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Corporate Competencies for Executive Women in Alberta; Oh, The Places You'll Go!

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Corporate Competencies for Executive Women in Alberta:
Oh, the Places You'll Go!

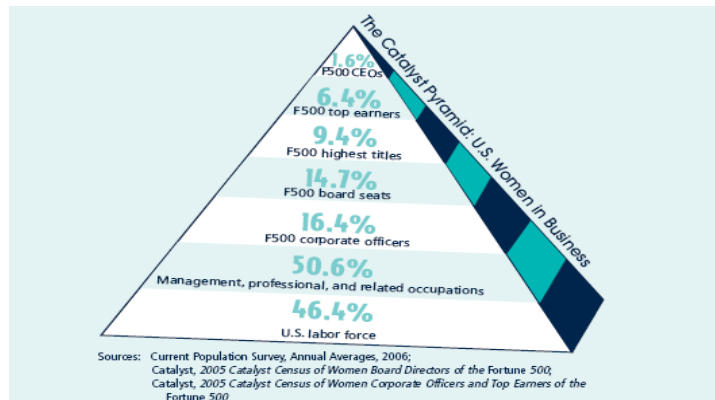Out there things can happen and frequently do to people as brainy and footsy as you.
~Dr. Seuss. (1990). *Oh, The Places You'll Go!*

Introduction

Several decades of workplace equity and diversity initiatives, driven by socio-political reforms, have resulted in workplaces that trumpet gender equity as a key organizational value. There is growing concern, however, that a single-minded focus on gender distribution of roles and the assumptions that appear to drive demographic trends, has—albeit with the best of intentions—distracted researchers from studying how female executives succeed (Adler, 1997). Applebaum, Audent, and Miller (2002) note that much of the contemporary literature "conceptualizes a feminine style of leadership that is singularly different than its male counterpart" (p. 48): Vikinas (2000) posits that the differences in effectiveness are negligible. Other studies (Regine & Lewin, 2003; Applebaum, Audent, & Miller, 2002) project that, because women are typically more relational than men, they are poised to become significant leaders in the 21st Century.

Are women truly poised to attain new levels of success in the new millennium or are they on the precipice of more rhetoric-fueled disappointment? Duffey et al (2006) found that, despite ample research examining male and female leadership styles, there is a paucity of research with respect to what specifically contributes to success for female business leaders (p. 553). The popular media, replete with articles about the scant numbers of women in the C-suites of Canada, the United States, and virtually every country in the world, appear to support academic findings. A GOOGLE search with the terms <"where are the women" + executives> yielded 9,730 hits on June 15, 2008. A scan of the headings of that day anecdotally confirmed that a dearth of female executives pervades virtually every sector of the business world.

Just how prevailing is the dearth? Despite studies that indicate that men and women leaders are "equally effective, while peer and direct assessment rate women as slightly higher than men" (Applebaum, Audent, & Miller, 2002), women hold only 16.4% of corporate officer positions in the United States (Catalyst, 2006). Figure 1 illustrates the division of roles assigned to women in business in the United States.

FIGURE 1 The 2005 Catalyst Pyramid: U.S. Women in Business

The Catalyst Pyramid: U.S. Women in Business

- 1.6% F500 CEOs
- 6.4% F500 top earners
- 9.4% F500 highest titles
- 14.7% F500 board seats
- 16.4% F500 corporate officers
- 50.6% Management, professional, and related occupations
- 46.4% U.S. labor force

Sources: Current Population Survey, Annual Averages, 2006;
Catalyst, *2005 Catalyst Census of Women Board Directors of the Fortune 500*;
Catalyst, *2005 Catalyst Census of Women Corporate Officers and Top Earners of the Fortune 500*

SOURCE:
Catalyst. (2006). *2005 Catalyst census of women corporate officers and top earners of the fortune 500*. Retrieved June 10, 2008, from http://www.heidrick.com/NR/rdonlyres/6325D623-238C-41CD-9E59-E80791BDE7BA/0/CTLYST_2005WCOTECensus.pdf (p. 36).

The percentages are no less dismal in Canada. According to the 2004 Catalyst Census of Women Corporate officers and Top Earners in Canada, women held only 14.4 % of corporate officer positions (*Catalyst*, 2006, p. 98). Figure 2 illustrates the division of roles assigned to women in business in Canada.

FIGURE 2 The 2004 Catalyst Pyramid: Canadian Women in Business

The Catalyst Pyramid: Canadian Women in Business, 2002

- 13 FP500 Heads
- 3.9% FP500 top earners
- 6.7% FP500 highest titles
- 9.8% FP500 board directors
- 14.0% FP500 corporate officers
- 34.9% Management occupations
- 46.0% Canadian labour force
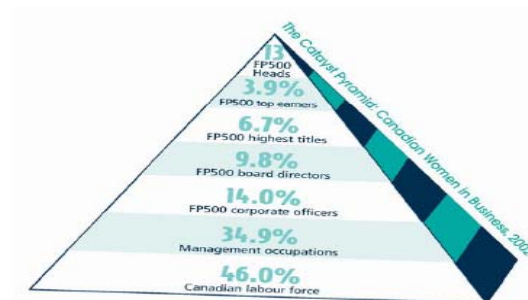
SOURCE:
Catalyst. (2005). 2004 Catalyst Census of Women Corporate Officers of Canada. Retrieved June 10, 2008, from http://www.catalystwomen.org/files/fact/2002%20Canadian%20COTE%20Fact%20Sheet.pdf

The future does not bode well for aspiring Canadian female executives: at the current almost imperceptible rate of change, the number of women reaching the top ranks in corporate Canada will not reach a critical mass of 25% until the year 2025 and will not reach 50% until 2043 (Catalyst, 2003, p. 8). Frankly, for women who grew up in an era that proclaimed—if not promised—that they could be anything they wanted to be, these projections are disquieting. And so, I was led to ask, with apologies to Dr. Seuss: Just what does—or doesn't—happen to "brainy and footsy" female Albertans on their way to the corporate executive suites of their province?

Purpose of the Study

This study sought to develop consensus opinion on the core competencies required to succeed as a female executive in Alberta. The study was prompted by the significant under-representation of women in Canadian corporate executive positions and by the U of X's interest in determining whether a market exists for an executive education program designed specifically for women.

Research Question and Sub Questions

This study addressed the following research question: What competencies are required to be a successful female executive in Alberta?

To inform the main research question, the study addressed the following sub-questions:

1. What competencies do successful female executives demonstrate?
2. What challenges do female executives face in the new millennium?
3. How do these challenges exemplify the value of acquiring the identified competencies?
4. Is there a training gap for executive or would-be executives in Alberta?
5. Would a U of X executive leadership course, designed specifically for Alberta women, help to address the perceived gaps?

