

Career Stages of Executive Women: The Role of Self in Career Development

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Abstract

Self-concept, self-esteem and self-confidence play a variety of roles in the arena of career and academic development. In the corporate environment, self-confidence is a key to overcoming internal and external barriers during the careers of executive women. The early career stages of executive women consist of a period of uncertainty and discovering, while they learn their new corporate environment. During the latter career stages, executive women learn how to succeed in their position and how the corporate culture works. Executive women attain more confidence as they learn about their new skills and become more effective leaders.

The leadership style of executive women tends to be more cooperative than the traditional hierarchical leadership style of men. From a sociological perspective, the development of self depends upon the social context where one can derive a strong sense of self. In the corporate arena, there are societal expectations that are different for men and women. Being aware of their talents and building on accomplishments, executive women can increase their self-confidence and build a strong sense to achieve success in a diverse corporate environment.

Introduction

During the eighties there was an influx of women working in corporate America that resulted in their achieving high executive status in the workplace. Prior to this epoch, career development research was primarily focused on men in the workforce and their career stages of success since there were very few top-level female executives. In the last twenty years research has focused on the career stages of women executives and what has contributed to their success. There was also speculation that the numbers of top-level executive women in the corporate and political arenas would increase; however, during the last ten years, research has claimed that these numbers have not increased as predicted and have fallen back, especially after America's security peril on September 11, 2001 (Collins, 2009; Frankel, 2004; Kornblut, 2009). The major cause of this persistent dilemma has been attributed to gender bias; however, the concepts of self, leadership styles and the corporate culture are also contributing factors. Female executives are still not earning as much as their male counterparts and today there is even less opportunity for women to achieve top-level executive positions.

Many developmental scholars have claimed that the three critical factors of self-concept, self-esteem and self-confidence played important roles in career development suggesting that building self-confidence and attaining positive self-esteem was linked to high achievement (Powell, 1998). Both men and women face internal barriers (self-concept, motivation or confidence) and external obstacles (societal expectations, global economy or gender bias) when dealing with work challenges and career choices. Understanding how executive women face

these challenges through various career stages can shed light on the enigma of the roles of self while climbing the corporate ladder. The concept of self involves social interactions, identity, leadership styles, personalities and confidence. The self needs definite boundaries to deal with others effectively, to persevere through issues, and to have clear intentions or goals without major conflicts for success.

Personalities in social interactions with colleagues, weak or unbalanced selves, and ineffective leadership styles can cause underlying conflicts in the workplace. Gergen (1991) from a sociological perspective had stated that the development of self was dependent on the social context in which individuals derived their strong sense of selves and their perceptions of social or work roles (Powell, 2009). According to Erik Erikson (1968), a well-known human developmental theorist, personality develops as one endures psychosocial conflicts while resolving them throughout the life span. The pressures of the workplace require a balanced and strong sense of self to be present when accepting challenges and resolving conflicts. Also, the vicissitudes of an executive woman's career demand a strong belief in self and acceptance of challenges since confidence increases when new tasks are completed well (Powell, 2006). Eleanor Roosevelt once stated that you can gain courage and confidence from doing the things you thought you couldn't do (Frankel, 2004). The journey of executive women in the corporate culture is arduous, but can be very rewarding. Understanding the roles or needs of self and maintenance of self-confidence are key factors for successful careers in business.

The Role of Self and Personality in Career development

The concept of self is developed throughout life as one experiences self, work and relationships. Individuals learn about their skills and talents by participating in projects, schools and work, as well as social interactions. Barriers (both internal and external) can prevent one from learning about the self and establishing successful goals (Powell, 2006). Scholars over the last twenty years have suggested that internal barriers (personality, behavior, self-esteem or confidence) and external barriers (societal expectations, gender bias or culture) prevent young adults from attaining their career goals (Collins, 2009; Frankel, 2004; Powell, 1998). The role of self, including self-concept (cognitive views), self-esteem (emotional views) and self-confidence (capability of self) aids personal motivation or behavior which can affect social relations, as well as career choices to achieve success in the workplace.

