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Comparing the female leadership journey between UK and Kenya women

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Abstract

(a) Purpose of the paper

The purpose of this paper is to identify and compare leadership experiences between Kenyan and UK women leaders and to offer advice to future women leaders. This study also tests the critical incident technique as an appropriate method of collected data.

(b) Main Findings

Four women responded to the pilot study and answered questions on their personal leadership journey, the critical success factors and enablers, the barriers, and offered guidance to future female leaders. The Kenyan women fed back that process improvement and use of statistical models was a method of leading teams. Being a team player was conducive to a successful leadership journey. Being critical of herself was a factor. One leader advised future women leaders to strike a balance between work and life. She advised building people skills to help empathize with people and to keep up with market changes. The second respondent reported the desire to positively influence others and recognised that support from a good leader was vital. Her CSFs were time management, task prioritization, strategic thinking, goal setting ability and good judgement. Her barriers were lack of confidence, fear of failure, maintaining authenticity during self-promotion, impatience, resistance to change, and overcoming imposter syndrome. Whilst there were no similarities between the narratives, this could be because there are so few respondents. It is hoped that the full study will show some parity.

Introduction

The overall culture of a country can be described as either masculine or feminine, according to the work of Hofstede (1985); this then has an impact on who holds the more powerful positions in industry. Both Kenya and the United Kingdom are described as having a masculine culture. This is defined as “a preference for achievement, heroism, assertiveness and material success.” Page 346. Femininity is more concerned with “relationships, modesty, caring for the weak and quality of life”. Within a masculine country it is seen that males hold more powerful positions than their female counterparts. (Witi.com, 2024).

The journeys taken by women therefore in these cultures may be somewhat different from potential male leaders. It is this journey that this paper addresses by way of a

pilot study to test critical incident technique as an appropriate method for collecting narratives from such women.

The critical incident technique (CIT) qualitative method was introduced by Flanagan (1954) in the 1950s to explore why pilots could not learn to fly. Since then, the technique has been widely adopted and adapted for use in many service contexts, proving popular in areas such as education (Douglas et al.), hotels (Edvardsson and Strandvik, 2000), banking (Johnston, 1995), wine retailers in Australia (Lockshin and McDougall, 1998), airlines and restaurants (Bitner *et al.* 1990) and also healthcare (Gabbott and Hogg, 1996; Kemppainen, 2000). The CIT questionnaire asks respondents to recall and describe in detail a story about something they have experienced within the service environment. To his credit very few changes have been made to Flanagan's original method according to Gremler (2004) and it remains in wide use today.

Flanagan (1954) defined CIT as a way of identifying the significant factor(s) that contributed to either the success or failure of a particular human event. Davis (2006) defined a 'critical incident' as an observable form of action or form of expression, complete enough in itself to allow the researcher to draw inferences from it. When using CIT the respondent is required to remember an experience they have encountered, either negative or positive, and re-tell it as a story or narrative. The technique allows participants to provide details of their experiences as they perceive them, rather than being asked specifically about selected areas identified by the organisation. Thus, providing richer data. Respondents can freely describe their experiences and unreservedly express their feelings, providing a narrative or an anecdote on their experience. A positive critical incident is classified as a 'Satisfier', a negative incident is termed 'Dissatisfier' (Cadotte and Turgeon, 1988) where the incident is deemed to be a catalyst for a change in customer loyalty behaviour, such as positive or negative word of mouth for example, this has been termed 'Critically Critical' by Edvardsson and Nilsson-Witell (2004) and where there are a lack of recorded incidents concerning particular areas of the organisation these are classified by Cadotte and Turgeon (1988) as 'Neutrals' (neither satisfying or dissatisfying).

CIT narratives can be collected via focus groups, one-to-one interviews or large group settings, direct or participatory observation and by telephone (Edvardsson and Roos, 2001). Various approaches to the CIT process have been identified for example, a ten-step approach by Johnson and Gustafsson (2000) Gremler (2004) provides a 5- step process. The latter in summary involves problem definition; study design; data collection; data analysis and interpretation, finally culminating in the result report. Data analysis involves a process of content analysis and coding to interpret the respondent's comments and draw any inferences from the narratives (Gabbott and Hogg, 1996). To ensure reliability, the data analysis phase should always involve more than just one judge and they should be adequately trained (Gremler, 2004).