Definition of Key Terms

For the purposes of maximizing the reliability of participant responses, it was critical that the key terms in the study were clearly defined and, insofar as is possible, universally understood. The following terms are defined in numerous ways in both the popular press and academic literature; however, for the purposes of this study, the key terms were operationally defined as follows:

C-Suite   highest level corporate executive offices

Challenge   a demanding situation that may or may not be classified as typical

Competency   the set of skills and attitudes, described in terms of behaviours, which can be observed and which is essential for effective or superior corporate executive performance

Executive   a person whose assignments require primary (and major) responsibility for managing the operations and the sustainability of a corporation

Success(ful)   Reaching a relatively high level in one's profession

The Literature Review

Introduction

My review of the leadership literature on women yielded copious information on feminine styles of leadership, the barriers that female leaders face, and the organizational/societal changes that must occur to facilitate the shattering of the proverbial glass ceiling; however, there appears to be limited literature about the core corporate competencies required for women to succeed at the executive level. Competencies are only alluded to by way of discussions about the values and qualities that female executives typically bring to the corporate world and by way of arbitrary comparisons of the male/female leadership behaviours and dynamics.

The literature review explored the current operational context of executive leadership and the impact of gender on the quest for executive leadership.

Limitations and Assumptions

I limited the literature review to peer reviewed articles and documents published from 2000 to the present. My assumption was that current circumstances would be more likely to be reflected in the recent literature. My primary focus was the Canadian context, so the literature that reflected the Canadian context, although limited, was of critical interest.

The purpose of the review was not to determine a preferred style of leadership. The purpose was to review the extant literature on the ways in which women lead and the barriers they face on the "road" to and in the offices of the C-suite. The insights gained from the literature review informed the questions I posed in the first iteration of the Delphi Survey.

Findings

Figure 3 summarizes the themes investigated in the literature review and indicates the associated primary references. There is overlap in the literature; however, for the purpose of this summary, only those references that investigated each theme in significant detail are listed beside each theme.

FIGURE 3   Leadership Themes Investigated in the Literature

LEADERSHIP THEMES INVESTIGATED	PRIMARY REFERENCES INVESTIGATING DESIGNATED THEME	
Limitations of literature methodologies	Stelter (2008) Duffey, Fox, Punnett & Gregory *et al* (2006),	Maloney (2003) Billing & Alvesson (2000)
Reasons for limited access to executive leadership	Christman & McClelland (2008) Stelter (2008) Catalyst (2007) Eagly & Carli (2007) Weyer (2007)	Greenburg & Sweeney (2005); Billing & Alvesson (2000) Hatcher (2000)
Feminine styles of leadership	Stelter (2008) Weyer (2007) Oakley (2000)	Olsson (2000) Billing & Alvesson (2000)
The female advantage perspective	Applebaum, Audet & Miller (2003) Regine & Lewin (2003)	Hatcher (2000);
Leadership barriers for women	Christman & McClelland (2008) Stelter (2008) Catalyst (2007) Eagly & Carli (2007) Jacobs (2007) Weyer (2007)	Catalyst (2006) Applebaum, Audet & Miller (2003) Domeisen (2003) Ohlott, Bhandry & Tavares (2003) Oakley (2000) Vikinas (2000)
Leadership metaphors	Stelter (2008) Eagly & Carli (2007) Jacobs (2007) Maloney (2003)	Hatcher (2000) Oakley (2000) Olsson (2000);
Leadership vocabulary	Stelter (2008) Applebaum, Audet & Miller (2003)	Billing & Alvesson (2000); Hatcher (2000)
Beyond gender differences	Christman & McClelland (2008)	Billing & Alvesson (2000);
Importance of hearing the female voice in leadership	Christman & McClelland (2008) Trinidad & Normore (2008) Greenburg & Sweeney (2005)	Oakley (2000) Olsson (2000);
Future implications for women aspiring to leadership	Christman & McClelland (2008) Stelter (2008) Trinidad & Normore (2008) Jacobs (2007) Weyer (2007)	Maloney (2003) Regine & Lewin (2003) Wood (2003) Oakley (2000);

The literature points to significant limitations with respect to study methodologies. Stelter (2008) and Duffey et al (2006) report that too often female leaders are operationalized as a homogenous group. Billing and Alvesson (2000) caution that "the review literature is rather general" and that "no distinctions are made between groups of women or historical and culturally different settings" (p. 148). Duffey *et al* (2006) propose that sampling methods need to be developed that are "appropriate and practical for each

location" (p. 567). The implications for future research are profound: do regional, ethnic, professional experience, terms of service, age, and other variables impact access to C-suite positions? Do the narratives of executive women speak to similar themes in spite of these variables? Since I found no study that spoke exclusively to the Canadian female executive experience and context, my study of female Albertan executives may help to reduce the paucity of information in this knowledge area.

Unpacking Limited Access

While the extant limited access to C-suite positions is inarguable, the reasons for the limitations are hotly debated. The literature identifies several theoretical assumptions that trigger and sustain numerous barriers to access to C-suite positions for aspiring female executives: biological assumptions, sociological assumptions, structural/cultural assumptions, and line experience assumptions. While gender differences in leadership styles and perceptions of leaders can be accounted for using various theoretical frameworks, it is likely that these assumptions work in a complex interdependency that is not easily unpacked. These assumptions informed the questions that were asked of the participants in the first round of the Delphi survey.

Biological Assumptions

The biological assumption rests on the notion that men and women are, to put it simply, different. They are built differently; they think differently; they behave differently. The basic premise under this assumption is that "leadership is biologically determined" (Applebaum, Audet & Miller, 2003, p. 44). Studies that operate from this theoretical framework investigate the deficiencies of female leadership. They imply that acquiring male leadership values, qualities, and skills are necessary to succeed in leadership.

Sociological Assumptions

Despite sweeping socio-political changes in the last forty years, significant sociological assumptions continue to deter, if not prevent, success for females in the executive echelons of business (Eagly & Carli, 2007; Weyer, 2007; Duffey et al, 2006). Studies that operate from the sociological theoretical framework investigate the sociological drivers for leadership and provide evidence that significant social change is necessary to facilitate female leadership success. Aspiring female leaders may be forgiven, however, for asking the question, "Now what?"—this sociological framework leaves little hope, much less direction, for women aspiring to leadership positions.

Structural/Cultural Assumptions

Some researchers argue that masculinity and femininity are culturally rather than sociologically or biologically defined (Stelter, 2008; Billing & Alvesson, 2000; Oakley, 2000). Arguing from a feminist mode of inquiry, Billing and Alvesson (2000) propose that structural and cultural assumptions "reproduce global inequalities" (p. 145). Studies that operate from this theoretical framework investigate the organizational and cultural drivers of leadership. Within this framework, women are typically expected to "cultivate more masculine methods" to fit an organizationally or culturally predefined male leadership model (Christman & McClelland, 2008, p. 20).