Smith and Betz (2002) studied how the roles of self-efficacy and self-esteem played in career indecisions of 405 college students. They discovered that self-efficacy (perception of a person's behavioral capacity) and self-esteem (self-regard or self-respect) variables were connected to female career indecision. In social cognitive developmental theories, the notions of perceived self-efficacy and self-esteem were crucial to the personal sense of self-control over destiny and successful adaptation of life events (Smith and Betz, 2002). Making adequate and effective career choices depends on understanding one's goals or needs and having the courage to pursue them. Believing in oneself and meeting difficult challenges help motivate the self to embark on the road of corporate success.

The discussion of self and self-concept pertaining to female career development is still prevalent in human developmental research. The roles of self, self-confidence and self-esteem influence how executive women behave and act to succeed (Powell, 2009). Social psychological researchers during the eighties (e.g., Gecas and Mortimer, 1987; Gergen, 1987; Markus and Nurius, 1987) examined an integrated perspective of self. They studied an individual's concept of self in one's environment and social context in order to establish an accurate method of measuring it. Generally, career men and women in corporations are evaluated on their skills, talents, styles, accomplishments and competence. Self-esteem and self-confidence were noted as direct variables that affected one's abilities to attain proficiency or career success; therefore, they play important roles when thinking about career choices (Blustein and Noumair, 1996; Powell, 1998).

Recent theorists (e.g., Collins, 2009; Frankel, 2004; Kornblut, 2009) agreed that during the past decade, it was difficult for executive women to overcome internal and external barriers due to changing views of working women and men. They are both having difficulty in getting and keeping top-level positions. The global economy has recently taken its toll on the workforce since many top-level jobs are disappearing and working executives have an uphill battle to keep jobs. Women are currently competing with men for the fewer executive jobs available with global issues or economic difficulty preventing competent workers from working. The corporate culture or the good 'ol boys club was a major culprit banning women from top-level positions; however, it now seems that both sexes are experiencing difficulty maintaining jobs. Even with an exceptional strong sense of self, combating or overcoming external obstacles is very difficult.

Career studies completed by Betz and Fitzgerald (1987) found that female developmental factors included: (1) individual variables (high self-esteem with a strong academic self-concept); (2) background (roles models including working mothers and supportive fathers); (3) education (college education and continuation of science courses or mathematics); and (4) home lifestyle (single or late marriage and having no or few children). As a result of their study, two of the major individual or personal variables that determined or facilitated careers were identified as high self-esteem and strong academic self-concept. They found that young women who avoided courses in math and science resulted in limited career opportunities since they had not really challenged themselves to gain skills or confidence (Powell, 2009). Women with low self-esteem felt they could not compete or succeed in business since they did not have enough skills.

Northcutt (1991) analyzed 249 executive women on various personality attributes or characteristics contributing to their success. Her survey questions on achievement and motivation cited: (1) male career developmental theories were different and not always applicable to females; (2) successful females in male-dominated careers had additional common characteristics, such as independence, aggression, perseverance and hard work; and (3) the perceived characteristics of a successful career woman included achiever, self-confidence and risk-taker (Powell, 2009). She also concluded that the personal characteristics of successful women in male-dominated careers were similar to the perceived executive male characteristics in

large corporations. Executive women's personality attributes included action and goal oriented assertiveness, decisive decision-making, and maintenance of high self-esteem.

Another researcher who claimed the importance of self-confidence in overcoming obstacles was Swiss (1996). After analyzing 325 women using surveys and interviews, she had identified ten major obstacles that helped prevent women's career advancement. She found that almost half of the career women in her study perceived their obstacles or barriers as more external, attitudinal and organizational, while the other half found their obstacles as more personal and internal. One of the participants had asserted that to keep advancing she needed to be more "confrontational" rather than "relational", but she didn't necessarily want to change and adapt to that style (Powell, 1998). The senior executive women in Swiss's study noted that the differential and exclusionary treatment they experienced presented them with challenges throughout their careers. Career women continuously have to meet and overcome daily obstacles (internal or external) that challenge them in the workplace.

