



## **Midstream without a Paddle: An Examination of Factors that Prevent Female Leaders from Entering Executive Waters**

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### **Abstract**

Researchers have studied the differences between male and female leadership styles for several decades. Yet, much of the research has been contradictory and has not explained how successful females ascend to senior leadership positions or, more importantly, why some female leaders derail. This mixed-methods study investigated; 1) leadership traits possessed by a purposeful sample of female executives and mid-level managers, 2) derailing behavior patterns of female leaders, and 3) impacts of organizational environment on advancement for women. It was found that differences exist between the two groups in their derailing behaviors and how they manage role incongruence and leadership styles.

*Keywords: Gender, Leadership, Personality Traits, Hogan, HDS, Big 5 NEO-PIR*

### **Introduction**

Wage parity, glass cliffs, and ceilings have made headlines for decades as women entered the workforce and then attempted to attain management and executive positions in organizations. Despite the increased awareness and progress for equity between the genders, the emergence of female leaders at senior levels has not been materially improved (McKinsey & Company, 2010). According to Catalyst Census research, women accounted for only 14% of executive officer positions, representing no change from the prior year (Catalyst Census, 2014). In the boardroom, women constituted only 16.6% of leadership roles in 2012 (Catalyst Census, 2013). Beyond corporate America, female leadership is also underrepresented in senior government positions. As of September 2015, only 10 women served as Head of State and 14 served as Head of Government (UN Women, 2015). Despite the progress made toward gender equality through equal pay policies and job opportunities, it is still a pervasive problem with organizations struggling to achieve gender equality in leadership positions.

A plethora of research studies have examined the question of why females are underrepresented in executive ranks while at the same time, a growing body of research has emerged that suggests a correlation between gender equality in the executive ranks and

organizational performance, including profitability (McKinsey & Company, 2007; McKinsey & Company, 2010) and return on investment (Credit Suisse, 2014). In some European countries, governments are so compelled by the evidence suggesting gender equality leads to greater organizational performance, gender mandates for female board positions are becoming legal requirements for companies (Miller, 2014; U.S. Bureau of Economic and Business Affairs, 2012). Notwithstanding scholarly research, women still find themselves midstream rather than upstream in their professional careers.

## **Significance of Study**

Although years of research have covered differences in leadership styles between genders, this research has not adequately addressed extraneous barriers that female leaders must overcome in order to emerge as an effective organizational leader (Jacobs & McClelland, 1994; Klenke, 1993; Rosener, 1990). Thus, our study advances prior research by evaluating the derailing behaviors of women. Studying derailing behaviors contributes to an understanding of what may preclude women from reaching the highest levels of leadership. This research addressed the following Grand Tour question and sub questions:

## **Research Questions**

- What are the differences in derailing behaviors between female executives and female leaders at non-senior levels?
- If derailing behavior patterns exist between two populations, how do women get support from organizations to overcome these challenges?
- What organizational or environmental factors explain why women do not emerge from middle to senior levels?
- What coping skills are required to enhance behaviors that lead to gateways into more senior roles?

The approach depicted in Figure 1 structures the presence of leadership emergence and effectiveness in the Big 5 Inventory (NEO-PIR) with the Hogan Development Instrument's (HDS Survey) derailing behaviors. The figure also incorporates organizational and environmental factors, along with coping mechanisms that may reduce barriers to senior roles. Finally, it represents the path of inquiry and frameworks for each research question.

## **Research Design**

Using a mixed-methods explanatory design (Creswell & Plano-Clark, 2011), this study started with the collection and analysis of quantitative data followed by collection and analysis of qualitative data. The quantitative research method revealed “what” (traits, derailers, environment, and coping mechanisms), while the qualitative research method revealed “why” (reasons for pursuing or forgoing executive leadership roles) of research context. In this way, the research produced a more robust understanding of the scaffolds and ledges that exist for female leaders on their ascent to the top. Thus, the propositions for the quantitative sequences were:

**Proposition 1.** It is proposed that female leaders at the non-senior level will possess the predicted traits in the Big 5 Personality Inventory for effective leadership. The Big 5 will be used as a blocking variable for this study.