Line Experience Assumptions

Many would-be female executives are caught in the "experience wanted" trap: line experience is valued but all too often not made available to female managers aspiring to executive status (Weyer, 2007). Eagly and Carli (2007) and Oakley (2000) posit that the "scarcity of female corporate officers is the sum of discrimination that has operated at all ranks" (p. 65). The implication for future research is that there may be some value to investigating the regional experiences of female executives to assess the extent to which line experience facilitates, or conversely lack of line experience impedes, professional advancement.

Defining a Feminine Style of Leadership

The question, "Does a feminine style of leadership exist?" may be moot in the new millennium. There is increasing evidence that an androgynous style of leadership is emerging as a pragmatic style of leadership for the new millennium (Jacobs 2007; Stelter, 2008). This trend is examined in more detail in the section of the review entitled, "Rejecting binary gender norms".

Currently, however, gender perceptions about leadership styles persist (Billing and Alvesson, 2000; Oakley, 2000; Olsson, 2000; Stelter, 2008; Weyer, 2007). Gender specific leadership labels abound; but in general terms, female leadership style tends to be transformational while male leadership style tends to be transactional (Billing & Alvesson, 2000; Oakley, 2000; Olsson, 2000; Stelter, 2008; Weyer, 2007).

The literature supports the following inventory of female leadership qualities: 1. openness, 2.flexibility, 3. empathy, 4.relational strengths, 5.inclusiveness, and 6. a preference for collaboration. Greenburg and Sweeney (2005) note that male leaders can also be exceptional in demonstrating these qualities (p. 34) but their findings indicate that women outperform men in their ability to incorporate these qualities into their leadership style. Of relevance to the research question driving this review, "What core corporate

competencies are required to succeed as a female executive in Alberta?", Greenburg and Sweeney (2005) explicitly—although briefly—indicate that these qualities can be "identified and developed" (p. 34). Further research is required to identify the competencies banked under these qualities.

Exploring the Female Advantage Perspective.

Some theorists suggest that the female advantage perspective is beginning to mitigate the barriers to female leadership (Applebaum, Audet, & Miller, 2003; Hatcher 2000; Regine & Lewin, 2003). This line of discourse claims that traditional masculine styles of leadership are being discarded and that new millennial models "synchronous with feminine ways are becoming desirable" (Hatcher, 2000, p. 398). This emerging new millennial model has significant implications for further research, specifically for a study on leadership competencies. If a feminine leadership dynamic is synergizing with traditional leadership models, the implication is that feminine qualities, values, and skills—cumulatively defined as competencies—can be identified and learned.

Deconstructing Leadership Barriers

There appears to be unanimity in both the academic and applied literature acknowledging that significant barriers exist for women pursuing C-suite leadership positions (Catalyst, 2007; Christman & McClelland, 2008; Eagley & Carli 2007; Stelter, 2008; Weyer 2007). Figure 4 outlines the barriers to female leadership as identified by Catalyst (2006):

FIGURE 4   Barriers to female leadership

With this level of representation at work, why are only 16.4 percent of corporate officers women?
- ◆ Catalyst research suggests that many stereotypes hold women back from top positions.[24] Common stereotypic perceptions include:
    - ❏ Women lack ambition.
    - ❏ Women don't have the right work experience.
    - ❏ Women don't have the leadership skills.
    - ❏ Women don't have the problem-solving skills.
    - ❏ Women won't make the necessary sacrifices.

- ◆ Other barriers Catalyst research shows contributing to women's slow advancement include:[25]
    - ❏ Lack of access to informal networks
    - ❏ Lack of mentors
    - ❏ Lack of access to influential colleagues
    - ❏ Lack of role models
    - ❏ Lack of stretch assignments
    - ❏ Limited flexible work arrangements

SOURCE:
Catalyst (2007). *The double-bind dilemma for women in leadership: Damned if you do, doomed if you don't.* Retrieved June 10, 2008, from http://www.catalyst.org/files/full/2007%20Double%20Bind.pdf (p. 12)

However, female entrepreneurs are the fastest growing sector in both Canada and the U.S; in Canada, their numbers have increased an astounding 200% in the past twenty years (Domeisen, 2003, p. 11). The growth in female entrepreneurship may indicate that the first set of barriers is flawed. An absence of ambition, leadership propensity and skills, and experience would hardly bode well for success in the entrepreneurial arena. In any event, each of the barriers identified by Catalyst (2006) has profound implications for the extrapolation of competencies required for females aspiring to executive leadership. There appears to be minimal literature on the specific competencies required to prevail in spite of these barriers.

Decoding the Language of Leadership

Oakley (2000) notes that female executives are more likely to ask questions while their male counterparts are more likely to issue orders (p. 325). A woman will request a task using considerate, option-laced vocabulary, while a man will use more command-oriented vocabulary; "in the almost all male world of upper management, therefore, women are forced to change their linguistic style to a more command-oriented form in order to be perceived as strong, decisive, and in control" (Oakley, 2000, p. 325). Oakley offers the examples of former Canadian Prime Minister Kim Campbell and the UK's Prime Minister Margaret Thatcher, respectively known as "brittle, defensive, and haughty" and "the Iron Lady" as evidence of yet another double bind barrier.

Contradictions abound, however. Regine and Lewin (2003) cite a Gallup poll of roughly two million people that shows that "a majority of [people] would prefer to have a caring boss than more money or perks" and that those who do have caring bosses "are more productive and stay longer with their organizations" (p. 349). The 2008 Catalyst study on female leadership extrapolates three double-binds from its data on leadership vocabulary and linguistics (p. 7): 1. Extreme perceptions: too soft, too tough, and never just right; 2. The high competence threshold: women leaders face higher standards and lower rewards than male leaders; and 3. Competent but disliked: women leaders are perceived as competent or likeable, but rarely both.

While the Catalyst report (2008) identifies the structural and organizational characteristics that influence and sustain the above double binds, and offers strategies/tools for building awareness of and addressing bias (p. 7), it offers no recommendations as to the competencies that female executives might acquire to mitigate against these biases. Catalyst reports that women corporate officers use a variety of strategies to succeed including "being committed to building the corporate business, developing effective relationships with coworkers, working well on teams, and learning from others within the

corporation" (p. 29) but provides no direction as to the competencies required to effect these strategies.

Rejecting Binary Gender Norm

The literature points to the following question: Does the notion of a feminine style of leadership inadvertently reinforce stereotypes? The binary gender leadership norms that helped to sustain the glass ceiling may no longer apply in the new millennium. Billing and Alvesson (2000) put forward that researchers and corporate stakeholders need to "find ways other than using female leadership as a slogan for promoting equality" (p. 144). Christman and McClelland (2008) maintain that today's leaders need to adopt a leadership style that morphs "dynamically and fluidly to sustain themselves in the complexity of today's organizations" (p. 23). Under a binary gender leadership model, acceptable androgynous behaviours are minimal. Figure 5 illustrates the acceptable interaction of gender-related leadership traits in a binary gender model as identified by Christmas and McClelland (2008).

