

Through the looking glass: how coaching and mentoring enable women to tackle gender-related challenges in their leadership journeys

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Abstract

Women continue to face a variety of gender-related challenges en route to, and in, senior leadership. We explore how coaching and mentoring enable women to tackle these challenges. Twenty-two women senior leaders from a wide range of industries were interviewed about gender-related challenges, and asked whether coaching and mentoring had supported them to succeed. Participants reported benefiting from coaching and/or mentoring, particularly as an antidote to the gender-related loneliness of challenging leadership roles. Coaching and mentoring helped women form their identity as leaders and increase their confidence. Many had not been provided with these opportunities through their organisations because coaching and mentoring were seen as remedial interventions. In challenging roles or “glass cliff” situations, they often found themselves unsupported and were resourceful in seeking formal and informal coaches and mentors. We offer recommendations for coaches, mentors and sponsors.

Originality / Value:

This study of women across industries shows the positive role that coaching and mentoring plays in enabling women to navigate the gender-related challenges they face on the way to, and in, senior leadership. The research reviews the significant empirical evidence that exists on the gender-related challenges that women face and the well-established body of evidence on the benefits of coaching and mentoring in general. The study finds that there is very limited research on the role that coaching and mentoring can play in enabling women to tackle gender-related challenges in their leadership journeys. Anecdotal assumptions that coaching and mentoring enable women to navigate these challenges have not been substantiated in the research literature to date. This research brings an evidence-based approach to these benefits and highlights practical implications for organisations seeking to support the development and success of women leaders.

Keywords: women; senior leadership; glass cliff; coaching; mentoring

Introduction

The goal of this research is to explore whether and how coaching and mentoring enable women to face and tackle the well-documented gender-related challenges they face on the way to and in senior leadership. Through research with women who have achieved senior leadership roles across industries, we explore access to coaching and mentoring and the conditions under which these interventions make a positive difference.

Theory

The starting hypothesis for this research is that coaching and mentoring not only help women survive the challenges of getting to the top; they also enable them to thrive on the other side of the “glass”. However, evidence on the impact and benefits of coaching and / or mentoring for senior women – specifically on how coaching and mentoring help address the gender-

related challenges women face on their way to and in senior leadership – is limited. This research set out to explore:

- Does coaching and/or mentoring play a role in enabling women to navigate the gender-related challenges they face on the journey to, and once in, senior leadership?
- What gender-related career and leadership challenges do women bring to coaching and/or mentoring?
- What conditions make coaching and/or mentoring effective in this specific context?

The full literature review (Appendix 1) was conducted in three parts to reflect the core components of the research question of **how coaching and mentoring enable women to tackle gender-related challenges in their leadership journeys:**

- What challenges do women face in senior leadership, including: what is the evidence for the glass cliff?
- What is coaching and mentoring and what is the evidence on the benefits?
- Is there empirical evidence on how coaching and mentoring support women in senior leadership?

What challenges do women face in senior leadership, including: what is the evidence for the glass cliff?

Women face a variety of challenges en route to, and once in, senior leadership and the research shows that these are changing over time. As female employment and representation in leadership has increased, research has shifted from leadership exclusion to focus on more complex forms of "Second generation gender bias" as opposed to the deliberate and blatant exclusion of women from senior leadership positions. This bias is described in terms of a set of *"subtle, often invisible barriers for women that arise from cultural assumptions and organisational structures, practices, and patterns of interaction that inadvertently benefit men while putting women at a disadvantage"* (Ibarra, Ely and Kolb, 2013, p.6). These barriers include: a lack of role models given the low representation of women in senior leadership, gendered career paths that limit access to the roles required to advance, lack of access to networks, social capital, mentors and sponsors, and *"the 'double-bind' effect which puts women's societal roles (e.g. be nice, nurture others and collaborate) at odds with their organisational and leadership roles (e.g. take charge, be decisive and be assertive)"* (O'Neil, Hopkins and Bilimoria, 2015, p.255; Ibarra, Gipson et al., 2017).

The picture is complex because the many different factors that can affect women's experiences of leadership are context-dependent, inter-connected and dynamic.

Getting to the top, what then?

The Glass Cliff was first explored in research by Ryan and Haslam in 2005 (and reviewed again in 2016) as the phenomenon whereby women who make it to the most senior leadership positions find themselves on a glass cliff in the sense that their roles are relatively more risky or precarious compared with their male counterparts (Ryan et al., 2016). Further studies over time have confirmed the existence of the Glass Cliff as an observable phenomenon (Morgonroth and Kirby, 2020), in which women are more likely to be selected for particularly challenging and precarious leadership positions.

The Glass Cliff is of particular interest because it has the potential to reinforce the stereotypes that plague women leaders ('proving' that they do not have what it takes to lead). It has also been shown that non-prototypical leaders are punished more harshly for failure when in these positions. Women are more likely to be fired from these challenging and highly visible roles which can have a significant effect on their future career options. (Ryan, Haslam, Morgonroth,

Rinkm Stoker and Peters, 2016). There is little empirical evidence to date on the relationship between the Glass Cliff and coaching and mentoring for women.

What is coaching and mentoring and what is the evidence on the benefits?