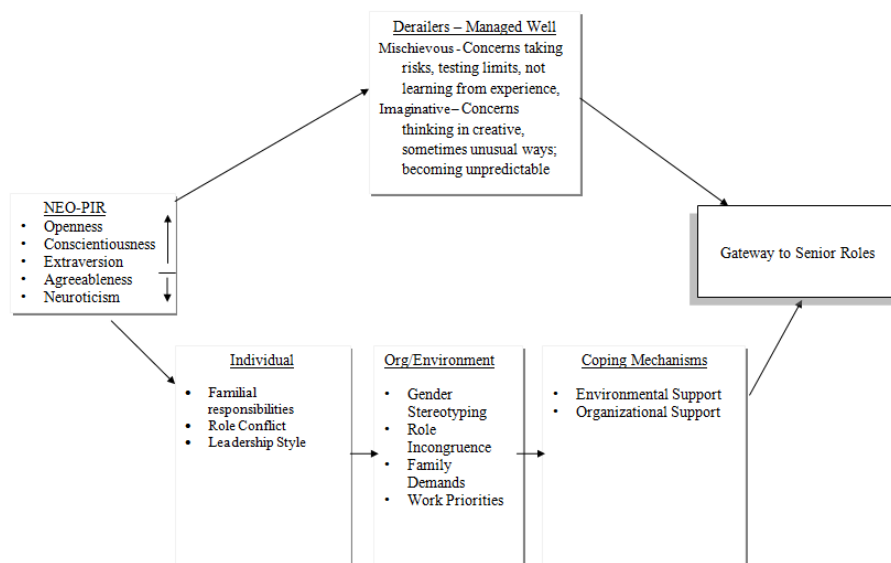
**Proposition 2.** It is proposed that female leaders who did not reach the executive levels will have higher scores in the Dutiful and Excitable dimensions in the Hogan Development Survey.

**Proposition 3.** It is proposed that female leaders who reached the executive levels will have higher scores in the Mischievous and Imaginative dimensions in the Hogan Development Survey.

**Proposition 4.** It is proposed that familial responsibilities emerge as a theme that inhibit the ascension of some female leaders.

**Proposition 5.** It is proposed that role conflict from gender stereotyping emerges as a theme that inhibits the ascension of some female leaders.

**Proposition 6.** It is proposed that leadership styles employed by women will emerge as a theme that inhibits the ascension of some female leaders.



*Figure 1.* Research framework for barriers to senior leader attainment in female leaders.

## Procedure

The NEO-PIR, or Big 5 Inventory, was used as a proxy for mid-level leaders to predict emergence into leadership roles. Derailing behaviors were classified using the Hogan Development Survey (HDS) and were tested as predictors of female leader emergence at executive levels. The behaviors were compared between derailing behavior patterns of front-line and mid-level female leaders. Figure 1 represents the research approach.

Using two assessments, the study compared two populations of 15 female leaders in each group. The first group of female leaders included leaders who successfully emerged at the upper level of leadership with an executive status at their respective organizations. The second group of female leaders included leaders who remained at a mid-level role in their respective organizations. The Big 5 personality traits are listed in Table 1 and derived from work by Costa & McCrae (1992). Participants were also administered the HDS assessment to analyze patterns between leaders who emerged and leaders who did not emerge at the executive level. The HDS dimensions and definitions are located in Table 1 (Hogan & Hogan, 1997a).

A t-test was used to uncover significant differences. The study compared the same leaders who achieved leadership ranks and those who did not to determine potential environmental factors that moderate the emergence of leadership. From those patterns, and a comparison with predicted HDS components, a sample of participants was interviewed to understand the context of individual leadership emergence or derailment. Immediately following the assessments, participants were interviewed to help explicate the quantitative data.

