GENDER DIFFERENCES IN LEADERSHIP

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Abstract

In recent times, the relationship between gender and leadership styles has emerged as a significant research area. Impact of gender over leadership practices are widely investigated by academics all over the globe, still this research area does not come without ambiguities due to contradictory views given by theorists. Some supporters’ hypothesized similarities found among leadership styles adopted by men and women at managerial positions, supporting the view that paid employees are anticipated to adhere to standardized instructions. On the contrary, several researchers theorized that the leadership styles adopted by male and female leaders are significantly different, mainly due to biological differences and variations in personality traits. With a systematic literature review, several researches are explored and evaluated, examining the impact of gender on leadership styles adopted, and also on the organizational performance. The study found that women tend to adopt a more transformational and democratic/participative leadership style whereas men were observed to adopt more autocratic and punishment-oriented leadership styles. Studies also found that the leadership style mostly adopted by women proves to be beneficial for organizational effectiveness, mainly integrating the system of reward, motivation, expectation and enthusiasm among others. It is suggested that further research should be undertaken to explore whether women intentionally change their leadership behaviors in male dominated organizations and whether they would pose to adopt different leadership styles given a different organization to work in.
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Leadership is a feature that exists in human society globally and governs them in several different aspects (Bennis, 2007). The research on leadership indicates that humans in general can easily recognize the leadership potential in each other. Studies also reveal that when there is group formation, leadership takes little or no time to emerge (Van Vugt & De Cremer, 1999). This implies that humans possess natural inclination to indulge in leader-follower relations; however, there is presently still a high leadership failure in society (Van Vugt, Hogan, & Kaiser, 2008).

When studying leadership, it is apparent that there is a disparity in leadership patterns in males versus females. Although statistics reveal that women make up 51 percent of the total population and 46.5 percent in the labor force, they are highly underrepresented at management levels. According to the report by the European Commission in 2012, women made up only 13.7 percent of the board seats in the European Union. Even more disappointing is that, within the European Union, women constituted only 3.4 percent of the chairs and presidents. Similar results can be witnessed in other parts of the world as well. In countries like Australia and Canada, the female board representation stands at only 10 percent while United States show a slightly better figure at 15.7 percent (European Commission, 2012). In addition to this, the Asia-Pacific region revealed that women made up 6.5 percent of the board members (Corporate Women Directors International, 2010).

Due to gender differences in leadership positions around the world, there is also a difference in the leadership styles. Many studies have discovered that leadership styles adopted by men and women tend to vary largely, hence affecting the overall performance of an organization. This appears as a very interesting topic as organizations with more female representation in top management tend to differ with organizations with low female representation in top management. This problem statement has provided a rationale for conducting a study on how gender differences in leadership impacts the organizational performance. For this, the
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literature available on gender differences in leadership is collated and synthesized, and will compare the leadership styles of men and women.

A research conducted by McKinsey & Company (2007) discovered that the companies that had a larger percentage of women in their top leadership and management positions tend to experience greater positive impacts on financial performance, as well as organizational excellence. It was found by another study undertaken by London Business School, 2007 (cited in OECD, 2009) that an increase in women representation in managerial teams boosted the innovation capacity of the companies as well.

Joy (2008) examined how women impacted the corporate boards in Fortune 500 companies. The study found that companies that had boards comprising of a greater proportion of women were able to financially outperform the ones that had low representation of females in their boards. Joy (2008, p.90) established that “increasing the number of women on corporate boards is important for both financial performance and gender diversity in the corporate officer ranks (2008: 9).”

With the differences in leadership outcomes, it becomes imperative to investigate how men and women differ in their leadership behavior and approaches.

Synthesis

During recent times, there has been substantial research over the specific behaviors adopted by men and women, resulting in data that suggest that female leaders tend to adopt a distinct leadership style from male leaders among organizations (Kim & Shim, 2003). Majority of research examining the gender differences as well as similarities among leadership styles was primarily impelled due to the lack of women retaining important positions in companies, government, and politics. Despite the fact that women have managed to attain positional
success with a tremendous pace among corporations and state organizations, their underrepresentation over the top ranks of organizational hierarchy still exist (Fortune, 2007).

