19 years.

Ethics

The research program was sponsored by the host organization but the research itself was conducted independently by the team of university researchers which included a research officer who conducted all the interviews. At the pre-stage, ethical approval was requested and granted by the researchers' universities and organizational authority for the study was obtained conditional upon anonymity. Participants were invited to participate by a third-party leader, with written assurances given as to the freedom to participate in the study or not, with no retribution or organizational impact for the individual regardless of their decision. The relevant participant information sheets and consent forms, explaining the purpose of the research, their role within it, and how confidentiality issues would be

Table I.
Research team
members, gender and
roles in the project

Research team member	Code	Gender	Insider/outsider status	Project role
Senior executive client company	SE	Female	Insider	Research design Conducting focus groups Data analysis
University academic: Institution A	PROF	Male	Outsider	Research design Conducting focus groups Data analysis
University academic: Institution B	PROF2	Male	Outsider	Research design Data analysis
Research assistant: Institution A	RA	Female	Outsider	Conducting interviews Compiling interviewer's notes

handled, was issued to all participants who had to demonstrate their consent by signing and returning forms. Participants were not compensated for taking part and were free to withdraw without any need for explanation and free from reprisal at any stage of the research study. The focus groups were conducted by one of the university authors (PROF). Prior to both interviews and focus groups information sheets were issued, explaining the aims of the project and participants' role within it. Then participant consent forms were issued guaranteeing *inter alia* the right to withdraw from the research process at any time and without explanation and promises of confidentiality of data and anonymity. All participants read the consent forms and signed them. These were then held securely at one of the universities. At the data analysis stage, all names of participants were changed.

Limitations

We would like to acknowledge some of the weaknesses of the research, in part, to address the critique of [Saunders et al. \(2017\)](#) that research-methods textbooks and academic articles often fail to acknowledge the challenges of undertaking field research and particularly gaining access (including cognitive access) of respondents. Hence, we acknowledge that while confidentiality was promised, the responses of some interviewees were nevertheless still guarded. As [Gray \(2017\)](#) notes, one of the potential threats to validity in qualitative interviews is that respondents give cautious, "socially desirable responses" that they think the interviewer seeks, rather than what they really feel, or are nervous that any critical comments might leak back to senior management. Hence, while the project interviewer commented in her post-interview notes that some respondents were "very open and agreeable" and "direct and positive", others were "initially guarded and a little starchy" (although they later "warmed up"), "somewhat diffident", "not very fulsome" in their responses and in one case "like extracting the proverbial". However, validity was helped by using a female interviewer, after all [Oakley \(1981\)](#) confirms that women interviewing other women creates a greater rapport.

Findings

Career barriers and limits to advancement

Our findings suggest that the women in our study experience "the gendered organization" in very different ways. Some seem "gender unconscious" ([Bierema, 2005](#)), feeling unconstrained and supported in their career journey: "The company looks after you" (Sandra). The key is self-determination and having a plan of what you wanted to achieve. However, it was also recognized that while they possessed a relatively sophisticated skill set and often science-based qualifications, these were insufficient for career advancement and there was a need to broaden themselves into a managerial role. Yet, while this might constitute a legitimate perspective, our study revealed a range of barriers that stand in the way, not least of which are family responsibilities. In line with [Cha \(2013\)](#) and [Kelly et al. \(2010\)](#) our respondents were well aware of the importance of having to prioritize work and commit themselves to long hours (one element of the "ideal worker" syndrome) and an environment that *requires* prioritizing work. In contrast to [Hart \(2016\)](#), whose respondents rarely mentioned children when talking about work, we specifically probed for this, uncovering many instances of women having to balance family responsibilities with demanding work schedules. For Nancy having to leave meetings at 5 p.m. to pick up her children was something she regarded as "tricky". As Maureen comments ruefully: "It is easier without having children".

There was a feeling that career opportunities existed, if you were prepared to take them and a general feeling of being supported, and very unconstrained on the career journey. For

some, it was an exciting pathway fueled by self-determination, or as Sally puts it: “The company looks after you, you do your best to look after the company”. It was important to know where you wanted to end up and to plan for this outcome. However, while most respondents felt supported in their careers, for many, external circumstances such as family responsibilities posed a significant constraint. “It is easier without having children” (Maureen). Joyce felt that having a partner and a ten-year old daughter made balancing work and her commitments problematic. Some women went part-time so they could look after their family but were told they would not be able to undertake new roles until they got back to full time employment (Amanda). These external responsibilities can leak into the work schedule:

[...] when you have no choice you have to be home or at the nursery [...] at a certain time [...] even if you have to leave at 5, you have to leave at 5 and then that can become quite tricky [...] having to [...] leave meetings early because it becomes much more obvious (Nancy).