Swiss's (1996) participants had reported that they had advanced more slowly in their careers than male counterparts since they needed to work harder or become more innovative than men to overcome obstacles. Swiss stated that some female managers took more control in their performance reviews and that they had practiced informal socializing by inviting clients and colleagues to the theater or to family outings rather than to the typical male golf games or bars (Powell, 1998). She had concluded that executive women could overcome obstacles by revising unwritten rules and taking responsibility for overcoming barriers with strong decision-making. Societal expectations in the corporate culture do not generally support women climbing the corporate ladder. Believing in one's capabilities and having a strong sense of self that adapts easily to changing work environments facilitates success.

Social Interactions and Gender Differences

Recent career literature (e.g., Collins, 2009; Kornblat, 2009) proclaimed that cracks in the glass ceiling are not big enough to allow a complete breakthrough. It is getting more difficult for executive women to succeed since they are expected to be tougher and play the man's game better than men do. How tough can they be? It is evident that not only do career women have to deal with internal challenges and personality issues, but also societal expectations and gender bias. The concept of self is not only rooted in self-discovery and identity, but also in understanding social interactions and connections with others as the self develops. Female social roles include resolving internal conflicts such as, work versus family demands which can cause major anxiety and stress. Self-concepts of individuals originate from personal experiences or social relationships and one's self-competence is maintained from social interactions or individual tasks (Powell, 2009). Senior executive females can have difficulty when engaging in social interactions with males since the corporate culture does not readily accept them.

Earlier studies, comparing career male and female strategies of influence, found that women in lower level management positions felt powerless and thus not as confident (Mainiero, 1986). Studies in the nineties on senior executive women had demonstrated that executive

women felt more powerful and had a higher level of self-esteem and self-confidence (Bierema, 1994; Mainiero, 1994). However, other studies had depicted that women were dependent and felt less worthy than their male counterparts which added to the belief that females were neither as strong nor as capable as their male counterparts (Swiss, 1996). Frankel's (2004) study had depicted women as sabotaging themselves and feeling not as capable as their male counterparts. Results from research vary but feelings of incompetence or a lack of personal empowerment can affect self-confidence.

Gecas and Mortimer (1987) as career developmental scholars had also defined identity as an objective self-definition with continuous self-conceptions that anchored the self to social systems (Powell, 1998). They viewed self-concept as a multifaceted phenomenon where individuals defined themselves via attitudes, beliefs, values and experiences along with their motivational and emotional components of self. Caffarola and Olson (1993) in their study on the psychosocial development of women, found the theme of the power of interpersonal relationships as central to maintaining the self-concept of women. Self-concept has also been linked to motivation, social relationships and identity (Powell, 2009). Major factors of corporate success include establishing a strong social support system such as, a working network organization, role models, and mentors who can help female executives achieve their goals.

Executive women have been facing huge external barriers or gender bias in the workplace, especially in a male-dominated corporate culture where the good 'ol boys club has been difficult to join as equals. Executive men have for decades held a very exclusive male social work club that included playing golf, discussing sports, and socializing after work. Understanding how these external barriers work and influence men by dominating their social relationships is very important for women. Erikson (1968) described how personality traits could be developed by progressing through life stages where individuals experience successful social interactions and relationships. As women become more experienced in the corporate culture, their learning and growth can influence their personalities to help them surpass their male counterparts by producing their own effective support systems to succeed.