FIGURE 5   Acceptable Interaction of Gender-related Leadership Traits in a Binary Gender Model
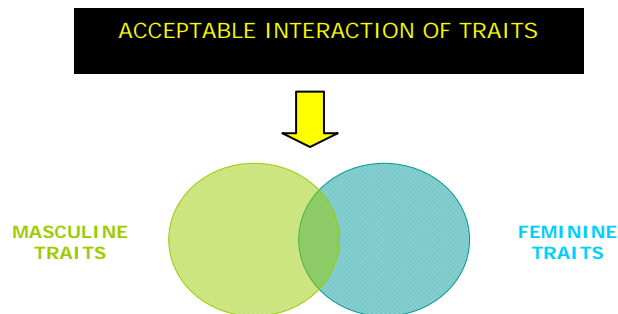
In an era of global economic collegiality, however, a more androgynous leadership style appears to emerging (Jacobs 2007; Oakley, 2000). Figure 6 illustrates an acceptable interaction of gender-related traits in an androgynous model.

FIGURE 6   Acceptable Interaction of Gender-related Leadership Traits in an Androgynous Model
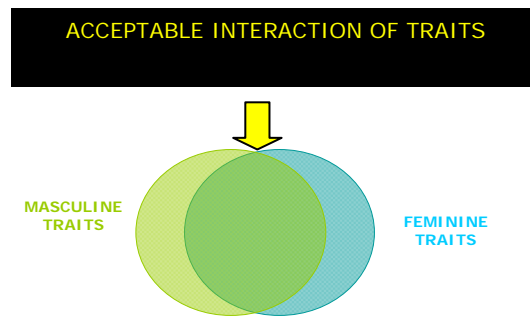
Regine and Lewin (2003) speculate that this move beyond a binary gender style of leadership may indicate that women may be poised, by virtue of their experiences learning to adopt and adapt masculine traits to their leadership styles, to become important leaders in the new millennium (p. 349).

Conclusion

Visualizing the Future

This review focused on investigating the theoretical assumptions that sustain limited access to leadership opportunities for females. Additionally, the review explored the traits that are commonly attributed to a feminine style of leadership and the barriers that challenge, if not impede, female executives.

The value of innovative, timely, and appropriate professional development opportunities for aspiring leaders, regardless of their gender, is not likely to generate heated debate—especially in an era of unprecedented global economic and knowledge growth, and opportunity. However, despite more than twenty years of investigating theoretical perspectives on leadership and the impact of gender "none of these theoretical perspectives have unequivocally provided adequate answers to enhance understanding or provide a platform for lasting change" (Wood, 2003, p. 122). If leadership is the most studied but least understood of human endeavours, it may be that the time is right for researchers to go beyond the rhetoric of gender differences in leadership and to move towards pragmatically identifying the competencies required to facilitate closing the extant gender gap for today's executive leaders and for those who would follow.

Constructing a Competency Model for Women Aspiring to Executive Leadership

Since the literature review did not yield a single competency model for women aspiring to executive leadership, it appears that the research question that prompted this review is pertinent. The literature review also points to the value of an investigation that focuses on a singular group of women with similar demographics.

Research Design

The study operated in a descriptive inferential framework using a three-round, Modified Delphi Technique (MDT) electronic survey to develop consensus opinion of five to eight core corporate competencies for female corporate executives in Alberta. Three iterations of the survey tool were delivered to the participants. Because the MDT relies on a group of content experts to form consensus, it was suitable for a study of this nature. All participants were female high-level executives in Alberta, with the expertise and hands-on experience to be considered content experts.

Crisp *et al* (1999) acknowledge that, although consensus reached through MDT tends to be high, one must be cautious about equating consensus with genuine agreement. For the purposes of this study, however, the results reached through the Delphi Method are intended to be indicators rather than an irrefutable ranked list of competencies.

A notable benefit of MDT is that it allows participants to "make judgments without introducing problems often associated with group interactions" (Hanafin as quoted in Christman & McClellan, 2008, p. 8). The MDT is "a good way to involve busy experts and specialists who may not be able to come together to brainstorm, but who nevertheless need to interact with each other to generate new ideas" (Nehiley, 2001, n.p.). Another benefit is that the process allows multiple opportunities for participants to reflect on and amend their responses.

The primary reason for using an online MDT survey was ease of access for both the researcher and participants. Given the demanding schedules and geographic diversity of the participants, synchronous, face-to-face methodologies would have presented significant deterrents to participation. The asynchronicity of the online environment allowed participants to respond at their leisure. In addition, the online environment provided them with the opportunity to reflect on the questions, save and/or change their responses, and submit their responses when they were ready.

Research Participants

Participation in the study was voluntary. Fifteen participants were selected from a cross-section of corporate executive women in Alberta. Participants were required to have

access to the Internet in order to participate in the study. Nine women in leadership positions accepted the invitation to participate in this study.

Method of Data Analysis

The data collected through the surveys was quantitative and qualitative. Therefore, two methods of data analysis were employed.

Quantitative Data

To speak to the reliability of my analysis, questions that elicited quantitative data were analyzed for central tendency, measuring the mean, the median, and the mode. Identifying the central tendencies in the data allowed me to construct a preliminary set of competencies that the participants could rate in subsequent iterations of the survey.

Qualitative Data

For each qualitative question, I identified high frequency words and collocations. High-frequency words are a preliminary indication of common themes. However, collocations are typically more reliable indicators of meaning than are repeated single words.

Study Timeline

Data collection occurred between November and December of 2008.

Findings

Introduction

The literature review revealed that what women need to succeed is inextricably linked to the socio-cultural operational context in which they toil, dream, and grow. The current—and arguably for the foreseeable future—socio-cultural operational context can be summed up in a single word: uncertainty (Fullan, 2001; Furst & Reeves, 2008; Moran & Blauth, 2008; Rosen, 2008; Wahl, 2008).

