

NSI Research Project: Female leadership

Abstract

Over the past decades, the labor force participation of women has increased strongly. Today, researchers and policy makers support the idea that female leadership and entrepreneurship are important for economic performance. Changing role models, more liberal social norms and favorable child care facilities also positively influence young women's ambition towards the development of a professional career and female entrepreneurship. Nevertheless, EU figures still reveal persistent gender inequalities when it comes to participation in areas of political and economic decision making, employment, and salaries. Within the organizational behavior literature, these gender inequalities have been explained by referring to the glass ceiling effect. Although females seem to be able to progress to the middle management level, they hardly get selected for top-management functions. Nevertheless, research (see Van Emmerik, Euwema, and Wendt (2008)) suggests that female and male managers, at least in terms of explained variance, do not differ much in leadership behaviors. Within the entrepreneurship literature, researchers have suggested a possible risk-averse attitude of women, making them less fit for a competitive environment. However, recent research showed that differences in leadership behaviors are predominantly explained by individual differences (and not by organizational and societal differences) pointing at the importance of examining individual leadership styles of (female) managers/entrepreneurs (Van Emmerik, Wendt, & Euwema, 2009).

In both academic fields (organizational behavior and entrepreneurship) leadership styles have been identified as an important variable in explaining success or failure in competitive environments. Currently, authentic leadership has been emphasized as an added value for both male and female managers and entrepreneurs. Authentic leaders are aware of their values and beliefs, they are self-confident, genuine, reliable and trustworthy, and they focus on building followers' strengths, broadening their thinking and creating a positive and engaging organizational context (Avolio and Gardner, 2005). However, in society, a set of widely shared conscious and unconscious mental associations seem to link men more with these traits that connote leadership. Women are associated with more communal qualities, which convey a concern for the compassionate treatment of others, while men are associated with more agent qualities, which convey assertion and control (Eagly and Carli, 2007). As a result, women often struggle to cultivate an appropriate leadership style. As empirical research on authentic leadership style is largely lacking, further research is needed to examine the effects of this leadership style and the added value it brings to female leaders/entrepreneurs and their organizations.

This research broadly aims to investigate whether female leaders and entrepreneurs benefit from authentic leadership and if they even benefit more than their male counterparts. Drawing from role congruity theory (Eagly and Karau, 2002), we hypothesize that both female leaders/entrepreneurs will benefit more from authentic leadership because of the perceived congruence between this particular leadership and female gender role/stereotypes. The validity of this explanatory mechanism will be tested in the lab and in the field, using samples of students, managers and entrepreneurs. Specifically, in a longitudinal field study, we will examine the effect of a (stable) authentic leadership *style* on followers' outcomes (e.g. job satisfaction, initiative) and organizational outcomes (e.g., performance, innovation), based on a between-subjects comparison of women and men in managerial and entrepreneurship positions. In addition, we will conduct a diary study to examine the within-subjects associations between (variable) authentic leadership *behavior* and individual and organizational outcomes. Finally, we will conduct a series of experiments to investigate the possibility that women will emerge more commonly as leaders than men in settings characterized by interpersonal trust, honesty, open-mindedness, and stimulating growth -- characteristics associated with authentic leadership.

References:

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