Several authors (e.g., Gilligan, 1982; Tannen, 1994; Wallace, 1994) cited gender differences as being based on male versus female personalities, socialization differences and expectations. Carol Gilligan (1982), a well-known developmental psychologist, stated that identity was dependent upon a social context of relationships. Gilligan's theory, prevalent during the women's equality movement, included the gender view that women see themselves as existing in a web of relationships held together by bonds of caring and responsibility. According to Wallace's (1994) study, certain perceived gender differences did not appear when comparing executive males and females. Wallace concluded that there was no consistent evidence that males and females differed in cognitive style, creativity, independence, general self-esteem, empathy or sociability.

Studies by Fagenson (1990) and Mainiero (1994) on gender differences claimed that women were perceived as less capable of leadership, since some women perceived themselves as less powerful in mixed gender groups and not as ready as men to express their opinions. This

concur with previous studies on this topic. Frankel (2004) reported that nice girls do not succeed in business since they have inadequate perceptions of self. It is evident that women's perceptions of being less powerful than men have to be overcome and this supports the notion that they have to be tougher to endure the social injustice of the glass ceiling. They not only have to work harder and one up most of their male counterparts, but they also have to persevere and maintain whatever confidence they do have to keep up in the corporate arena and ultimately win.

Executive women can experience difficulty with gender bias in the workplace since they see themselves as incapable of success in higher level positions and have been excluded from the game by not being given fair opportunity to play. Gender bias includes creating exclusive social male clubs or interactions that prevent women from participating in making decisions or knowing adequate information to give their opinion. Is this fair? It seems that a question of social justice is a continuous dilemma in the workplace and there are no real solutions or changes to the secure corporate culture that prevents women from equal opportunity or top-level positions. Studies have shown that, besides the external barriers such as gender bias and global economy, internal barriers such as, lack of confidence or low self-esteem are also major contributors preventing women from successful careers (Frankel, 2004; Powell, 2009). How can executive women overcome these barriers for individual career success?

Leadership Styles and Career Stages

Understanding the basic leadership styles of career women could help illuminate how they succeed in business. The major styles include: (1) hierarchical or traditional versus participatory (web-like); (2) dictatorial or decisive versus collaborative (consensus); and, (3) micro management or hands on versus macro management (delegation). Career literature (Bass and Avolio, 1994; Tannen, 1994) has highlighted women's feminine characteristics, such as caring in relationships and consensus decision making, as well as gender differences in leadership styles as critical to their success. In the past decade the corporate world has been undergoing changes, especially in terms of how leadership is viewed. Several career development theories on leadership styles promoted participatory management, a style which was used predominately by successful women (Powell, 1998). Bass and Avolio (1994) found that the traditional top-down hierarchical organization which favored dictation by authority gave way to a more caring style and concern about relationships or collaboration across all levels (Powell, 1998). Effective leadership styles have to be developed and refined through experience.

Bass and Avolio surveyed over 500 men and 200 women using a questionnaire to find these leadership factors: (1) idealized influence or charisma; (2) inspirational motivation; (3) intellectual stimulation; and (4) individualized consideration (Powell, 1998). They studied management styles and concluded that women's leadership styles were generally different than men's and could be more suited to running corporations. Bass and Avolio (1994) and Rosener (1995) concurred that regarding leadership styles women managers were characterized as being more open with colleagues and consensus builders in decision-making situations. In the last

decade, leadership styles tended to become more collaborative and included fellow colleagues to participate in the decision-making process, as well as incorporating both micro and macro management styles to become more effective.

Mainiero (1994), an organizational scholar, completed in-depth interviews with 55 senior executive women. In Mainiero's study of the political maturation process, she cited four major seasoning stages: (1) political naiveté or being naive about the corporate culture, learning and knowing what to do and say; (2) building credibility or working within the system twice as hard and gaining trust exhibiting executive potential; (3) refining a style or delegating and teambuilding, showing persistence and trusting one's leadership style; and (4) shouldering responsibilities or mentoring and managing a balanced lifestyle (Powell, 1998). Mainiero had concluded that these executive women succeeded by refining their political skills, knowing what to say and do at appropriate times and maturing their subtle interpersonal skills. As executive women become more experienced, politically seasoned and knowledgeable they can become more successful.