If uncertainty is the new norm, embracing it is the new leadership imperative. Rosen (2008) describes this new imperative as follows:

Constant change places [leaders] in a continual state of transformation and is unsettling, unnerving, and intimidating. It creates anxiety, making you feel vulnerable, uneasy, and helpless. Living with change creates gap after gap between your current reality and your desired future. Let's face it: Leadership used to be about creating certainty. Now it is about leading through uncertainty. (p. 34)

Fifteen years ago, in their comprehensive study of executive development in major corporations, Vicere, Taylor, and Freeman (1994) concluded that the historical imperative of homosocial reproduction was already being replaced by an emerging need for corporate executives who reflect the diversity of the global marketplace and who are capable of "building and maintaining an organization's ability to change, learn, and grow" (p. 20). The ensuing years have validated their conclusions; however, little has changed in terms of our moving from theory to practice. While my review of the literature yielded copious amounts of information on feminine styles of leadership, the barriers that female leaders face, and the organizational/societal changes that must occur to facilitate shattering the proverbial glass ceiling, limited research has been done to determine the core corporate competencies required for women to succeed at the executive level: competencies are merely alluded to by way of discussions about the values and qualities that female executives typically bring to the corporate world.

The study consisted of a three-round Modified Delphi electronic survey to determine the top five competencies required to succeed as a female executive in Alberta.

Participant Demographics

Participants were selected from a cross section of executive women in Alberta. Nine women in leadership positions accepted the invitation to participate in this study.

To gain a sense of how long it takes for women to ascend to leadership positions, participants were asked to identify their age bracket.

36-45	2	22.2%
46-55	**5**	**55.6%**
56-65	2	22.2%

To establish the level of experience, participants were asked to indicate the number of years that each had been in an executive leadership position.

3-5 years	1	11.1%
6-8 years	2	22/2%
9 or more years	**6**	**66.7%**

Participants were asked to indicate their years of service in their current leadership positions.

0-2 years	1	11/1%
3-5 years	**3**	**33.3%**
6-8 years	2	22.2%
9 or more years	**3**	**33.3%**

All participants were from the cities of Edmonton and Calgary and surrounding areas.

The Data

Observations about Leadership in General and Leadership in Alberta

Several challenges, specific to female executives, emerged from my review of the literature. To gain some understanding of leadership challenges for women in general and to ascertain whether the challenges facing female executives in Alberta are unique, participants were asked to use a Likert scale to respond to statements that outlined particular challenges to leadership. Figure 7 shows the participants' responses to each premise in general (unshaded percentages) and specific to Alberta (shaded percentages).

FIGURE 7   Challenges to Executive Leadership for Women

Premise	Strongly Disagree	Disagree	Neither Agree Nor Disagree	Agree	Strongly Agree
Stereotypes persist that portray women as less capable leaders than men.	0%	25%	0%	50%	25%
	0%	0%	0%	75%	25%
The possession of feminine leadership characteristics decreases a woman's chances of emerging as an executive leader	0%	12.5%	37.5%	37.5%	12.5%
	0%	12.5%	25%	50%	12.5%
Women are under-represented in executive leadership because of negative perceptions of their abilities.	0%	12.5%	50%	12.5%	25%
	0%	12.5%	37.5%	25%	25%
Women are under-represented in executive leadership because of limited opportunities to obtain line experience.	0%	12.5%	12.5%	37.5%	37.5%
	0%	0%	25%	62.5%	12.5%
Women aspiring to executive leadership lack access to informal networks.	0%	12.5%	12.5%	37.5%	37.5%
	0%	0%	25%	62.5%	12.5%
Women aspiring to executive leadership positions lack mentors.	0%	12.5%	12.5%	37.5%	37.5%
	0%	0%	25%	62.5%	12.5%
Women aspiring to executive leadership lack role models.	0%	50%	37.5%	12.5%	0%
	0%	12.5%	0%	62.5%	0%
Women aspiring to executive leadership lack stretch assignments.	0%	37.5%	12.5%	50%	0%
	0%	37.5%	0%	62.5%	0%
Women aspiring to executive leadership lack access to professional development opportunities.	0%	50%	37.5%	12.5%	0%
	0%	50%	12.5%	37.5%	0%

Six participants agreed that it is easier for a female aspiring to executive leadership to make it to the C-suites in Alberta than it was ten years ago, while all agreed that it is easier than it was twenty years ago. However, in response to all of the above premises, the

participants agreed that females aspiring to executive leadership face greater challenges in Alberta than in the general population.

There was also unanimous agreement that female executive leaders in Alberta face higher standards and lower rewards than their regional male counterparts.

Competencies Required To Succeed As a Female Executive in Alberta

In the first iteration of the survey, participants identified nineteen competencies required for women to succeed in executive leadership. In the second iteration of the study, the participants rated these competencies. Figure 8 shows the average rankings of each of the competencies.

FIGURE 8   Iteration 2: Core Competencies for Success for Women in Executive Positions in Alberta ~ Average Rankings
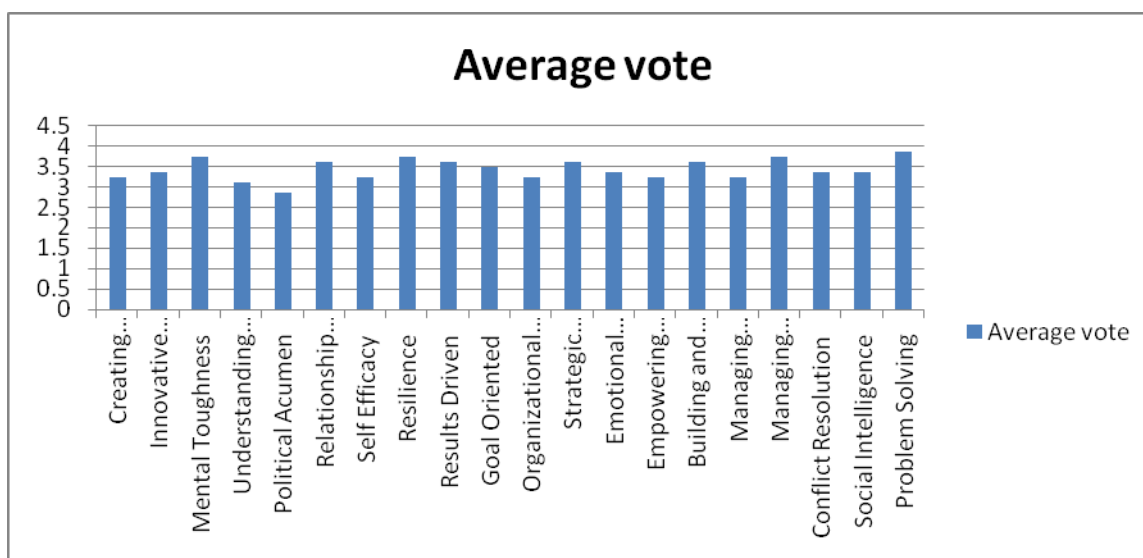
The following nine competencies earned the highest average ratings: being goal oriented, being resilient, being results driven, building and coaching a team, building relationships, having mental toughness, managing organizational politics, problem solving skills, and thinking and planning strategically.