Mid-level leader participants completed the NEO-PIR Inventory that comprises the Big 5 personality traits. The NEO-PIR was selected for this study because it has been shown to be the best predictor of leadership emergence and effectiveness (Judge, Bono, Ilies, & Gerhardt, 2002). Moreover, the NEO-PIR's five factors have a strong intra-class correlation between raters that range from .30 to .65 (McCrae & Costa, 1987). The instrument has also shown to have strong discriminant validity; 80% of the partial correlates were significant and all relationships were positive (McCrae & Costa, 1992). Therefore, the inventory served as a blocking variable with participants scoring high on extraversion, openness, and conscientiousness and low on agreeableness and neuroticism (Judge et al., 2002).

The Hogan Development Survey (HDS) is used in organizations to measure the behaviors of individuals under extreme environmental stress. The HDS was part of the research design because it uncovers derailing leadership behaviors after emergence (Hogan & Hogan, 2001). The reliability of the assessment's scales and subscales rate at .71 across all scales and the average inter-item correlations for HDS subscales rate at .21, indicating that responses are reliable and valid (Hogan & Hogan, 1997b).

### **NEO-PIR Descriptive Statistics**

The NEO-PIR results for the mid-level group are outlined in Table 2. In earlier discussion, the Big 5 personality traits were mentioned as predictors of leadership emergence and effectiveness (Judge, et al., 2002). In the leadership emergence domain, high scores of Extraversion, Openness, and Conscientiousness are present above the high levels at thresholds of 121, 121, and 133 respectively (Judge et al., 2002). The domain of Agreeableness was under the threshold below 120. The group means and thresholds are represented in Table 2 and support Proposition 1 that mid-level female leaders are predicted as effective leaders.

Table 1.

*Assessment Dimensions NEO-PIR Big 5 Inventory Definitions*

Assessment	Dimension	Definitions
<i>NEO-PIR</i>	Extraversion	Refers to behaviors like being friendly, warm, energetic, determined, enthusiastic, optimistic, active
<i>NEO-PIR</i>	Agreeableness	Concerns being forgiving, trusting, generous, tolerant, clever, gentle
<i>NEO-PIR</i>	Conscientiousness	Refers to being efficient, thorough, persistent, ambitious, methodical
<i>NEO-PIR</i>	Openness	Characterized as original, imaginative, versatile, insightful, idealistic, unconventional
<i>NEO-PIR</i>	Neuroticism	Concerns being anxious, fearful, irritable, excitable, moody, hasty
<i>Hogan Derailer</i>	Excitable	Concerns seeming moody, easily irritated, and hard to please, and dealing with stress by quitting or ending relationships.
<i>Hogan Derailer</i>	Skeptical	Concerns mistrusting others' intentions, being alert for signs of mistreatment, and then challenging or blaming others when it seems to occur.
<i>Hogan Derailer</i>	Cautious	Concerns being overly concerned about making mistakes or being embarrassed, and becoming defensive and conservative when stressed.
<i>Hogan Derailer</i>	Reserved	Concerns seeming independent, uncaring, aloof, uncomfortable with strangers, and dealing with stress by withdrawing and being uncommunicative.
<i>Hogan Derailer</i>	Leisurely	Concerns wanting to work according to one's own pace and standards, and feeling put upon when asked to work faster or differently.
<i>Hogan Derailer</i>	Bold	Concerns the tendency to over evaluate one's talents, not admit mistakes or take advice, and blustering and bluffing when under pressure.
<i>Hogan Derailer</i>	Mischievous	Concerns taking risks, testing limits, making hasty decisions, not learning from experience, and demanding to move on when confronted with mistakes.
<i>Hogan Derailer</i>	Colorful	Concerns expecting to be seen as talented and interesting, ignoring other's requests, and becoming very busy when under pressure.
<i>Hogan Derailer</i>	Imaginative	Concerns being eccentric-acting and thinking in creative and sometimes unusual ways – and becoming unpredictable when stressed.
<i>Hogan Derailer</i>	Diligent	Concerns having high standards of performance for self and others, being meticulous, precise, picky, critical, and stubborn when under pressure.
<i>Hogan Derailer</i>	Dutiful	Concerns being cordial, agreeable, and eager to please, reluctant to take independent action, and conforming when under pressure.

Table 2.