Many women talked about the role of nannies helping with childcare and in the home, while having a supportive partner was also seen as crucial:

I have the luxury of having a husband that is very supportive of my career and so we– we share all responsibilities and I think that’s kind of a perfect deal that we have (Heidi).

Joyce has seven-year old twins and needs the support of both a nanny and her parents. Similarly, Patricia talked about the support of her husband who is “just the perfect man in the world– he’s supporting me very well”. Naomi has a six-year old child and four-year old twins, one of whom has special needs. She has deliberately chosen a job that does not require overseas travel, although she concedes that she sometimes has to go from the USA to Japan for a week, one reason why she has a nanny who works up to 55 hours a week. However, as Vera makes clear, nannies only supply physical support, but you cannot buy emotional support that can only come from the family, especially your spouse.

Inconsistent organizational support for career advancement

However, for others, it was not external responsibilities that were the problem, but lack of sponsorship within the organization – particularly sponsorship from a senior person, and access to the right networks. Gill comments that she has “a jerk of a boss” who does not embody the values of the organization and so is no help. To achieve progress there is a need to move from a “scientific bubble” into a managerial role, although for Nancy it was important to keep close bonds with her professional background in science – “promotion is not the be all and end all”. But if promotion was the goal, there is a sense that career progression is limited unless women leaders are willing to be mobile and to undertake overseas assignments (particularly if working in Asia), and a willingness to take sideways steps to broaden experience and knowledge of the organization. Leaders have to show an ability to be adaptable and to learn (Yasmin). In addition to the coaching sessions, the Accelerating Difference program also involved line manager support and sponsorship, the results of which were varied. Some were impressed with the level of support from their line managers. Other line managers, however, appeared busy or simply did not have the background to help participants with their personal development. One tried “but was very ego centric and authoritarian” (Lara). Levels of sponsorship also varied. While for some, the sponsor was helpful and allowed the participant to broaden their networking outside their own business unit, many sponsors seemed less engaged with helping in this way, failing to support such visibility. Although Gill’s sponsor says he supports her and argues that she needs to be more “visible” in the company, he does little to help her achieve this and is

negative about her own attempts to talk to senior executives. Hence, “Every time I meet with him, I come home and cry” (Gill).

Different for men

Sometimes the status of men was contrasted with that of women. Without external responsibilities, men can get into work earlier, a factor that helps their career progression, while women are dropping off the children at school, something that male Senior Vice Presidents do not do (Yasmin). “Men think about their external responsibilities a little differently” (Naomi). However, it is felt that the organization is changing and losing some of the “boys club” reputation, although it is still felt that it is quite a masculine organization. “There’s a kind of mismatch between what leadership ought to be and what the organizational culture is expecting (Lara). Some senior teams comprise only men aged around 40 or 45 years old, and all native English speakers, “so for me it’s more a question of diversity than a question of gender [. . .]. I fear it’s not because I’m a female it’s more because I’m French” (Yvette).

Organizational progress

There was also talk of an evolution in attitude and culture. As Sarah comments, desktop computers have largely been replaced by laptops, and there is more of an understanding that people (women and men) can work outside the usual 9-5.30 working h. There can be a level of trust that comes with a manager’s level of responsibility and experience. “You’re trusted to do your job and it doesn’t really matter when you’re doing it”. As a female manager, Sally is conscious of having a lot of young mothers in her team and so it is important for her to give them flexible working arrangements including allowing them to work at home. She believes that male managers are similarly supportive.

Individual coaching seen as positive

With almost no exceptions, individual coaching was seen as facilitating positive outcomes, providing a safe environment to “feel vulnerable” and to work on themes that are personally challenging. As a result, “I can now manage my power; I’ve got more self-confidence” (Lara). It opened up a space for personal reflection and time to focus on the self, and to work out personal solutions. Some used the individual coaching to prepare for challenging situations within the workplace. It allowed the participant to “streamline” their thoughts and to become more aware of their strengths. Here, the relationship with the coach was important. “The coach was able to stop my negative spiral, challenge me and help my self-esteem” (Gill). “The coach showed me the importance of being who I am. They see a huge difference in me post-coaching. It was transformative. I was rude, now I’m direct”. (Yvette). For some it was particularly important to have a female coach who helped participants to deal with emotional issues.