In addition, the second iteration provided participants with the opportunity to outline additional core competencies that had not emerged in the first iteration, participants identified four additional competencies:

- Ability to learn
- Effective communication of value delivered
- Maintaining and growing strong networks
- Personal drive/desire to be an executive

In the final iteration, using a Likert scale (not necessary to succeed, helpful but not critical to succeed, important to succeed, essential to succeed), participants were asked to rank the top nine core competencies that had emerged in the second iteration of the study. Figure 9 outlines the raw occurrences of the data. No clear ranking emerged from the raw occurrences; however, building and coaching a team, building relationships, being results driven, and being resilient each earned four "votes" within their ranking, thereby indicating some measure of consensus with respect to the group's ranking of the third, fourth, sixth, and seventh of the nine competencies.

FIGURE 9   Final Iteration: Forced Rankings of Core Competencies for Success for Women in Executive Positions in Alberta ~ Raw Occurrences

Answer Options	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	Response Count
Problem Solving Skills	0	1	1	0	2	2	0	2	0	8
	3	0	0	2	0	0	0	1	2	8
Building & Coaching a Team	0	1	4	1	1	0	1	0	0	8
Thinking & Planning Strategically	2	2	1	0	2	0	1	0	0	8
Being Goal Oriented	0	1	0	0	1	2	0	1	2	7
Building Relationships	1	0	0	4	0	0	1	0	2	8
Being Results Driven	0	2	0	0	1	4	1	0	0	8
Being Resilient	0	1	0	0	1	0	4	2	0	8
Having Mental Toughness	1	0	2	1	0	0	0	2	2	8

Although an analysis of the raw occurrences failed to reveal consensus, the average rankings yielded a more immediately discernable ranking. Figure 10 outlines the average occurrences.

FIGURE 10 Final Iteration: Forced Rankings of Core Competencies for Success for Women in Executive Positions in Alberta ~ Average Occurrences
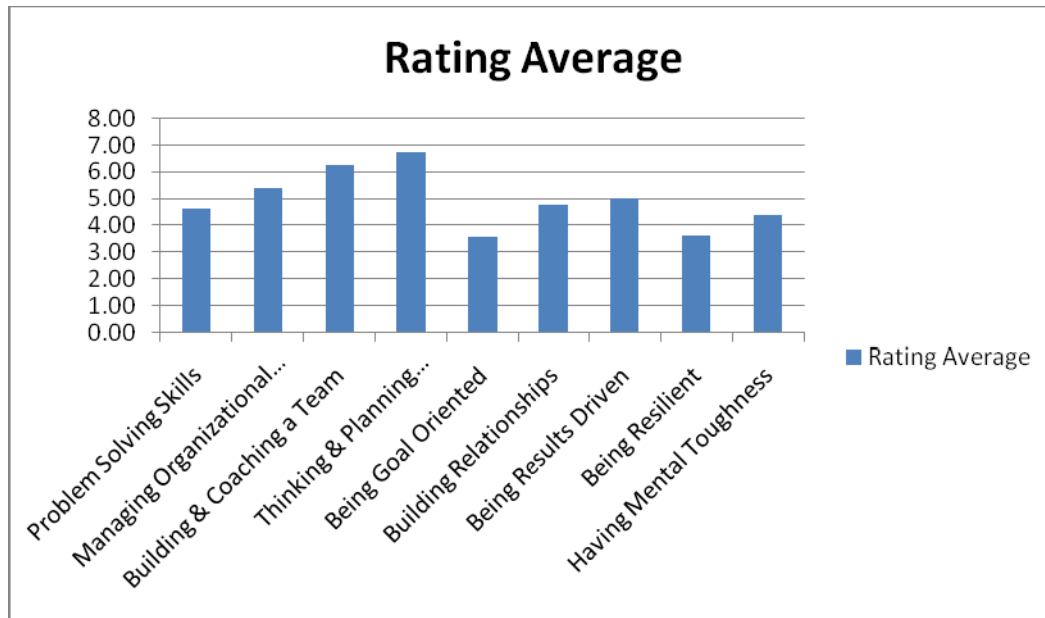
The core competencies, as ranked by averages, for success for women in executive positions in Alberta are as follows:

1. Thinking and planning strategically
2. Building and coaching a team [3rd under raw occurrences]
3. Managing organizational politics
4. Being results driven [6th under raw occurrences]
5. Building relationships [4th under raw occurrences]
6. Problem solving skills
7. Having mental toughness
8. Being resilient [7th under raw occurrences]
9. Being goal oriented

Given the small sampling of the study, however, the above rankings can only be interpreted as a preliminary gauge of the core competencies required for women to succeed in executive positions in Alberta.

In addition, participants were asked to assess the importance of the additional four competencies identified in the second iteration (Figure 11).

FIGURE 11   Iteration 2: Additional Competencies

Competency	Not necessary to succeed	Helpful but not critical to succeed	Important to succeed	Essential to succeed
Ability to learn	0%	12.5%	25%	62.5%
Effective communication of value delivered	0%	37.5%	25%	37.5%
Maintaining and growing strong networks	0%	12.5%	75%	12.5%
Personal drive/desire to be an executive	0%	12.5%	25%	62.5%

More telling perhaps than the rankings, were the anecdotal responses of the participants who commented on the ranking process. One participant noted that she,

"… found it difficult to rank the 9 core competencies as I could easily have assigned them all the same score. So, how I did it was pick things as higher rated if I felt other topics could fall under those ones. It was tough!"

Another participant noted, "I see them almost 'all' as essential to succeed—it takes a lot to be a woman!"

When asked to outline the challenges that female executives face in Alberta, the participants noted the prevailing glass ceiling. The women identified the following conditions as evidence of prevailing barriers to high level executive positions:

- "being relegated to the 'soft skill' executive positions in Human Resources"
- "same as in the past—being in the minority"
- "being under-valued"
- "getting opportunities to learn and demonstrate executive proficiency"

One participant wryly noted that "Alberta is still an old boys' network which can be very exclusive."

Leading Through Change: Female Executive Leadership Styles

Furst and Reeves (2008) and Haslam and Ryan (2008) propose that, by virtue of their transformative, relationship-oriented leadership style, women are particularly well suited to leading through uncertainty; in fact, they may be "especially effective in turbulent times because they encourage open communication, trust building, and collaboration" (Furst & Reeves, 2008, p. 378).

My preliminary findings appear to support Furst & Reeves (2008) findings: four women in the study ranked building and coaching a team and building relationships as critical competencies for success—competencies that are typically associated with transformative leadership and that surely require open communication, trust building, and

collaboration. The female executives in this study agreed that their leadership style includes qualities that are typically associated with transformational leadership principles. Figure 12 outlines the percentage of respondents who agreed that each descriptor describes her leadership style.