This research encouraged participants to provide narratives on their challenges (obstacles) and their critical success factors on the journey towards leadership. They were also invited to offer advice to potential female leaders on how they might achieve success in their own journeys.

Literature Review

The 'glass ceiling', i.e., an unacknowledged barrier to advancement (Boyd 2008) is referred to within the literature and has evolved from its humble beginnings in the 1980's (Ryan and Haslam, 2005; Boyd, 2008; McKinsey, 2022), through the 'glass cliff' era of appointment into a precarious position (Ryan 2016), to what is now termed the 'leadership labyrinth' (Goethals and Hoyt, 2016). Clearly there has been an evolution, and an appreciation for more than just the quantitative inequity; the multifaceted complexity of gender imbalance brings greater depth and intricacy to the challenge. As women have gradually risen through the ranks into more senior positions, academic scrutiny has intensified, with attention given to topics such as the perception of women leaders, the success and failure different leadership styles and tendencies may offer, and the impact this may have on business (Goethals and Hoyt, 2016).

M'bata and Cheptjator-Thomson (2018) posited that there was a scarcity of women leaders specifically in the sports industry in Kenya. They investigated women's journeys to leadership and found that leaders were from a specific background in terms of their education, ie. they were highly educated. Sports is not the only area lacking in female leadership. Tang (2023) found that within the maritime industry internationally there was a lack of females whilst Lekchin and Kamm (2020) reported on a male-dominated construction industry within the US.

Pogrebna *et al.*(2024) considered two centuries of leadership and discovered a scarcity of black female leaders. They propose that to generate a more inclusive culture in the future, more positive experiences should be fostered. Olwanda *et al.*(2024) studied maternal and neonatal outcomes and found that the woman's ability to make decisions was critical for, *inter alia*, gender equality.

Pickel and Sivachandran (2024) considered the gender balance within Canada's medical schools and discovered that whilst most students were female, they were underrepresented within the ranks of leaders.

Within the literature several barriers to success were identified, namely, being expected to act like mothers, not being heard or recognised as a leader, being talked down to by men, (Leavy *et al.* 2024); imposter syndrome, age and racial discrimination, lack of mentorship and motherhood. Having to work harder was recognised as a barrier by both Leavy *ibid* , and Canli and Aquino (2024).

Several authors found that 'resilience' was a pertinent factor in the successful woman leader (Indrianti *et al.* (2024); Chanana (2024) and Walters (2024)). Other enabling factors referred to in the literature were: pragmatism, sustainability, facilitation, communication, catalyst and informed (Schiuma *et al.*2024); mindfulness (Indrianti *et al.*2024); early exposure to role models, socialisation and positive thinking (Tangonyine *et al.* (2024); mentorship (Brown, 2024); and innovation (Chanana, 2024).

Several authors proposed a way forward for helping women leaders in terms of more mentorship (Brown, 2024; Canli and Aquino, 2024), sharing narratives to raise awareness, education, training and development (Awain *et al*, 2024), tailored leadership coaching, (Carter and Sisco, 2024) the use of AI to develop self-help training programmes (Rukadikar and Khandalwal (2024), and early exposure to role models, Tangonyine *et al*. (2024).

It will be interesting to see if the current study shows up any similarities in the narratives from women leaders.

Method

A number of female leaders in Kenya and UK were initially contacted via email and asked if they would like to take part in this pilot study on women leaders. Those who responded positively were sent the CIT based survey instrument containing just 4 questions about their leadership journey.

Results

Four women responded to the survey questions, describing their leadership journeys - 2 from Kenya (coded KWL1 and KWL2) and 2 from UK (coded UKW1 and UKW2). Because there are only a small number of respondents in this pilot study, I have included all the narratives verbatim. This is in line with Leavy *et al*. (2024) who advocate sharing narratives as a way of raising awareness of the issues.

All four respondents were over 40 years of age and had over 10 years leadership experience. The UK respondents were university Professors and the Kenyan respondents were employed within the Finance sector.