Executive coaching can be defined as “a helping relationship formed between a client ... and a coach who uses a range of cognitive and behavioural techniques in order to help the client achieve a mutually defined set of goals with the aim of improving his or her professional performance and well-being and the effectiveness of the organisation” (Grant, Curtayne and Burton 2009, p. 396, adapted from Kilberg, 1996). Mentoring, by comparison, “refers to a developmentally orientated interpersonal relationship that is typically between a more experienced individual (the mentor) and a less experienced individual (the protégé)” (Eby, 2010, p. 324).

The benefits of coaching

There is extensive quantitative and qualitative research that coaching has positive effects for individuals across a wide variety of domains, from how they feel about themselves and their abilities through to how well they perform in their roles (Grant, Cavanagh, Passmore and Parker 2010; Grant, Curtayne and Burton 2009; Jones, Woods and Guillaume, 2016; Passmore, 2011; Sonesh et al., 2015). A useful typology of outcomes is provided by Jones et al. (2016) highlighting the affective, cognitive, skills and results-based impacts of coaching. Theeboom highlights how coaching works to improve performance and skills, well-being, coping, work attitudes and goal-directed self-regulation (Theeboom, 2014).

What is the evidence on how coaching and mentoring support women in senior leadership?

Evidence on the impact and benefits of coaching and/or mentoring for senior women – specifically on how coaching and mentoring address gender-related challenges for women on their way to, and in, senior leadership – is limited. Cross-industry research on this topic with women in senior leadership positions is particularly rare. Earlier research is often focused within single organisations or specific cohorts of women (Bonnywell 2017; Hoigaard and Mathisen, 2009; Skinner 2014).

In her insightful study of coaching for women within one organisation, Bonnywell (2017) found that coaching supported their development in various ways. Coaching helped participants achieve change in relation to self (confidence, identity as a leader and self-leadership) and in relationship to others (line manager, conflict, power and personal life). Group coaching also enhanced women’s collective impact within the organisation, including increased confidence from feeling that they are ‘not alone’ and ripple effects from their experience of coaching such as stronger networks (Bonnywell, 2017). Other research highlights how coaching helps senior women with leadership identity formation by enabling authentic leadership in environments dominated by men and male definitions of success (Skinner, 2014).

Formal mentoring has been shown to help female middle managers with their sense of leadership efficacy, job satisfaction and career planning (Hoigaard and Mathisen, 2009). In the literature examining women-only development programmes, coaching is considered to help women leaders process and act on 360-degree feedback (Ely, Ibarra and Kolb, 2011). This is considered important for women because of the conflicting messages this feedback often contains due to second-generation gender bias and the double-bind effect.

Finally, evidence suggests that coaching needs and impacts can vary over time during different phases of women’s careers (O’Neil 2005; O’Neil, Hopkins and Bilimoria, 2015). The three career phases of women identified in the research of “*idealised ambition*” (when women feel

they will face not particular constraints because of their gender), “*pragmatic endurance*” (when the realities of gender barriers hit hard), and “*reinventive contribution*” (when some women find ways to build out new, more meaningful ways to work) may be reflected in the patterns of coaching or mentoring sought, how it is used and what impact it has (O’Neil and Bilimoria 2005). This hypothesis was explored in our analysis of the data.

Method

Context of the Study

This study sought to build on and expand current empirical research published in peer-reviewed journals related to the research question. The literature review informed and shaped the hypotheses and questions to be asked in the interviews.

Participants

The research included semi-structured interviews with women in senior leadership positions, in line with relevant empirical studies. Interviewees were identified through the personal and professional networks of the research team. Eighty-six percent of the interviewees were based in Europe at the time of interviewing, although several had previously had global careers, including in China and Japan. Fourteen percent were from the United States. The sample was evenly split between the private and public/third sector. Three of the interviewees were trained coaches.

Data Collection

Interviews were 30-minute, semi-structured sessions over video-conferencing facilities. A formal interview guide was used by the three researchers when conducting the interviews. The semi-structured interviews were recorded and transcribed verbatim by an online transcribing software without annotations for behaviour (e.g. pausing, laughing, etc).

Data Analysis

Data was analysed using manual double-coding (labelling) by two researchers simultaneously to ensure a robust interpretation of key themes. In a process of abstraction, the codes were grouped and categorised into the main themes. All three researchers conducted a third round of review focused on the process of grouping themes and emerging concepts by addressing how themes were identified to avoid any bias. The final themes are presented in the findings section below. This study sought to build on and expand current empirical research published in peer-reviewed journals related to the research question

Analysis and Results

The key findings of the 22 semi-structured interviews are that:

- Gender-related biases affect the success of women on the way to and in senior leadership and continue to exist across a range of industries, even in organisations and systems where it may look as if the glass ceiling is broken.
- Women felt particularly unsupported and lonely when they took on challenging leadership roles, making these feel more like glass cliffs.
- Coaching and mentoring were an antidote to the loneliness of leadership, providing an essential space for leadership development, self-exploration, identity formation and accountability without judgement.
- A perception of coaching as a remedial intervention persists. Women are not routinely offered it, especially after big promotions, and find themselves having to patch together different forms of support over the course of their careers.

Women's careers are still affected by gender across industries

Nearly all women interviewed experienced gender-related barriers to their success at work. They described a range of "second generation gender bias" (Ibarra, Ely & Kolb, 2013 HBR) that was consistent with the literature, including: the double bind, different performance expectations, being excluded from certain roles, and having to navigate male-dominated leadership cultures.