Power of group coaching sessions

For some, the group coaching sessions were more powerful because they could spend time with other female leaders with whom they could benchmark their experiences and receive valuable feedback. Some said that the process also made them less frightened about giving feedback, something that was important in their daily working lives as leaders. But group sessions could also be an emotional “roller coaster”. Feedback could be very direct and some of the topics were quite difficult and led to feelings of vulnerability. But there was also a sense that everyone was struggling with the same things, including the (false) assumption

that just because they were working hard, this would be recognized. One respondent would have welcomed a mixed rather than an all-female group, as “it would have been useful to have a male point of view” (Kate). There was also a legacy element to the group coaching. Some talked about now having a “great network” (Sally) and the ability now to network more with women at their own level.

Complementary nature of individual and group coaching

The women leaders engaged with both the individual and group coaching in different ways. For some, individual and group coaching were complementary, with group coaching deepening the learning and reflection emanating from the individual coaching. “It was a place to explore personal challenges in greater depths and how to assert my view” (Camilla). Others felt the group sessions provided an opportunity to really explore issues ‘in the group session you have time to really push and push on it [...] I got further on to the resolution than I would have done otherwise’ (Camilla) “I definitely cross-fertilized ideas from the individual and group coaching (Tasmin). Others would take ideas from the group coaching back into the individual sessions, while for a minority, individual and group coaching were kept separate. For Holly, the individual coaching was extremely valuable as ‘it gave me a very safe environment to feel vulnerable and work on things that are challenging’. Several of the participants observed that coming together for the group coaching provided them with a supportive environment “the support network, seeing that other female leaders have the same challenges and that the way I’m feeling is normal”. (Holly).

Discussion

In contrast to scholars who see women as less than ideal workers due to the structural constraints laid upon them (unable to work long hours, being less committed to work, etc.; Benard and Correll, 2010; Correll *et al.*, 2007; Glass, 2004), the women in our study demonstrated agency and resourcefulness, constructing strategies for attempting a work life balance, including eliciting the support of husbands and partners (or in some cases parents) or nannies. Yet while the physical support of people such as nannies was essential, it was not always sufficient - it is emotional support that is essential, and this can only come from close family members such as one’s spouse.

Access to informal networks can give women confidence (Schein, 2005) and offer opportunities for identifying opportunities for career advancement (Williams *et al.*, 2012). However, perhaps because of the full-time commitment to both work and family responsibilities, the women in our study rarely, if ever, mentioned having access to such networks. This is potentially, problematic since, as Linehan (2001) shows, female managers can miss out on international appointments if they lack access to appropriate networks, role models or mentors. On a positive note, the Accelerating Difference program involved the formal support of women’s line managers and sponsors. However, as we have seen, the results of this were varied and inconsistent. Some received unconditional support from their sponsor which included giving participants more access to networks outside their own business unit. Other sponsors, though, seemed distracted and busy, or in extreme cases ego-centric and authoritarian. The experience of crying every time a participant met her sponsor is perhaps not typical but nevertheless illustrative. This may be one reason why informal networks emerged from the group coaching sessions within AD, with participants commenting that it allowed them to build networks with other like-minded female leaders. Hence, given the right conditions (the facilitation of experiential learning and reflective

processes) formal programs have the potential to facilitate the building of informal networks.

As we have seen, there have been few studies involving the executive coaching of female leaders (O'Neil *et al.*, 2015) with less than 2 per cent of studies related to women in organizations (Skinner, 2014) – the focus of the current study. Within coaching research in general, there is a focus on the individual rather than coaching groups or teams (Clutterbuck, 2013). The current study focuses not only on the executive coaching of women leaders but uniquely on their experiences of both individual and group coaching and how they make use of both modalities. Group coaching helps to provide an “intimate conversation space” which can often play a key role in building relationships across the silos that exist in organizations (Britton, 2015, p. 117). In contrast to team coaching which has a focus on team outcomes, group coaching helps individuals learn about themselves as leaders (Fusco *et al.*, 2016). In line with the research of Baron and Morin (2010) we find that individual coaching has a positive impact on the self-efficacy and self-confidence of participants. But what was unique to our study was how it revealed how participants combined their individual and group coaching in different ways, so that the sum was greater than the individual parts. Group coaching, for example, was used to deepen the issues emerging from individual sessions and for the cross-fertilization of ideas.