(a) Personal Leadership Journey

Q1: Think of a significant event or interaction pertaining to your own personal leadership journey that encouraged you to pursue a career in leadership and management. Use the space below to describe the event and express the feeling(s) evoked, the impression you took away and the resulting behaviour change (if any). You may record more than one significant event or interaction.

While in graduate school, I developed a keen interest in process improvement using statistical models. I always aimed at getting an opportunity not only to drive process improvements in organisations but also lead teams to deliver and re-imagine business processes and solutions with the customer in mind. (KWL1)

I started out because I wanted to positively influence others. I saw that when team members grow, their team's impact also grows. I also realised with the support of a great leader people can grow much faster (KWL2)

The first thing I'd say is that I never think of what I do as "leadership". For me, it's a matter of "taking responsibility for". I guess that reflects the fact that I've slipped into (rather than "pursued") roles because a) I was approached to do so, or b) because no one else wanted to do it.

I've not had a leadership dream, since I've never aspired to lead anything or anyone. My earliest career dream was being hairdresser (when I was in primary school) then a lecturer (when I was an undergraduate). I remember being in an undergraduate lecture and wondering if I could be a lecturer. I thought it would be a long shot, but I gained funding to do a PhD and I secured some part-time HE is teaching alongside. I was thrilled to secure a full-time job as a lecturer. I thought it was a job for life, and I would be teaching a subject I loved – and would love for ever. Hence, no more career dreams! (UKWL1)

Having a line manager who recognised your capabilities and then provided you with opportunities to develop.

1995- was asked to move from my considerate job as a decision maker on benefits to become a team leader of a computerised delivery team, which was new at that time. This is a leap for me, but I job shadowed the team, asked what they needed and got it for them from senior management. Staff were disillusioned so I organised away days and team building activities (socials) and helped staff progress.

1997-was asked to take on two teams, including an appeal team to deduce work backlogs and turn the teams around, which I did. Staff again progressed better as I improved their Performance Appraisals. Having trust from your senior manager and freedom to manage allowed this to happen. Other these years until 2005 when I left to do a PhD I had several line managers, some better than others. But those that understood performance outputs and took on board any issues progressed up to them allowed me the freedom to lead and develop my teams. During these periods and until 2003 I won 3 staff awards for delivery of pilot projects as my leadership style allowed for staff to perform at their best and for us to improve business processes and reduce customer waiting times.

(UKWL2)

(b) CSFs and Enablers

Q2: Think of any critical factors or enablers that have a positive effect on your leadership effectiveness and/or success. Use the space below to describe the event(s) and express the feeling(s) evoked, the impression you took away and the resulting behaviour change (if any).

Being a team player and people oriented are critical factors that have had an impact on my leadership journey coupled with creating a conducive environment for teams to thrive. I embrace collaborative and transformative approaches in my day-to-day leadership journey. (KWL1)

A good leader must cultivate the right set of skills to develop their leadership effectiveness, including:

- Time management.
- Task prioritization.
- Strategic thinking.
- Goal-setting ability.
- Good judgment.

(KWL2)

I'm sorry to say that I don't have that many feelings about the job. I work with amazing people, I've met many unforgettable characters, and I'd walk over hot coals for my team. But "it's a job, not a calling"! When my life flashes before my eyes at the end, I don't think I'll be playing a montage of my greatest moments at work.

Thinking about 'critical factors': I would reflect on how I've matured in my time here. My experiences have sometimes been salutary ones and I guess that guides my behaviour. But I don't fear change (regime, regulatory or otherwise). Like those of us who've stayed with the same employer for a while, things are always in churn and it's pointless breaking your heart over a defunct process, an anointed leader you find annoying, or another sector initiative that invades your working practice.

(UKWL1)

Again, having a line manager that believes in your capabilities.

Being able to produce measurable outcomes.

Having clear and SMART objectives in your appraisal and being fairly assessed and rewarded.

Being successful in achieving targets with my team is something that I enjoy. Along with recognising and developing my staff. It makes me feel job satisfaction and I then aspire to doing more if this is recognised and appreciated by senior management.

In my current role as Professor, it is particularly satisfying to mentor research staff and help provide opportunities for them and again recognised and valued by the organisation/line management.