I have experienced a situation where men and women in the workplace may exhibit similar behaviours and styles, and the men get promoted, and the women don't. That's it.

The "double bind" – needing to deal with conflicting expectations of them as women and as leaders – was particularly prevalent in the examples women gave:

But I remember the first review I ever had with him, he gave me the feedback that I was demanding, and it wasn't a positive piece of feedback.

Women gave stark examples of needing to prove themselves in ways that did not seem necessary for others:

... within the first two or three minutes, he interrupted me, ... he said something like "and what [she] means is this"... so what [he'd] done is tell everybody in the room that really [he was] running the show from over there.

They were judging her by a standard [but] they didn't even bring out that yardstick for the men. ... Women are never quite right. Because we're being measured by a standard that isn't a standard. It's not the standard that was made for us. It's a man's suit that we're being asked to step into. And dammit, it doesn't fit.

They highlighted that performing this balancing act was demanding and exhausting:

It's like that Fred Astaire and Ginger Rogers thing about she did everything Fred Astaire did but backwards with heels on.

Some women experienced the glass ceiling, where they struggled to access senior roles. One woman also described the "sticky floor" as "the things that hold you back all along the way, even at a lower level" which ranged from discrimination to self-censorship: "I can't possibly ask for that ... I don't want to push too hard". As one CEO put it:

But of course, there's a glass ceiling for women. And, of course, that is driven by a combination of just kind of society's inability to ... accept women in leadership roles ...

Even the sense that this barrier was lurking ahead affected women's choices:

I think there was a true unconscious bias against women ... I got to where I never wanted to feel like I was smashed up against the glass ceiling. I was in a good job. I was doing well. So better to leave on my terms than to actually definitely feel myself side-lined.

In some cases, the bias was not subtle or unspoken and the impact of this could be profound:

"Do you think you can still come and do this job, because it's a big job, and you're gonna have a small child?" which was something, frankly, they shouldn't have said, and really knocked my confidence for quite a long time.

It was it was a glass ceiling moment. I remember one of my bosses being like, "Oh you're a feminist, what do you think?". I never wanted to be labelled a female executive, because it made it quite dangerous for me.

He said to me: "You're far too young to be a CEO, and you're far too old to have a baby." ... That was my first day on the job.

The glass ceiling was not necessarily an absolute barrier for women entering senior leadership. Various examples were given of women being channelled into specific kinds of senior roles, especially those that were inward-facing, not strategic for business or already female-dominated. Being excluded from some positions was often seen to be as a result of assumptions about the choices that women would make, for example about mobility or in relation to their partner's job.

They would have been like, "Oh, well, you can't do that anyway, because you can't move with your family", or, "Oh, well, I mean, you wouldn't want that, would you?". Whereas with a man, they wouldn't say to a man, "Well, you don't want to move your family to China, do you?". Or "You don't want to move your family to Dubai." They would have just offered the job and let him go figure it out.

This experience of not even being asked was particularly frustrating for women who were confident they could do the job:

I'll just wake up one morning and some guy has been appointed European head of something. And there was never any suggestion and no one's ever said, "Well, [Sarah], would you like to be European head of something?".

Glass cliffs: women took on particularly challenging senior roles

Beyond the struggle of reaching senior leadership, 50% of women in the study recognised or had experienced the Glass Cliff as described in our literature review. Even if they did not describe this as a "cliff edge", nearly all women spoke about taking on very challenging leadership roles and seeing other women doing the same. These were roles where things were "a mess", "toxic" or "huge" and far too big for one person to handle. Many described being seen as having the skills and abilities for that type of role:

I think it was more just like they thought, "Oh, [she] would actually be quite good at sorting out that problem or dealing with that big difficult change". So, I don't think it was a kind of female thing. I think it was just like, "Oh, actually, she's got the right experience to come in and do this tough thing.

Some women reflected that gender may have played a part in why they were selected for, or indeed why they themselves chose, certain roles. Sometimes this was because they were seen to possess the people skills necessary for leading through difficult changes; being "soft" or "nice to everyone" while also "sorting things out" or being "fixers" (consistent with the "Think Crisis, Think Female" bias (Ryan, et al., 2016). There was also an instinct described to step in to protect others. Women considered that there were gendered assumptions at play here:

Am I taking it over because I think I can handle it better than anyone else in my organisation? Probably. And am I taking it over, because I'm a woman

and I'm, like, designed to protect everybody around me, so I'll pick up all the heat? Probably.

Put the woman at the front and let her voice the message, because it'll come across softer, [but] I always felt like I was the one making the hard calls.

Interestingly, some women described being drawn to and choosing these roles "like a moth to flame".

So, yes. It's a glass cliff, that I was complicit in ... At that time if anyone said, "No, it is probably a bit much, you shouldn't", I would have probably said, "f-off" and "No, I can do that".

Most women in the study did not see themselves as being set up to fail in these roles, but they consistently highlighted the lack of support they received once they were brought in:

I do think women, myself included, sometimes are branded as fixers. And you can come in and clean up messes, and then are not given the right support.

During those three years, I did not feel very well supported ... It was a bit of: "You have a track record of cleaning things up. Go do it." ... I'm sitting here thinking, "This is so fundamentally broken" ... And [I was] really left out there to just make the best of it.