In relation to this, a phenomenon known as the “glass ceiling” is explained as an obstacle that represents bias and discrimination, resulting in the exclusion of females from the top ranks of leadership (Fletcher, 2004). This concept signifies that systematic effect is produced through formal structures (for instance performance measurements, promotions etc.) and informal structures (for instance who is chatting with whom, who is present at what occasion etc.) in a way that it hampers females’ promotions (Johnson et al, 2008). All these studies demonstrate that in practical terms, men adopt different leadership styles from women, which might relate to the inequality found among the promotion to top ranks of leadership. Simultaneously, it is also important to take into account that sufficient evidence exists that indicates no different leadership styles are adopted by men and women (Mandell &Pherwani, 2003).

**Transformational vs. Transactional Leadership**

A number of theories related to leadership style exist. The transformational and transactional leadership theory given by Burn (1978) is one of the most prominent illustrations.

Transformational leadership is more than just the “managing” aspect, rather, it entails transforming the relation shared by the leader and his/her followers into a synergetic state and further motivating their followers to attain their maximum. A more traditional leadership approach is adopted by transactional leadership which involves the exchange of actions, reward being one example. Various studies explored the transformational role and transactional role of leadership served by men and women. These researches comprise of investigation of transformational leaders within conventionally transactional settings (Mohr & Wolfram, 2008).
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Nonetheless, several academics determined that the leadership style adopted relies upon circumstances (Bass, 1985) or the culture prevalent in organizations, while others deduced women frequently use transformational leadership characteristics as compared to men.

A meta-analysis research examining the transformational and transactional roles of leadership discovered some provocative results (Eagle, Johannesen-Schmidt & van Engen, 2003). It was found that females tend to demonstrate more of a transformational leadership style while concentrating more on the idea of rewards. Whereas, men were more apt to show the punishment feature related to transactional leadership, along with the laissez-faire style.

Continuing with the gender difference found among leadership styles, a significant review comprising of 162 researches showed that female leaders adopted a comparatively greater democratic/participative leadership approach and a lesser autocratic leadership style as compared to the male leaders (Eagly & Johnson, 1990). Furthermore, female leaders were found to be less stratified, increasingly accommodating and collaborative, while showing a greater will to improve the self-respect and confidence of others. These results substantiate the fact that females are expected to manage better and conveniently among authentic leadership styles.

Leadership styles and corporate performance

Within their contemporary research, Mc Kinsey (2009) linked the differences found among leadership styles to the corporate performance. The examination included more than 800 business leaders, exploring the leadership styles that are more effective for handling the worldwide challenge post-crisis. While discovering which leadership approach proved to be more beneficial for the corporate performance, they also investigated the leadership styles mostly adopted by women. It was revealed that women adopted those leadership styles which
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were more advantageous, specifically the ones relating to rewards, expectations, motivation, and decision making process involving participation from others.

As per the gender perspective, there were studies which concluded that differences found among male and female leadership behaviors derived from the socialization practices, through which individuals are trained to coincide with the societal anticipations regarding their gender position (Carless, 1998). Likewise, the social role theory suggested that the behavior of individuals is in line with the societal hopes regarding their gender role (Eagly 2007); thus resulting in gender differences in leadership styles.

There exists a varied collection of empirical findings which endorse gender differences among leadership styles, with the help of which some concrete conclusions can be made (Burke & Collins, 2001; Eagly & Johnson, 1990, Van Engen et al, 2001). There is a general consensus that women face more barriers trying to acquire the position of a leader as compared to men; however there exists a lesser consensus over the variations or similarities found in leadership styles (Eagly & Johannesen-Schmidt, 2001).

Besides the significance of societal factors, another key element is the gender ratio among organizations. A seminal study conducted by Kanter (1977) demonstrated the adverse outcomes of women being underrepresented on leadership positions. As a result, she encouraged a greater numerical representation in management positions. Since then, the ratio of female representation on managerial posts has drawn attention, being a structural property that might influence leadership behavior along with organizational functioning.

In the context of groups, evolutionary philosophy, along with the understanding of socio-cultural theory, propose that some differential preferences could subside concerning the men vs. women leaders among group settings (Van Vugt et al, 2008). Considering all other factors to be equal, it is anticipated that an inclination towards female leadership is found in
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circumstances of intra-group competition, while male leadership was preferred in the context of intergroup competition. This proposition was eventually the outcome of gender differences found among human mating strategies, through which the bodies and minds of male and female shape up in a different way (Geary, 1998).