Bierema (1994), in her study on women coping in a corporate world identified three major career stages that her participants experienced with increasing levels of self-confidence. Her stages included: (1) acquiescence (learning the environment and culture); (2) competence (gaining technical and professional skills); and (3) influence (sharing the knowledge with others). These stages progressed similar to other research studies where self-confidence of career women was lower in the first level of learning the environment and had become higher as the participants gained experience, skills and comfort in their positions. These career stages included a progression of becoming more established in one's position as experience and expertise grew.

As executive women gain experience, they develop and refine their leadership styles, confidence and other skills which enable them to succeed. Studies have shown that many successful women practiced participatory, consensus-building and decision-making management styles. Many researchers have noted that women executives tended to be more open and have relationships with their colleagues and staff, adapting a participatory style of management rather than a hierarchical style or traditional style of management. Both male and female executives are currently more relational using a collaborative, as well as micro (hands-on) and macro (delegation) leadership styles. To be competitive and successful, adapting an eclectic leadership style helps executives use the appropriate management style depending on the situation. Through experience, a strong sense of self develops from refining and adopting a personal leadership style that works well.

Frankel's (2004) study had specified the unconscious mistakes that women made to sabotage their careers and coached them to become more decisive, to have confidence in their presentations and to persevere in meeting their career goals. She had encouraged women to act like themselves and not to follow former corporate rules of "acting like a man" to succeed; however, she claimed that women have to expand their leadership styles in the workplace since they bring a unique set of behaviors useful for today's climate. Career researchers for the past

three decades have agreed that having mentors and networking by maintaining work relationships could help executive women achieve their goals. Most women develop their own supportive networks which may include men who have guided them to success. Senior executive women need to become role models, mentors and guide new career women by passing the torch of knowledge, expertise and, experience to these future leaders, as they cross the bridge to higher level positions.

Conclusion

As a result of the studies of several researchers, self-concept was defined in terms of both personal stability and adapting to a changing environment. Self-concept is a major topic in career development research and an important ingredient for success. It is also evident that to attain success female executives must overcome internal and external barriers, as well as gender bias and refine or develop their own unique leadership styles. Socialization includes a supportive network of mentors in the workplace and plays an important role in the development of women's leadership style and confidence. Gergen's (1991) theory defined self in a social context and contended that people need to manage and modify their self-concepts through changing, adapting, and developing an internal awareness as well. Adaptation to changing work environments is a key to corporate survival and executive women need to feel confident or comfortable in their own style.

Erikson's (1968) research emphasized the importance of social context or a social system that connected one's self definition, not only to identity, but also to behavior and conflict resolution. Individual behavior could be different in various contexts and personality characteristics could change depending on the environment. Motivation influences behavior or action and may be internal, depending on one's desire to succeed, or external, depending on the environment or social influences (Powell, 2006). Social experiences with challenging opportunities are important to maintain high self-esteem and to build self-confidence. In the field of career development, understanding the individual's motivation, self-concept and relationship to environment could contribute to solving the puzzle of success. Executive women need to believe in their strengths and their abilities so they can succeed and win.

Studies on career stages of executive women showed that the initial stages seemed to be characterized by a period of uncertainty; however, as executive women learned more, becoming comfortable and successful in their jobs, they attained new skills and confidence to achieve their goals. As female executives had diverse experiences adapting to changing circumstances, they felt more competent. Increasing studies on the interplay of social interactions and the development of self-esteem could help solve the dilemmas that career women face while adapting to a diverse and changing corporate environment. Further studies exposing the complexities of maintaining a strong sense of self in the corporate culture while overcoming gender bias and other obstacles could help careers. As Eleanor Roosevelt stated in a televised interview in the 1950's, as long as we think in terms of gender we have not progressed as a

society at all. If executive males and female could play the corporate game together as a team, they could all win since their success begets more success for future generations.

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