Some exceptions and intersections

A notable minority said that they had not experienced a glass ceiling and even if they had experienced bias, they didn't feel that being a woman had particularly affected their careers. Half of the women in the study did not identify with the Glass Cliff even if they had taken on very challenging leadership roles, since they questioned the idea that they had been "set up to fail". Three women from the public sector identified strong female role models as one driver of their belief that being a woman should not, and would not, hold them back from achieving their career goals. In some ways, just the idea that being a woman could make a difference spurred them on to succeed.

But I genuinely don't think I ever felt really like, I couldn't move to the next level because I was a woman. In fact, I had sort of slightly the opposite feeling in the sense that what always used to drive me to want to do bigger things was always the feeling that if I didn't apply for them, and try and do them, then some less qualified and less capable man would get it instead.

Many of the women interviewed highlighted that even if being a woman had affected their careers, there were also many other factors at play. Intersectionality – the interplay of biases in relation to different characteristics – certainly played a role in the trajectories and experiences of a number of the women we spoke to:

So, I think I come up against a few barriers that intersect. So, there's being a woman, there's being a BME woman, there's being a BME woman from a working-class background. And then there's being ... a very petite woman, as well, which does make a difference. It's hard for me to isolate what the impact is of just one of those things.

The benefits of being a woman; of positive discrimination or just standing out because "people remember you ... you are different ... you're not walking in, in the grey suit and tie" were also recognised by some women in the study.

Despite these bright spots, the overwhelming story for these leaders reinforced the findings in our literature review of continued gender-related barriers to career success for women on the way to and in senior leadership. The encouraging insight was that coaching and mentoring had a positive impact.

Coaching and mentoring helped women reach and thrive in senior leadership, but they primarily had to find it for themselves

All participants had experienced some form of coaching or mentoring that had made a positive difference to their experience and careers. However, 50% said that formal coaching was not offered by their organisations, came at the wrong time, and/or they had look for it themselves. Just 23% had benefited from formal mentoring at some point in their career. Informal support was common in mentoring with 75% benefiting from informal mentoring, compared with 55% saying they received informal coaching. Just under half of respondents talked about having informal peer group coaching.

The benefits women talked about were profound – *"it literally changed my whole life"* - and the impact was long-lasting:

Even to this day, every day, I am applying something that came out of those sessions.

Yet a significant proportion of the women interviewed had not been offered coaching or mentoring by their organisations:

I have to say that I had none. I had no [formal] coaches, no mentors, no support system. And it was extremely painful.

In many cases this seemed to be because coaching and mentoring were seen a remedies for failure or underperformance rather than as a means for developing high potential:

You're really good. You don't need help ... this perception that coaching or mentoring or something formal was almost to suggest you weren't good.

I don't think [formal coaching] was either offered to us or we sought it out for whatever reason, and I wonder whether it is a bit that kind of, we have to look like we've got it all sorted.

The lack of role models also came up as a constraint on access to mentoring.

Given these limitations on what was offered, women had to be proactive, *"taking things into my own hands"*. They did this in a wide range of ways, including through peer groups, ad hoc and informal coaching and mentoring arrangements, and even by funding professional coaches themselves. Informal relationships could develop into profound opportunities for reflection and development:

When you're willing to be vulnerable ... you've got to be fairly sure it's not going to be used against you in any way ... and nobody's judging you ... then you get these incredibly rich conversations, because all of that artifice drops away ... [and the] relationship gets to a much deeper place where you're talking about much more interesting things.

Of particular note, coaching and mentoring was rarely offered after big promotions to challenging roles:

After I was appointed ... I was feeling ... kind of lost. It was quite a lonely position. And I didn't really know how to make it work ... especially when you get to a certain level and you project a certain sense of knowing what you're doing, even if you're crying inside.

Frankly, I don't need a coach to help to make partner. I need a coach once I make partner.

In light of these experiences, women were clear in their advice to other women approaching senior leadership - get coaching and mentoring support as soon as you can:

Be very strategic about coaching and mentoring right from the beginning. Because I think every year that goes by that ... you haven't accessed all those skills and expertise and ways of looking at your career ... you lose potential future opportunity.

Coaching and mentoring were an antidote to the loneliness of leadership experienced by women

Women spoke about feeling isolated as leaders for gender-related reasons and the relationship this had with their coaching and mentoring. They said that this isolation came from needing to prove that they were up to it, being "dutiful" and not asking for help or showing any weakness because that would play to gender stereotypes that women are not competent leaders:

... Do I dare say, "Wait a minute, you're breaking me"? ... The kind of need to show competence and the importance of looking ... highly unflappable, I think. I wonder if there is just this kind of additional pressure for women.

... Women who are trying to function at that level sometimes become their own worst enemies. Because they're so afraid of appearing incompetent, or like they don't know what they're doing, they start to make the mistake of [...] assuming or pretending they have all the answers.

Coaching and mentoring were frequently cited as an antidote to this loneliness of leadership; providing the safe space needed to share and think through these concerns:

The more senior you get, you're much lonelier. You have a peer group, [but] it's not quite the same. And so, you have to be more self-reliant. And a coach helps you do that, because they help you sort of structure your thoughts and structure your thinking: what's going well, what's not going well, what do I need to do?