FIGURE 12   Female Executives in Alberta: Their Self-Reported Leadership Style

Descriptor	Combined Agree & Strongly Agree
Open	100%
Flexible	87.5%
Empathetic	87.5%
Relational	100%
Inclusive	100%
Collaborative	100%
Competent and likeable	75%
Effective at building and fostering team success	87.5%
Effective at creating and supporting a culture of strategic thinking and innovation	87.5%
Effective at ensuring organizational alignment	87.5%
Effective at networking	77.7%
Effective at contributing to organizational success	100%

So what does leading through change "look" like? Moran & Blauth (2008) and Fullan (2001) propose that leading through uncertainty requires "creating a change capable culture." When asked to self-describe their leadership styles, the participants used the language of change agents. Figure 13 outlines the responses of the nine participants (P#) when they were asked to self-describe their leadership style:

FIGURE 13   Female Executives in Alberta: Their Self-Described Leadership Style

P#	Self-Described Leadership Style Descriptors
1	Strategic
2	Visionary, passionate, innovative
3	Focused, with clearly defined deliverables to achieve results of overall company vision
4	Open and flexible, non-micromanagement
5	Visionary, inclusive—with an interest in building a team that can make a difference and that is open to positive change and progress
6	Values-based, principles-driven servant leadership

P#	Self-Described Leadership Style Descriptors
7	Balanced, healthy emotional intelligence focused on relations and getting the job done
8	Goal oriented, team based
9	Values-based, principles-drive, servant leadership

Furst and Reeves also note that the rate at which women are appointed to high level executive positions is highest following either a shift in market orientation or a crisis (p. 378)—a situation that demands exceptional team building skills. It may be that female executives in Alberta—with their strong belief in the value of transformative leadership and their self-reported confidence in the underlying skill strengths of the transformative leadership style—are uniquely qualified to lead through the inevitable, and likely considerable change wrought by the economic and organizational turmoil of the new millennium.

What Is the Role of the U of X?

My study indicates that there is support for a U of X executive leadership program specifically for women: 85.7% of the participants confirmed the University's position that there is a need for this type of program and that the U of X is operationally suited to design and deliver such a program.

Limitations

There are notable limitations to my study and to the conclusions that can be derived from it. The method used to identify potential participants for the study was not particularly rigorous: I had hoped to limit my participants to those women holding executive positions in C-suites in Alberta, but like Furst and Reeves (2008) I found myself having to reconcile myself to a broader definition of the term executive. My participants were drawn, therefore, from a sample of individuals holding executive positions in small businesses, corporations, and government. Although the sample was broader than my original intent, it was also smaller. I had hoped to garner the participation of twelve to fifteen women; however, given the time constraints imposed by delays in the ethics approval process, I was only able to elicit the participation of nine female executives. Although commonalities emerged amongst the participants, the sampling was too small to elicit statistically sound conclusions.

Discussion

Introduction

This study sought to develop consensus on the core competencies required to succeed as a female executive in Alberta and to determine whether a market exists for an executive education program designed specifically for women.

To seek answers to the questions, a panel of nine female executives from Alberta participated in a three-round Modified Delphi Technique survey. Participants were provided with the results of each round and given opportunity to provide additional comments which were then incorporated into the next round of the survey.

The flaws inherent in operationalizing female leaders as a homogenous group (Stelter, 2008, Duffy et al, 2006, Billing and Alvesson, 2000) provided the rationale for imposing regional limitations on the participant pool. Although the findings of the survey were not conclusive, they do offer a starting point for future research. The study would need to be replicated with a larger group of female executives to determine the efficacy of my conclusions.

This discussion focuses on the findings of the study as they relate to the participants' perspectives on the present and future of female executive leadership in Alberta in the new millennium. Their present experiences and the implications of those experiences are explored via an examination of their current competencies and an inventory of the challenges they faces in the new millennium. Their projections for the future and the implications of those projections are explored via an examination of their ranked list of the core competencies required to succeed in female executive leadership in the new millennium, and their assessment of the role of the U of X in their executive leadership development.

The Present

An Inventory of Albertan Competencies: The Female Leadership Perspective

The female executives in this study used the language of transformational leadership to define their roles and the competencies embedded in those roles: they defined themselves as open, relational, inclusive, collaborative, innovative, and effective at creating, fostering, supporting, and contributing to organizational success. The singular positivity of their responses implies a strong, healthy, probably complex, "learning space" of some kind, one that led them to a leadership paradigm characterized by studied risk taking, emotional intelligence, corporate prowess, and unfailing resilience. That female corporate leaders tend to be transformational is no surprise; the literature is replete with studies, most on scales

significantly larger than this one, that support this finding (Billing & Alvesson, 2000; Oakley, 2000; Olsson, 2000; Stelter, 2008; Weyer, 2000). In hindsight, I might have garnered more insight by asking the more intriguing question, "To what do you attribute your leadership style?" or "How did you learn to be open, relational, inclusive, collaborative, innovative, etcetera?"

An Inventory of New Millennial Challenges: The Female Leadership Paradigm

Although the participants in this study self-reported as assured, competent, forward-thinking leaders, their representation in the executive ranks was apparently not won without significant persistence against the obdurate barriers that inhibit women reaching critical mass in the executive leadership arena. The participants in this study were in their teenage formative years between 1958 and 1985, an era that hinted—if not proclaimed—that they could be anything they wanted to be, and yet 75% of them agreed that in the general population stereotypes persist that women are less capable leaders than men, that women are under-represented in executive leadership because of limited opportunities to obtain line experience, that women aspiring to executive leadership lack access to informal networks, and that women aspiring to executive leadership lack mentors.

The results were even more troubling in the regional context. For a province that prides itself on "creating opportunity" (http://alberta.ca/home/), Alberta fared extremely poorly when the participants were asked to gauge the challenges facing women aspiring to executive leadership in Alberta. To every premise posed about the challenges to executive leadership for women, participants rated the challenges as being greater in Alberta than in the general population (See Findings, Figure 7). Almost twenty years after Dr. Seuss playfully rhymed his way through itemizing the challenges of making one's way in the world, very little appears, by these participants' estimations, to have changed.

The Future

An Inventory of Core Competencies for Executive Women in the New Millennium: The Female Leadership Gift

In the first iteration of the MDT, participants identified twenty competencies required to succeed in executive leadership in Alberta. In the second iteration, the participants were asked to rate the competencies. In the third iteration, the top nine competencies were isolated and participants were asked to rank them. The core competencies, as ranked by averages, emerged as follows:

1.   Thinking and planning strategically
2.   Building and coaching a team
3.   Managing organizational politics
4.   Being results driven
5.   Building relationships
6.   Problem solving skills
7.   Having mental toughness
8.   Being resilient
9.   Being goal oriented

While the above rankings can only be interpreted as a preliminary indication of both the core competencies required for women to succeed in executive positions in Alberta and their relative importance, the data also appear to support the literature that posits an intrinsic female gift for transformative leadership (Applebaum, Audet, & Miller, 2003; Hatcher 2000; Regine & Lewin, 2003). Further research, on a larger scale, to replicate these findings would enhance our understanding of the female leadership paradigm and its corresponding fit with new millennial imperatives.