In spite of some significant placement developments achieved by females in the corporate sector, they often encounter the increased pressure to surpass their male counterparts. Among the upper ranks of organizational hierarchy, women are found to be in a minority at several instances, leading to high visibility which might draw a disproportionate amount of attention, actual or anticipated (Gardiner & Tiggemann, 1990).

As stated by Myers (2008), social identity suggests that a person obtains his/her self concept not merely from individual’s identity, but also with regard to who he/she is not. For instance, in a scenario where a female is encircled by a collection of males, she is mindful of the individuality and distinctiveness she can bring about in those surroundings (Myers, 2008). If females are not successful in surpassing their male counterparts, they might seem to be less devoted to their work compared to males (Gardiner & Tiggemann, 1990). For this reason, women are more likely to overcompensate for being thought as highly capable and fully committed to their work and the organization. One suitable illustration of having the need to overcompensate can be observed in the medical domain in which female practice is in conjunction with their male counterparts (Eagly & Carli, 2007).

Another research conducted by Kabacoff (2000) found various differences in leadership styles adopted by men and women among the senior executive positions. The groups who rated their leaders (self, boss, colleague and direct reports) all interpreted their male senior executives as highly constrained in emotional articulation. On the contrary, women senior executives were depicted as working with increased level of energy, passion and emotional
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representation, while possessing a higher capacity to preserve the energy levels and
involvement of others. Bosses and colleagues both specified that women senior executives
were more inclined towards setting deadlines and also monitoring progress in order to
ascertain the execution of tasks (Kabacoff, 2000).

Moreover, female senior executives were known to have a more assertive and competitive
approach for realizing their objectives, and more likely to make others aware of their
opinions of them and their progress. Hence, male senior executives were perceived to have a
more traditional approach towards issues, highlighting risk minimization and learning
through past encounters. Ultimately, women senior executives were observed to set higher
level of performance standards for themselves as well as others. Bearing in mind the co-
relational nature of this research, descriptions of the gender differences are exploratory. It is
important to note that variations in emotional constriction and representation might
correspond to socialization distinctions or variations found in role expectations, which seems
to go after gender stereotype positions (Kabacoff, 2000).

Another interesting study was conducted by Business Insider (2014), which investigated why
women leaders are more effective than men leaders. They measured varied competencies
between the two groups and found that women performed better on 12 out of 16
competencies than men (shown by the figure below).
The reasoning behind these differences may vary. However the major reason discovered in this study was that women try to perform twice as much to prove they are half as good as men. This makes them put extra effort in their work. Since they are underrepresented, they strive harder to make it up the ladder. The competencies suggest that women are seen as more effective in getting things done, portraying themselves as role models and producing results. The skills illustrate those leaders who take up major challenges, make sure that people are acting with integrity and achieving results (Business Insider, 2014).
Evaluation of Literature

A systematic literature review involves summarizing the existing literature evidence in relation to a specific topic, where the researcher collects a large number of literature sources, filters them based on specific criteria such as recentness, authenticity, reliability and availability, and scrutinizes them to identify the important points from them. These are summarized in different categories analyzing every single aspect of the subject studied by the researchers so far. Once the information is summarized in a logical manner, the researcher scrutinizes them to identify any specific gaps in the literature studied, and provides suggestions for further research in order to eliminate the identified gap. Through this process, the researcher provides a framework or context that can be used by other researchers to further explore the areas in which prior researchers failed to provide answers (Bettany-Saltikov, 2012).

The literature analyzed was thoroughly researched and collected from a variety of sources. The study included research from different countries that tried to collect information on leadership patterns from men and women. The data is credible and the research was carried out through a systematic procedure. However, different studies have different research concerns and weaknesses involved.

For example, in the study by Kent et al. (2010), although the study has been able to compare and contrast the leadership styles used by both men and women, it has been limited by the fact that the women sample was quite small due to the fact that women were underrepresented, making about 21 per cent of the total sample size. The question that can be posed here is how a rigorous comparison between the leadership style of men and women can be achieved considering the underrepresented sample size of women. Also, most of the
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studies have been conducted from organizations that are heavily male dominated. There have been many doubts casted on these studies because the researchers are of the view that women leaders working in male dominated organizations tend to alter their behaviours and the leadership styles to conform to the male dominated leadership patterns.