Across industries, women leaders spoke about coaching and mentoring as providing an unusual opportunity for them to take time out and focus on themselves. Developing this self-leadership was described by one woman as essential to her survival and success, especially in glass cliff roles:

... That analogy that when you're on an aeroplane, they say you put your oxygen mask on first ... You need to take care of yourself first. So, you can take care of other people. And I think if I didn't have people around me, the instinct might be just keep running into the fire. Right? ... And I just would have lost energy, momentum, focus along the way. So, I think that's where the coaching and the mentorship really helped me the most.

This “putting yourself last” tendency was identified by one woman as a function of gender and the many roles she plays:

...[Coaching is] the first time I really have an opportunity to sit down and think about me, and what I want and where I want to go.

Coaching and mentoring helped women form their identities as leaders and increased their self-efficacy

Most women talked about how coaching and mentoring had helped them form their identity as leaders, reflecting on their strengths, personal style, what kind of leader they wanted to be and their brand. This finding extends and strengthens the published evidence found in the literature review on the specific benefits of coaching for women leaders (Bonnywell 2017; Skinner 2014). This was captured vividly by one woman who talked about coaching and mentoring having “*altered bits of my DNA*”. The emphasis was not on learning new leadership skills or pursuing a specific goal but developing your sense of yourself as a leader and “*grounding [yourself] at an identity level*” and getting beyond the male success stereotype (Gipson et al. 2017):

... Don't be girly, don't be maternal. You know, don't be little sister, or big sister ... but actually show up as a woman leader with legitimacy and own your space.

Part of this exploration involved what women often described as the coach or mentor “holding up a mirror to them” which changed their perspective and understanding of what was happening, and, of who they were. Seventy-seven percent of women described the benefit of coaching in this way:

It really took some accountability, in order to get me to make these shifts, and actually people daring to put a mirror to me, or also put a flashlight in the blind spot.

So, this process of seeing yourself in the mirror ... you're recognising the problem, and then you're working around it, rather than just creating this double persona sometimes where you've got to act in front of your subordinates.

My coach just really pushed me on everything that I said, and made me kind of think it through quite deeply. And I found that incredibly useful.

Some women commented that this “reflecting back” helped them because it took the form of accountability without judgement. The benefit of accountability is evident in the literature (Grant, Curtayne and Burton 2009). Our interviews highlighted not just the role of accountability but also the importance of the accountability being supportive and kind:

And he was more challenging of me, and in a supportive way, but it's what I needed to really push myself into the next sphere, which was, you know, running an organisation.

And I would say she played an important role in gently but quite firmly holding up a mirror, and sort of making me face some very uncomfortable things.

And he really challenged me and held me to account on that ... It was very highly accountable but no judgement at all.

These shifts in self-concept helped women thrive in challenging roles, particularly in relation to letting go of being perfect and pleasing others:

It makes you think about how you're going to do the job without sort of driving yourself into the ground by trying to ... be conscientious and do everything.

Unsurprisingly, the most commonly-cited benefit of this process of identity formation was the development of a stronger sense of self-efficacy, described by many women as “increased confidence”:

Coaching itself has been supportive, because it's people believing in me, people believing in my role, giving me the confidence that I can step up, do things that seem scary.

Hence, the most frequent advice that women gave for the next generation was “be confident” and “get coaching support”.

There was no “one-size-fits-all” approach in the kinds of coaching and mentoring that supported these women on their leadership journeys.

Different kinds of coaching and mentoring proved flexible enough to meet a wide range of changing needs over time:

I have deliberately picked different types of mentors, depending on what I think I need advice on. So, when I came back from my first [child] or when my kids were very small, I had a mentor who was a very successful female with kids a bit older than mine.

What women valued did not fall neatly into specific categories of “questions vs advice” or “internal vs external”. Instead, they described all sorts of shifting combinations that they used in different ways over time. Women were clear that sometimes internal coaching was exactly what they were looking for, but at other times, they would seek out an external perspective.

Women were resourceful in finding the support they needed to reach, survive and thrive in senior leadership. Coaching and mentoring helped them break glass ceilings and negotiate glass cliffs:

If you're the only one doing it, then you're definitely on your glass cliff. But actually, if there's a group of you doing it, that cliffs starts to level out into, you know, more of a broad sunny upland.

Discussion

This research provides practical implications for organisations seeking to support the development and success of women leaders. This includes those commissioning and facilitating access to coaching and mentoring, as well as those providing these services.

Key implications highlighted from the research include:

- Organisational leaders need to acknowledge that gender-related biases still exist even in organisations and systems where, on the surface, it may appear as though the glass ceiling or cliff are no longer issues. Gender should remain a focus in DEIB strategies. Organisational leadership would benefit from gathering data via internal or commissioned research to explore the current reality of women’s workplace experiences in their organisations.

- Special consideration needs to be given to the coaching and mentoring on offer to women after major promotions, as opposed to only beforehand, and in situations where they are asked to step into particularly difficult roles.
- Performance and talent management conversations can do much to highlight that coaching and mentoring are not remedies for failure, but an essential tool for development.
- The different kinds of coaching and mentoring provided to women leaders in organisations should be regularly reviewed to ensure that a broad spectrum of options is on offer.
- Women should be asked what they need. It is important for those who commission coaching and mentoring to avoid making assumptions about this.
- Providers also have a role in diversifying their coaching offerings and adapting to client needs over time.