This study is one of very few that has examined the impact of an executive coaching program on the career development of women leaders. It has shown that coaching, both individual and group, can have a powerful effect on promoting reflection, self-confidence and focus. The group coaching in particular, helped to generate a feeling that many of the experiences and problems of women leaders were collectively shared. This was important because many of these women leaders faced the challenges of achieving a work-life balance, having to demonstrate an impact in their work and also having responsibilities for both children and often-elderly parents. Group coaching specifically helped in the generation of positive group dynamics which meant that some groups decided to continue after the end of the program – becoming developmental networks. The line management and sponsorship elements of the program generated more mixed results. Here we see a potential contrast in impact between stakeholders who are trained and experienced in the professional development of their clients (coaches), and those who are more ambivalent and less well trained in providing personal support (line managers and sponsors). Sponsorship itself can potentially be problematic because it often involves older males spending one-on-one time, potentially off site and after hours, with a younger female. According to Hewlett *et al.* (2010) this can often look like an affair. While we found no such reports in our study, the sponsorship element was the one that generated the most problems, often due to a lack of engagement and empathy from the sponsor.

As such, we can recommend HRDs seeking to address the issue of female-leader progression in gendered organizations, to consider deploying a development initiative that comprises both individual and group coaching by a combination of internal and external, trained coaches. The study has demonstrated the ability of combined coaching forms to support female leaders as they face barriers to career development in gendered organizations. Additionally, the study highlights the importance of aligned and consistent messages and support from all levels of leadership – both male and female. We recommend ensuring that senior-manager support is consistent for participants, including monitoring and rectifying any inconsistencies in line-manager engagement with female leaders. Finally, we recommend introducing sponsorship in a culturally appropriate and transparent way to

ensure that the organizational system for formal recognition of advancement is leveraged in an effective manner.

Conclusion

The program in our study may be categorized as an example of what [De Vries and Van den Brink \(2016\)](#) classify as a bifocal approach to addressing inequality in the gendered organization. On the one hand, it adopts a traditional format, focusing on developing leadership qualities in individual women leaders, so they are better able to compete with men for senior positions. On the other hand, it follows [Benschop and Verloo \(2011\)](#) in making the AD program as participatory as possible, drawing in not only participants from all over the world, but also their line managers, sponsors and, of course, both internal and external coaches. The sponsorship of women by more senior executives, many of whom are male, adds organizational power and weight to the initiative as they have the power to create opportunities for the women to progress.

However, whether the participants become change agents bent on disrupting and challenging organizational practices is more open to question. The women leaders in our study seem more focused on personal growth and career development than challenging the gendered substructures of the organization (even though many seem aware of and are critical of them). Our study helps to illustrate how difficult it is to take on and change the organizational substructures that perpetuate the “glass ceiling”. On the other hand, it also shows that important incremental changes are possible. Company data collected separately from the study reported that 40 per cent of those women who started the program in 2013 have been promoted and 49 per cent of those who began in 2014 (compared with 31 per cent of women and 29 per cent of men across the same period).

There are limitations as to the extent to which this study can be generalized to other contexts. The research was conducted in a large, global corporation, the results of which may not be applicable to medium and small businesses, most of which do not have the resources to fund coaching programs. Furthermore, our cohort of female leaders may not be typical of women suffering gender discrimination, since they are in most cases degree educated (some to doctoral level) and have already attained quite senior positions. They could also be seen as unrepresentative in that they have already been selected as “high flyers” for the AD program.

Nevertheless, we would argue that the findings of the study illustrate the possibilities for using personal and collective development initiatives such as coaching and sponsorship for achieving tangible and significant improvements in women leaders’ career progression, overcoming some of the issues of the gendered self and the pre-conceptions of the ‘ideal worker’. The rate of promotion of the participants will take a time to work through until it impacts the uppermost levels of the organization, but it is providing the input of more female leaders required to feed the pipeline of talent from which top leaders will be selected in the future.

The research implications of this study identify that further research is required in the area of gendered organizations and leadership and career development using combined coaching and sponsorship for both female and male leaders. Further research could also look into how gendered organizations are changing as more female leaders reach senior-leader positions, for example, in terms of broader diversity issues including age and ethnicity and the effect of development initiatives.

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