

WOMEN IN LEADERSHIP

A deeper understanding of factors that contribute to and hinder leadership advancement for New Zealand women
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CURRENT CLIMATE OF NEW ZEALAND LEADERSHIP

Companies with equal gender representation among executive leadership teams claim there are benefits beyond financial. These companies report to be more innovative, more effective in pursuing environmentally friendly practices, have stronger business and equity practices, increased customer satisfaction and loyalty.

Yet, traditionally boards and leadership teams tended to be homogeneous in makeup, dominated by European males. The NZ Women on Boards Census (2018) reported that in the past New Zealand has ranked within the top 10 countries worldwide for women in leadership. Yet recent years have seen this plummet - NZ is now ranked 33/35 for gender parity in leadership teams. Within NZX listed companies less than 1 in 4 board members are female and there are only 4 chief executives roles held by women.

In 2018 the NZ government committed to gender parity on all state sector boards by 2021. Whilst this is encouraging, the rate of progress in the private sector dropped to 1.93%, if it continues at this rate, the gender gap in governance will not close till 2032.

In order to ensure long term success it is imperative that women are not promoted based solely on meeting a quota system. Leadership appointment should still be based on their skills and abilities to lead. Therefore it is critical to be building pipeline talent equally.

OVERVIEW AND AIMS OF THIS RESEARCH

This research directly surveyed over 150 women currently in executive level leadership positions throughout varying organisations and industries within Aotearoa. This research sought to gain further insight into both the influencing and hindering factors that current female leaders attributed to their leadership appointment.

The impact and satisfaction of having a career sponsor, executive coach or mentor was also examined to understand the influence these external factors have on leadership efficacy and career satisfaction.

These results are designed to help both aspiring and current female leaders as well as organisations further understand the current climate and what key influences could help assist gender equality across boardrooms in Aotearoa.

KEY FACTORS THAT CONTRIBUTE TO LEADERSHIP ATTAINMENT

Leaders were asked to describe in open ended sections what key factors they believed contributed to their leadership success. These results were collated into themes, With three main factors that contributed to their leadership appointment emerging. The top three themes were evenly distributed

34%

DRIVE

Personal commitment, motivation and determination

33%

HARD WORK / RESULTS / EXPERIENCE

Delivering results, Personal Achievements and best person for the job

33%

PERSONALITY / PERSONAL VALUES

Strong work ethic, positive attitude, undersanding people, making a difference

Results showed that leaders predominantly attribute their leadership success to their own internal characteristics. These findings align with a developmental model of leadership, which is when life experiences influence the development of leadership behaviors. As executive level leadership is often demanding, leaders displaying these core attributes, which contribute to leadership engagement, also often have increased resilience and higher levels of confidence.

When evaluating the qualitative findings and the levels of leadership efficacy (confidence) in women there was a positive association between these self beliefs and perceptions of leadership success among women,

KEY FACTORS THAT HINDERED LEADERSHIP ADVANCEMENT

Using open ended fields current leaders were asked to describe the three main factors that they believe hindered their leadership advancement, These answers were then collated into themes.

38%

ORGANISATIONAL CULTURE

Unconscious bias, "old boys" networks, Stereotypes, Sexual harassment

26%

WORK / LIFE CONFLICT

Family commitments, Geographical locations, Work hours required

26%

SELF DOUBT / LACK OF CONFIDENCE

Imposter Syndrome, Lack of faith in ones own ability,

Organisational culture is defined as the underlying beliefs, assumptions, values and ways of interacting that contribute to the unique social and psychological environment of an organisation. This research found that unconscious biases in executive level leadership teams especially around not being part of "the group" (boys networks), sexual harassment and stereotypes around women and leadership positions was the key factor that prevented or hindered their appointment to executive level leadership.

Whilst many companies now emphasize the need for more inclusive policy and unconscious bias training, these results indicate that there is still along way to go.

Self doubt, or an unwillingness to put themselves forward was also described as hindering their leadership career. This was particularly highlighted by Māori leaders as their modesty or lack of self promotion earlier influenced their careers. Women also expressed how they focused to much on the work and expected their results and effort to be acknowledged.

CAREER SPONSORS, EXECUTIVE COACHING AND MENTORS

Leaders were surveyed on their experiences with sponsors, coaches and mentors., As well as their levels of career satisfaction and Leadership Efficacy (confidence in the knowledge, skills, and abilities associated with leading others).

Career Sponsors:

A career sponsor is typically a senior executive willing to advocate and create opportunity for an individual identified as a potential future leader.

41% of leaders experienced a sponsorship relationship during their career. With over 1/3 of women reporting that having a career sponsor directly affected their appointment into a leadership position .

Additionally, career sponsorship was found to be strongly associated with overall career satisfaction, Meaning that those sponsored had higher levels of career satisfaction than women with no sponsor..

Leadership Efficacy was also found to be higher in women who have/had a career sponsor.

Traditionally, a career sponsor may have been fostered informally, (male to male) usually though a 'similar to me" bias with relationships fostered socially and professionally.

The findings of this research indicate the importance for current executive level leaders (male and female) to identify potential female leaders, and pursue a more formal sponsorship relationship offering guidance, exposure and advocacy to ensure she is given every opportunity to progress in her leadership career.