Limitations and Future Research

The findings are about both recent experiences of senior women and their challenges, and are partly backward-looking about the coaching and mentoring they did (or didn't) receive on their leadership journey to this point. As such, we cannot necessarily extrapolate that opportunities for coaching and mentoring remain the same now as they were when these women were progressing to senior leadership. Participants are current senior leaders and shared present-day challenges about being a woman in senior leadership, and spoke of their coaching and mentoring – both past and present. Future research could explore the current experiences of women working towards senior leadership not just those already in it.

Intersectionality of different characteristics and how that played out for women in leadership could not be explored due to limitations of the sample size and diversity.

Future research could involve wider participant numbers in order to capture greater diversity (e.g., geography, characteristics of participants). An important consideration for future research is to explore women's experiences of intersectional biases. This would enable consideration of key characteristics and intersecting biases that may affect the role of coaching and mentoring in women's progress and success in senior leadership. In addition, research on how coaching and mentoring enable all leaders, not just women, to create inclusive workplaces would be of interest.

Conclusion

Despite important developments to tackle challenges and biases that women face in reaching, and succeeding in, senior leadership roles, this research highlights the ensuring need to support women across industries, particularly with obstacles such as gender-related leadership loneliness, the glass cliff and second-generation gender bias. The findings support previous empirical work that coaching and mentoring have a positive impact on leadership journeys. This study specifically showcases that for women across industries, there is a recognition of the importance of various forms of coaching and mentoring opportunities not only on the way to, but once in, senior leadership positions. There is no one-size-fits-all approach: a very wide range of coaching and mentoring help women reach, survive, and thrive in, senior leadership roles.

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Notes

For the purposes of this study the term is 'woman' is used to describe all people interviewed. The authors recognise and appreciate that a range of gender identities exist. Binary distinctions between 'women' and 'men' are made here where these are the direct quotes of the women interviewed or by researchers in the empirical literature.

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Appendix 1

Literature Review: Through The Looking Glass: How coaching and mentoring enable women to tackle gender-related challenges in their leadership journeys

Overview

This literature review is conducted in three parts to reflect the core components of the research question of **how coaching and mentoring enable women to tackle gender-related challenges in their leadership journeys:**

- A.1 What challenges do women face in senior leadership – what is the evidence for the glass cliff and the glass ceiling?
- A.2 What is coaching and mentoring and what is the evidence on the benefits?
- A.3 What is the evidence on how coaching and mentoring support women in senior leadership?

A.1 What challenges do women face in senior leadership levels – what is the evidence for the glass cliff and the glass ceiling?

Women face a variety of challenges en route to, and once in, senior leadership and the research shows that these are changing over time. These include: a lack of role models given low representation of women in senior leadership, gendered career paths which limit access to the roles required to advance, lack of access to networks, social capital, mentors and sponsors and “*the 'double-bind' effect which puts women’s societal roles (e.g. be nice, nurture others and collaborate) at odds with their organisational and leadership roles (e.g. take charge, be decisive and be assertive)*” (O’Neil, Hopkins and Bilimoria, 2015, p.255; Gipson et al., 2017).

The picture is complex, in the sense that the many different factors that can affect women’s experiences of leadership are context-dependent, inter-connected and dynamic. Challenges do not fit neatly into different categories – for example how women engage in networking and build social capital is imbued with how they navigate stereotypes and deal with structural imbalances in their caring responsibilities. As such we use headings to sign-post through the issues while acknowledging these interdependencies and overlaps.

A.1.1 How women choose to lead (or not)

It is sometimes argued that the slow progress on equality in leadership is because women are voluntarily ‘opting out’ of the most senior leadership roles because of the increasingly unreasonable expectations and pressures of these jobs. This opting out story is not strongly supported in the research, which shows, for example that regardless of gender, people in similar roles are equally committed to their careers and desire to lead. (Eagly and Carli, 2007)

A.1.2 Discrimination, stereotypes and biased expectations

“Women are subject to more scrutiny, held to higher performance standards, have less opportunity to develop their leadership capital throughout life and face more challenges to their leadership and authority than men.” (O’Neil, Hopkins and Bilimoria, 2015, p. 256; Eagly and Carli, 2007).

Over the course of their careers, women receive less support and development to lead and there is clear selection bias towards men “*the preference for male leadership has been demonstrated time and again*” (Gipson et al., 2017, p. 55). As female employment and representation in leadership has increased, research has shifted from leadership exclusion to

focus on more complex forms of “Second generation gender bias” as opposed to the deliberate and blatant exclusion of women from senior leadership positions. This bias is described in terms of a set of *“subtle, often invisible barriers for women that arise from cultural assumptions and organisational structures, practices, and patterns of interaction that inadvertently benefit men while putting women at a disadvantage”* (Ibarra, Ely and Kolb, 2013, p.6). It is this quality of ‘invisibility’ - perhaps also of the risk of wounding yourself in the act of breaking - that has stimulated the numerous “glass” metaphors (ceiling, cliff, labyrinth) found in the research and public debate on women’s leadership.

Discrimination does not only reside in individuals, in their judgements, expectations and decisions but can also be constituted in the systems, process and very fabric of organisational life (Eddo-Lodge, 2017). A masculine work culture where social capital is built in often segregated networks, can exclude women from opportunities to build relationships that advance their careers. (Eagly and Carli, 2007). Networking with peers, seniors and mentors is critical to both professional growth and navigating unwritten organisational rules and yet women are less likely to do it or to seek advancement through it (Helgesen and Goldsmith, 2019).