Current global and regional economic upheaval speaks to uncertainty as the new norm in the leadership paradigm (Fullan, 2001; Furst & Reeves, 2008, Moran & Blauth, 2008; Rosen, 2008; Wahl, 2008); if a feminine leadership dynamic is synergizing with traditional leadership models (Applebaum, Audet, & Miller, 2003; Hatcher 2000; Regine & Lewin, 2003) to meet the challenges of that uncertainty, the implication is that feminine qualities, values, and skills—cumulatively defined as competencies—can be identified, learned, and taught. The findings of this study suggest a starting point for beginning to construct an outcome-based curriculum with identified core competencies and corresponding strategies for their development.

Acquiring the Competencies to Face New Millennial Challenges: The Female Leadership Development Commitment

A majority of participants agreed that a training gap exists for extant and aspiring female executives in Alberta. They also agreed that the U of X is well placed to design an executive leadership program specifically for women. This endorsement speaks in some measure to the ongoing commitment of the participants to professional development.

What Next?

The study provides strong support for the U of X to move forward with its needs assessment process. A larger sampling and a methodology that encourages self-generating

conversation would likely yield profoundly meaningful data that would inform a robust leadership program for women. Macnaughten and Myers (2004) contend that focus groups provide the opportunity for self-generating, conversational information exchanges that yield rich phenomenological data. Therefore, to further inform the research question, I suggest that the University proceed with a second phase of information collection through a series of focus groups. The most immediate challenge for this process will be, as it was for me, time constraints. Although numerous women expressed an interest in participating in my study, many found themselves unable to reconcile their full-to-capacity daytimers with the demands of the research process. Some flexibility in the research process, for example, by way of having multiple participation options (timing, venue, and methodology), would likely help to mitigate against this challenge.

Final Thoughts

You'll look up and down streets. Look 'em over with care. About some you will say,
"I don't choose to go there."
With your head full of brains and your shoes full of feet,
you're too smart to go down any not-so-good street.
~Dr. Seuss. (1990). *Oh, The Places You'll Go!*

I began this study wondering what happens to the "brainy and footsy" female Albertans on their way to the corporate executive suites of their province; I learned, through both the study and informal conversations, that female Albertan executives demonstrate a determination to contribute and to succeed that defies simple explanations. I speculate that "à la Seuss" they choose—sometimes calculatedly, sometimes with deceptive abandon—where to go and where not to go. More than that, they cleverly choose how to get there, whom to take with them, and what to do once they get where they're going. Future research that uncovers the stories embedded in their choices would help to inform the literature on the female leadership paradigm in Alberta and beyond.

Leggo (2004) notes that "any story we tell will always be a fragment of the complex and wide-ranging experiences that each of us lives daily in our bodies and imaginations, the experiences we live daily in interconnections with family, colleagues, and community" (p. 98) and suggests that narrative researchers "seek to invite productive readers to continue the questioning" (p. 110). I wonder now whether my participants' determination thrives in spite of the low number of women in the top ranks in corporate Canada and the dismal projections for growth in the immediate future, or whether their determination thrives, at least in part, *to* spite statistics and corporate soothsayers. I wonder whether today's female executives see themselves as pioneers or bearers of a torch lit by their predecessors. And I

wonder what they'd talk about if they were given the opportunity to choose the theme rather than answer questions in a script.

Amidst the roar of a cascading torrent of questions and the absence of uncomplicated answers, I was reminded of one of my initial discussions with my project sponsor, X, Assistant Dean, U of X, who cautioned against writing another research paper on the proverbial glass ceiling. I turned to the literature on leadership metaphors, yearning for a synergistic image to reflect my participants' determination to contribute and succeed in the new millennium.

Not surprisingly, the leadership tradition is replete with leadership metaphors that rely on masculine vocabulary and imagery. Jacobs (2007) notes the abundance of sport and warrior metaphors in the literature and in practice. Stelter (2008) uses George Bernard Shaw's infamous quote from Pygmalion to capture the essence of the female leadership paradigm: "why can't a woman be more like a man" (p.94). Oakley (2000) uses the novel Catch-22 as a metaphor symbolizing Neanderthal leadership prototypes that persist in spite their ineffectiveness. Even the metaphor of the glass ceiling, long held up as a symbol of the challenges to female leadership, is grounded in masculine imagery and language, conveying that "women are unable to see [impediments] from a distance" and that there are some roles that women have "virtually no chance" of attaining (Eagly & Carli, 2007, p. 64). Even more problematic is that "the glass ceiling fails to incorporate the complexity and variety of challenges that women can face in their leadership journeys" (Eagly & Carli, 2007, p. 64).

Eagly and Carli (2007) propose that the labyrinth is a more appropriate metaphor for female leadership in the new millennium—a metaphor that I embraced in the early stages of this study. They note that "for women who aspire to top leadership, routes exist but are full of twists and turns, both expected and unexpected. Because all labyrinths have a viable route to the center, it is understood that goals are attainable (p. 64)." Although this metaphor appears to more accurately reflect the literature on female leadership, as my study unfolded I became increasingly troubled by its failure to resonate with the visceral certainties of stereotyping and structural/cultural resistance that confronted the participants in this study and, by extrapolation, female executives in Alberta. The labyrinth, with its singular path to its centre implies a predetermined intransient structure: while perseverance and agility serve those who traverse the labyrinth well, ultimately the triumph of the labyrinth is that it although it bears the footprints of those who challenge it, its structural design remains intact. Like its predecessors, the labyrinth hardly serves as an inspiration for the socioeconomic reform that will facilitate female executive leadership.

Juxtaposed with the gravity of the implications of the protectionism of what one participant called "the old boy's network" was the "Seussian" spirit of playfulness, rightness, and hopefulness embedded in the turns of phrase of my participants and in the subtitle of this study: "Oh, The Places You'll Go!" A new millennial metaphor for female leadership should incorporate the characteristics—contradictions and inequities intact—of all of the above metaphors: the new millennial female executive is part athlete, part warrior, part shape-shifter, alternately adaptable and stubborn, serious and playful, adroitly navigating the expected and the unexpected, and ever purposeful.

The waterfall (represented in Dr. Seuss' painting below) might serve to more accurately reflect the female leadership paradigm in Alberta. As a phenomenon of nature, design and happenstance married in the confident syncopation of its path-forging practice, the waterfall metaphor captures the essence of this study's participants. Additional research will be required both to confirm the validity of this metaphor and the implications for professional development for prospective female leaders in Alberta.

COURTESY OF:
http://www.drseussart.com/details/archive/waterfall.html

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