Executive Coaching:

An executive coach is the formal relationship between an externally hired coach and the individual (leader). Only 26% of participants had experienced executive coaching throughout their career, With 3% of leaders described it as directly impacting their leadership appointment. Even with the lower numbers of women experiencing executive coaching, the results indicated that it impacted positively on overall career satisfaction.

Our results yielded a mixed response to coaching satisfaction. Women who were happy with their coach described them as being invaluable when evaluating and navigating work, personal life and career phases.

However those not satisfied with a coach described the personal fit and the relationship built with the coach as reasons why. Those dissatisfied with coaching relationships often described the coaches not being relatable or feeling misunderstood. Leaders described the importance of being able to choose/hire their own external executive coach as opposed to being assigned one or having in house coaching.

Given the results of the executive coaching experience it highlights the importance for leaders to choose their own coach to ensure that there is a personality and experience match. Organisations should not underestimate the effect coach/coachee relationship has on the overall effectiveness and outcomes of the coaching experience,

Mentoring:

Overall mentoring was the most common experience for leaders with 46% having had one or more mentors during their career. With 5.6% attributing a mentor to their leadership advancement. On average women leaders were satisfied with both formal and informal mentoring relationships. Genuine connection has been described as the most crucial element when selecting a mentor. Whilst these connections are critical in executive leadership roles, which can sometimes be isolating, our results found minimal evidence to suggest it has an impact on career satisfaction and perceptions of leadership efficacy,

TE MANA O TE WAHINE

15% of leaders surveyed identified as Māori. Our results yielded no significant differences between Māori and non Māori women in regards to their overall career satisfaction, or leadership efficacy. Nor did they differ in levels of mentor, career sponsor or executive coaching satisfaction.

On the surface it may seem that once in key leadership positions, all women regardless of ethnicity have similar perceptions of efficacy and career satisfaction. However, this numerical data does not paint the whole picture and this area should be further explored in the future.

After analysis of the qualitative data and descriptions of their rise to leadership, there were highlighted differences for women who were working in organisations where they were in a minority group. Māori and Pasifika leaders described a "double jeopardy" during their rise to leadership as they had to "prove their worth not only as a woman but also as a Māori woman". This finding highlights to organisations and individuals the importance of awareness of unconscious biases and how the organisational culture is crucial to minimising this type of discrimination.

PRACTICAL IMPLICATIONS

ASPIRING LEADERS:

Personal drive, dedication, skills and capabilities are no doubt some of the key factors to the appointment of leadership roles. On that journey social support should not be underestimated. In terms of external influences which enhanced leadership advancement, a sponsor had the most direct affect on both obtaining leadership positions and the confidence to perform and be supported once appointed. *"My sponsor definitely put me on my leadership path and supported and believed in what I could achieve"*. Current leaders directly advised aspiring leaders to seek a career sponsor. *"Having a sponsor is something I encourage all wahine I work with to seek"*. Aspiring leaders are encouraged to think outside the traditional box in terms of advancement *"I sought out sponsorship with the opportunity to work in a collaborative team - which opened the door"*.

CURRENT LEADERS:

With a leadership path already forged, some of our contributors found a lack of confidence or impostor syndrome to still be prevalent. Our results indicated that a quality relationship with an Executive Coach may influence leadership efficacy and overcome these feelings as one leader put it, *"throughout different phases of my career - they have been invaluable for assisting to make sense of certain situations, reflections, planning and testing out of ideas"*. Additionally, it was found that the support of a career sponsor can positively impact aspiring leaders career progression. Therefore, seeking out protégé with whom you genuinely connect or believe in, can influence not only their career, but your own personal satisfaction and the impact this has on achieving gender parity leadership teams.

ORGANISATIONS:

Organisational culture was described as the most impacting in terms of leadership hindrance, The irony of this finding is that, in order for the culture to change, often the way organisations have been traditionally led and board composition need to be re evaluated. It has been shown that diverse executive level leadership teams, result in more inclusive policy and decision making, However to ensure long term positive changes, it needs to move beyond policy alone. This includes encouraging different styles of leadership and embracing different ideas that women bring to the table. Start or continue unconscious bias awareness training, re-evaluate promotion and hiring practices, look at how executive coaching may improve current leaders as well as encourage both male and female leaders to build sponsorship type relationships with potential female leaders to foster a culture of growth and development.

CONCLUSION

In an ever expanding global network current leaders and organisations need to be more proactive in dismantling old paradigms in relation to what constitutes a leader and what defines success in an organisation. If New Zealand wants to continue to be a progressive and ensure economic success on global platform it is imperative that diversity and equality is brought to the forefront by moving beyond tokenism or fulfilling quotas.

Currently a vastly under researched area, these results provide an understanding of the current climate for women in leadership, and provides some practical tips for aspiring leaders to not only reach these key leadership positions, but ensure they feel confident and satisfied once appointed.

There are numerous ways this research could be expanded on including looking at the differences in development of Maori and Pasifika leaders and exploring how women who do not follow traditional career paths feel.

References:

Women in Leadership: Factors that contribute to or hinder career advancement and efficacy among women leaders;
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