A.1.3 Family responsibilities

Global data consistently show that men and women do not share the burden of domestic work equally. Given this, the persistence of an organisational model that demands the separation of career and family life means that women are consistently put in a position of tension between these two core sets of responsibilities. The lack of integration of work and family at an organisational or societal level means that the burden and conflict inherent in attempting integration falls to women themselves. (O’Neil, Hopkins and Bilimoria, 2015).

A.1.4 Getting to the top, what then?

The Glass Cliff was first explored in research by Ryan and Haslam in 2005 (and reviewed again in 2016) as the phenomenon whereby women who make it to the most senior leadership positions find themselves on a glass cliff in the sense that their roles are relatively more risky or precarious compared to their male counterparts (Ryan et al., 2016). The initial study was done in response to an article in the Times in 2003 which asserted that women reaching Board level in the UK had *“wreaked havoc on companies’ performance”*.

Further studies over time have confirmed the existence of the Glass Cliff as an observable phenomenon (Morgonroth and Kirby, 2020) in which women are more likely to be selected for particularly challenging and precarious leadership positions.

A meta-analysis of leadership selection studies found that *“women are more likely to be selected than men in times of crisis, and that this effect is larger in countries with higher gender inequality”* (Morgonroth & Kirby, 2020, p.3). The glass cliff is not exclusive to women, extending also to minoritised racial and ethnic groups. (Morgonroth & Kirby, 2020; Ryan, Haslam, Morgenroth, Rinkm Stoker and Peters, 2016).

Three main potential drivers of the Glass Cliff effect have been identified – the need to signal change in difficult times by appointing a very visibly different leader, the persistence of gender stereotypes and biases which see women as bringing particular skills and abilities to lead through crisis (the “Think Crisis, Think Female” response) and the more sinister explanation of setting up women to fail in order to protect a status quo of male-dominated leadership (Ryan et al., 2016).

The Glass Cliff is of particular interest because it has the potential to reinforce the stereotypes that plague women leaders (proving that they do not have what it takes to lead). It has also been shown that non-prototypical leaders are punished more harshly for failure when in these positions. Women are more likely to be fired from these challenging and highly visible roles

which can have a significant effect on their future career options. (Ryan, Haslam, Morgenroth, Rinkm Stoker and Peters, 2016).

A.1.5 What helps?

Much of the research on the challenges women face identifies the need for coaching and mentorship to support women, including through women-only development programmes (Fitzimmons, 2014; O'Neil, Hopkins and Bilimoria, 2008; Vinnicombe and Singh, 2003). Before examining the evidence on coaching for women we first explore, in the next section, the foundations on what coaching and mentoring are and the impact they have.

A.2 What is coaching and mentoring and what is the evidence on the benefits?

Executive coaching can be defined as *"a helping relationship formed between a client ... and a coach who uses a range of cognitive and behavioural techniques in order to help the client achieve a mutually defined set of goals with the aim of improving his or her professional performance and well-being and the effectiveness of the organisation"* (Grant, Curtayne and Burton 2009, p. 396, adapted from Kilberg, 1996). Mentoring by comparison *"refers to a developmentally orientated interpersonal relationship that is typically between a more experienced individual (the mentor) and a less experienced individual (the protégé)"* (Eby, 2010, p. 324)

A.2.1 The benefits of coaching

There is extensive quantitative and qualitative research that coaching has positive effects for individuals across a wide variety of domains, from how they feel about themselves and their abilities through to how well they perform in their roles (Passmore, 2011; Theeboom, 2014; Grant, Curtayne and Burton 2009; Grant, Cavanagh, Passmore and Parker 2010; Jones, Woods and Guillaume, 2016; Sonesh et al., 2015). A useful typology of outcomes is provided by Jones et al. (2016) as follows:

- Affective outcomes (attitudes and motivations e.g., self-efficacy and well being)
- Cognitive outcomes (knowledge and cognitive strategies e.g., problem-solving)
- Skills/based outcomes (compilation and automaticity of new skills e.g., leadership skills or technical competencies)
- Results (individual, team or organisational performance).

Theeboom's overview of 18 studies of the effects of coaching on individual outcomes in an organisational context demonstrates that professional coaching works to improve self-reported outcomes in performance and skills, well-being, coping, work attitudes and goal-directed self-regulation (Theeboom, 2014). This analysis highlights relationship-to-self benefits including self-awareness, self-insight, self-acceptance, self-reflection, self-confidence and self-efficacy. Other studies highlight that coaching can help leaders feel better able to deal with organisational change or stress (Grant, Curtayne and Burton, 2009).

A.2.2 Measuring impact

The full impact of coaching or mentoring is difficult to measure given a focus on self-reported outcomes, and the impact may not be visible since effects over time and spill-over benefits for others in the organisation are difficult to ascertain and therefore tend to be out of scope of the research (Theeboom 2014; Grant, Cavanagh, Passmore and Parker, 2010; Sonesh et al., 2015). Researchers are attempting to address such challenges. A recent study of coaching for emerging leaders (students) found large and statistically significant benefits of coaching that was coupled with evidence that went beyond self-reports by coach or coachee to include observations from knowledgeable acquaintances, who noted growth in outcomes of self-confidence and self-awareness (Brown, Varghese, Sllivana and Parsons, 2021). A longitudinal field experiment with 193 cadets experiencing a six-month mentorship programme increased

levels of leader efficacy, which was then a predictor of leader performance ratings (Lester, Hannah, Harms, Vogelgesang and Avolio, 2011).