(UKWL2)

(c) Barriers

Q3. Think of any existing barriers to your success as a leader or hurdles that you may have or need to overcome. Anything that may be disempowering or have a disabling impact on you. Use the space below to describe the event(s) and express the feeling(s) evoked, the impression you took away and the resulting behaviour change (if any).

I can be quite critical of myself, which can lead to negative self-talk and eventual burnout. I've found that I can avoid this by recording my goals, objectives, and key results and setting aside time to celebrate milestones and achievements, big and small. This not only helps me focus on how I'm benefiting the team, but it also has also helped me get better at prioritizing my most impactful tasks. (KWL1)

Some barriers that many women leaders face include a lack of confidence, a fear of failure, maintaining authenticity during self-promotion, impatience, resistance in responding to new ideas, or overcoming impostor syndrome. All of these can be potential roadblocks to leadership success. (KWL2)

The fact that I've needed a) permission and b) pushing to take on leadership roles is emblematic of my biggest barrier - me. It was an achievement just to go to university and I think I rested on my laurels early on. I sometimes wonder if I had my time all over again: could I have done more? Maybe. I might have had a career plan, formed networks, adopted a cause that gave me a sector platform, and now I might be a on that top table. But, heck, maybe I'd be a bitter also-ran. On balance, I value my wellbeing over any hazy placement in an organizational chart.

There are the usual external barriers for women of my age and background. I've experienced a great deal of sexism since I started lecturing in 1987. I've been judged and consigned on the basis of my sex, I've been patronised and sex-pestered when I was younger. These days I'm often on the receiving end of ridiculous levels of mansplaining. How do I feel? I avoid confrontations at work and try to zone out when a man is stating the bleedin' obvious. But I'm not offended by self-importance.

(UKWL1)

Lots of hurdles-

Being female and seeing less competent men progress more quickly in the civil service. Having less time to focus on work when I am balancing childcare etc. Becoming ill through no fault of my own, and then getting back to a leadership position after a long period. Disempowerment also comes from senior management (not in my current workplace) not taking on board my ideas or using my experience.

(UKWL2)

(d). Guidance to future leaders

Q4. What advice do you have to offer future generations of women wanting to pursue a career in leadership in your industry? Please use the space below to outline your guidance.

Strike a balance between work and life. Build people skills this comes handy as it helps one on how to empathize with others in an appropriate way. Learning never stops, build skills to catch up with the market changes. (KWL1)

For women wanting to pursue leadership, I would advise them to:

- Advocate for themselves
- Stay Confident and Curious
- Support Other Women
- Pursue Financial And Business Knowledge
- Prioritize Continuous Learning (KWL2)

The generations of women that follow me are so much more savvy than I ever was. I don't think I have anything to offer them.

(UKWL1)

In academia, or any other administrative heavy environment be sure of the HR policies in your organisation and make sure fairness is applied to you and your

colleagues and staff. Find a good mentor to point out where you should be focussing your work efforts and how to deal with difficult work scenarios.

Be generous with your time in developing and supporting others, as long as you can see that they use your guidance wisely. Try not to be a people pleaser or take on extra work that is not a benefit to your development. Avoid managers who always delegate tasks. Be the manager that learns the task then devolves it only to enable genuine staff development. Be fair, consistent and honest with yourself and others. Be visible and drive forward strategies with a clear vision, engaging with staff as you do it.

(UKWL2)

Discussion

Due the small number of respondents there are few common themes. However, the issue of imposter syndrome comes up and is in line with the literature. In particular the findings of Canli and Aquino (2024). In the advice to future leaders, finding a mentor was proposed, in line with several of the authors within the literature.

Sexism is mentioned as a barrier and this was one of the themes identified by Canli and Aquino (2024). Resilience is inferred from the narratives, agreeing with a number of the authors within the literature review.

It was pleasing to see that from all the women leader respondents, the narratives were detailed and lengthy and each found the experience to be cathartic. All but one of the responses included detailed practical advice to future women leaders and potential leaders, much of which mirrors that in the literature.

Clearly the numbers of respondents in this pilot study is small and makes it difficult to provide valid and reliable advice. However, the main aim was to test the CIT survey and it was found to be useful. The full study will contain sufficient responses and will be reported on in the future.

It is hoped that women on their own leadership journey will find the advice offered by successful women leaders useful.

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