Another research conducted by Kabacoff (2000) managed to investigate the link between gender differences in leadership and organizational effectiveness at the senior executive level and board of directors in private industry. While the main strength of this study was the incorporation of data coming from various perspectives (self, boss, colleagues and direct reports), which enhanced its practicality, at the same time, not explicitly addressing the gender of the raters was considered to be its major limitation. Also, the data collected demonstrated the views and opinions regarding the leadership practices instead of structured behavioral examinations.

All the studies analyzed researched the topic from a uni-dimensional angle where only gender and leadership were explored. However, other factors such as a person’s age, cultural and educational background and experience might also impact the leadership styles used by the men and women.

Despite the limitations of the research, these have been able to present robust findings by taking into account the validity and reliability of the research instruments used.

The findings of the study clearly present some basic themes: the leadership of men and women vary considerably, based on their approach towards problems, their behaviors towards the staff, and decision-making. Due to the stereotypes against women, women have been more cautious in implementing their leadership style. They appear to be more passionate and energetic leaders who are sometimes more strict in their goal achievement than men. The leadership of women is more effective due to the fact that they tend to put in more hard work
in order to achieve recognition. However, there is always an emotional element attached with the leadership of women because they are also able to connect with the team members more strongly than the men.

Research has proved that while the leadership of men and women might be different from each other, they both emphasize final goal achievement by adopting differentiated behavior from each other. Men tend to be more conventional in their approaches, as they have watched their senior counterparts do it for many decades before them.

Women, on the contrary, believe in differentiating themselves from men, adopting more innovative leadership patterns. This has given them an edge on the men, which is sometimes depicted in the survey results conducted on leadership between men and women. Men and women leaders also tend to differ in their leadership philosophy. However, despite these deductions, this research area remains under-researched, which calls for further investigation into the research topics.

**Future Research/Recommendations**

Considering this research area, it can be suggested that further research should be undertaken to explore whether women intentionally change their leadership behaviors in male dominated organizations, and whether they would pose to adopt different leadership styles given a different organization to work in. In spite of the fact that women are gaining increasing visibility at managerial teams, their admission to board of directors is still inadequate on a comparative basis. Considering the fact that high position executives serves a dual role of outlining the organizational structures as well as portraying model roles for managers down the hierarchy, the gender composition of executive boards might be a significant element to supplement the conclusion of this study. In this context, access to data related to various rates
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of women executive’s representation on the board of directors can contribute significantly to this research topic.

One interesting future direction is to investigate specific leadership attributes with respect to gender. For example, the women and men leaders could be investigated on whether women leaders are more creative than men, etc. Another question that could be investigated by future studies is how effective these styles are to motivate the employees. Does this prove that women are better motivators than men? More studies need to be focused on those organizations where the male-female leadership ratio is relatively equitable. Such studies can prove to be effective in delivering the desired results.

Conclusion

Gender differences in leadership styles adopted by men and women on various organizations all over the world has emerged as a significant research topic and this systematic literature review evaluated various studies conducted to explore this topic in conjunction with different aspects including societal, cultural, biological and gender stereotype factors. While some authors believe that there exists no significant differences between leadership styles adopted by male and female, many researchers, on the basis of their observations, assessed these gender differences and also linked it to the measures of organizational effectiveness. In broader terms, it could be established that women tend to adopt a more transformational and democratic/ participative leadership style whereas men were observed to adopt autocratic and punishment-oriented leadership styles at many instances. Moreover, some authors revealed that the leadership style mostly adopted by women proves to be beneficial for the organizational effectiveness, mainly integrating the system of reward, motivation, expectation and enthusiasm among others. It was also highlighted that the base of some gender differences that exist is the socialization process, and individuals are taught to correspond
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with the social expectations related to their gender position. However, biological, societal and cultural factors also contributed to these gender differences, as the focal point of several literature sources discussed in this review.

Recommendation for organizations based on the results of the study could also be used for organizations that fear that women might not perform when assigned to top management positions.

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