A.2.3 What works?

The number of coaching sessions received is not necessarily correlated with the effects of coaching (Jones, Woods and Guillaume, 2016; Sonesh et al., 2015). Whether coaching is done face-to-face or blended with virtual methods has not been found to affect the outcomes (Jones, Woods and Guillaume, 2016).

An analysis of 117 empirical studies of workplace coaching ("*formal one-to-one coaching by coach practitioners in an organisational setting*") identified seven factors that determine coaching effectiveness: self-efficacy, coaching motivation, goal orientation, trust, interpersonal attraction, feedback intervention and supervisory support. Many of these factors are inter-related and can be both drivers and outcomes of effective coaching (Bozer and Jones, 2018).

The skills and experience of the coach are an obvious factor in the effectiveness of coaching (Passmore, 2011). Grant et al.'s (2010) overview of coaching provides an insight into the range of reported competencies and experiences of effective coaches, including: empathy-building, listening, credibility and self-confidence, authenticity and integrity, personal career experience, boundary-setting, confidentiality, and flexibility to meet needs. This wide range of competencies is reflected in the professional frameworks of the leading professional bodies (EMCC and ICF) and the qualification and accreditation systems that underpin the development and quality assurance ecosystems for coaching and mentoring.

A.3 What is the evidence on how coaching and mentoring support women in senior leadership?

Evidence on the impact and benefits of coaching and/or mentoring for senior women is much more limited than the research base on the benefits of coaching in general as outlined above. Studies are useful although often focused within single organisations or specific cohorts of women (Bonnywell, 2017; Skinner, 2014; Hoigaard and Mathisen, 2009).

In her study of individual and group coaching for women within one organisation, Bonnywell found that coaching supported their development in various ways. Coaching for women on this programme designed to increase female representation in senior positions helped participants achieve change in relation to self (confidence, identity as a leader and self-leadership) and in relationship to others (line manager, conflict, power and personal life), (Bonnywell, 2017). Group coaching also enhanced women's collective impact within the organisation, including increased confidence from feeling that they are 'not alone' and ripple effects from their experience of coaching such as stronger networks (Bonnywell, 2017).

Skinner highlights how executive coaching helps senior women with leadership identity formation by enabling authentic leadership in environments dominated by men and the male definitions of success (Skinner, 2014).

Published, peer-reviewed research on the impact of mentoring for women appears to be even more limited than that related to coaching. Formal mentoring has been shown to help female middle managers with their sense of leadership efficacy, job satisfaction and career planning (Hoigaard and Mathisen, 2009). Mentor communication skills (listening, coaching and taking a structured approach) mattered most in the impact of the mentoring.

There is more literature on approaches to women's leadership development in general, including but not limited to coaching and mentoring. In this context it is suggested that coaching women in or working towards senior leadership positions needs to be tailored to the

specific leadership challenges they face considering their gender (O’Neil, Hopkins and Bilimoria, 2015) and that women-only development programmes help because they respond to gendered experiences of leadership identity formation (Ely, Ibarra and Kolb, 2011). Evidence suggests that an awareness of the context may also enable coaches to “call out” when the experiences and issues brought to the coaching may be functions of the system rather than being the woman’s problem (Ruderman and Ohiott, 2005).

In the literature discussing women-only development programmes, coaching is considered to help women leaders process and act on 360-degree feedback. This is considered important for women because of the conflicting messages this feedback often contains due to second-generation gender bias and the double-bind effect. Women can share their experience and confusing feedback with others in the same position as them to help make sense of mixed messages (such as “be more assertive” alongside “don’t have such sharp elbows”) (Ely, Ibarra and Kolb, 2011). These researchers framing of successful leadership transition and practice as a process of identity construction flags that women-only programmes provide a valuable holding environment for reflection and sense-making that aids identity formation. This may be particularly true of the coaching and/or mentoring relationships that women use to explore and make sense of their experiences – a space in which their concerns are listened to (or held) with respect and in which they can examine what is going on rather than simply being subject to it.

This research also highlights the mechanisms by which leaders flourish and what can bring them down – where focusing on purpose as opposed to focusing on what others think of us drives more effective leadership behaviours (Ely, Ibarra, and Kolb, 2011). This may provide insight as to why coaching and mentoring are valuable for senior women. Given the goal-oriented nature of coaching conversations, it may be that coaching enables women to identify and/or re-connect with their wider leadership purpose rather than being distracted into acts of impression management that reduce leadership effectiveness.

Finally, evidence suggests that coaching needs and impact can vary over time during different phases of women’s careers (O’Neil, 2005; O’Neil, Hopkins and Bilimoria, 2015). The three career phases of women identified in the research describe how women become increasingly aware and increasingly frustrated by gender-related barriers to their success (O’Neil and Bilimoria, 2005). These shifts in how women make sense of their experience may shape what kind of coaching and mentoring they seek and how this changes over the course of their careers.