*NEO-PIR Means and Thresholds for Leadership Emergence and Effectiveness*

Column 1	Group Mean	Threshold	Predictive Direction
Neuroticism	66	69	Low
Extravert	123	121	High
Openness	122	121	High
Agreeableness	117	120	Low
Contentiousness	133	133	High

**Hogan Descriptive Statistics**

The mid-level leader descriptive statistics are revealed in Table 3. The executive leaders' descriptive statistics are revealed in Table 4. Both tables reflect data analysis at a significance level of .05 ( $p < .05$ ). The means in the mid-level leader descriptive statics reflected values at  $M=43.73$  (Cautious variable) on the low end and  $M=70.67$  (Skeptical variable) on the high end. The executive leader analysis reflected ranges of  $M=52.60$  (Cautious variable) on the low end and  $M=62.60$  (Excitable variable). The analysis in the descriptive statistics revealed that there were large standard errors and standard deviations. For the mid-level leaders, the standard deviations for the dimensions ranged from an  $SD = 21.14$  (Skeptical variable) to  $SD = 31.84$  (Reserved variable). For the executive leader group, the standard deviations for the dimensions ranged from an  $SD = 23.02$  (Dutiful variable) to  $SD = 30.44$  (Cautious variable).

Table 3.

*Mid-Level Hogan Derailer Descriptive Statistics*

Excitable	Skeptical	Cautious	Reserved	Leisurely	Bold	Mischievous	Colorful	Imaginative	Diligent	Dutiful	
Mean	62.60 Mean	62.00 Mean	52.60 Mean	54.07 Mean	54.33 Mean	59.13 Mean	53.53 Mean	60.47 Mean	54.67 Mean	53.40 Mean	55.33
Standard Error	5.97 Standard	7.69 Standard	6.75 Standard	8.22 Standard	6.12 Standard	6.60 Standard	7.45 Standard	6.51 Standard	6.91 Standard	8.20 Standard	5.94
Median	69.00 Median	67.00 Median	58.00 Median	66.00 Median	54.00 Median	57.00 Median	49.00 Median	57.00 Median	63.00 Median	53.00 Median	57.00
Mode	69.00 Mode	87.00 Mode	58.00 Mode	66.00 Mode	54.00 Mode	43.00 Mode	34.00 Mode	79.00 Mode	34.00 Mode	69.00 Mode	57.00
Standard Deviation	23.12 Standard	29.78 Standard	26.14 Standard	31.84 Standard	23.68 Standard	25.56 Standard	28.84 Standard	25.22 Standard	26.78 Standard	31.76 Standard	23.02
Sample Variance	534.69 Sample V	887.14 Sample V	683.26 Sample V	1013.64 Sample V	560.95 Sample V	653.41 Sample V	831.70 Sample V	636.27 Sample V	717.24 Sample V	1008.97 Sample V	530.10
Kurtosis	-0.41 Kurtosis	-0.63 Kurtosis	-0.64 Kurtosis	-1.27 Kurtosis	0.13 Kurtosis	-1.09 Kurtosis	-1.11 Kurtosis	-1.46 Kurtosis	-1.17 Kurtosis	-1.20 Kurtosis	0.06
Skewness	-0.41 Skewness	-0.78 Skewness	-0.15 Skewness	-0.34 Skewness	-0.50 Skewness	-0.05 Skewness	0.35 Skewness	0.14 Skewness	0.14 Skewness	-0.21 Skewness	-0.14
Range	80.00 Range	94.00 Range	85.00 Range	95.00 Range	85.00 Range	76.00 Range	88.00 Range	77.00 Range	79.00 Range	96.00 Range	86.00
Minimum	16.00 Minimum	2.00 Minimum	10.00 Minimum	4.00 Minimum	3.00 Minimum	20.00 Minimum	12.00 Minimum	23.00 Minimum	20.00 Minimum	3.00 Minimum	13.00
Maximum	96.00 Maximum	96.00 Maximum	95.00 Maximum	99.00 Maximum	88.00 Maximum	96.00 Maximum	100.00 Maximum	100.00 Maximum	99.00 Maximum	99.00 Maximum	99.00
Count	15.00 Count	15.00 Count	15.00 Count	15.00 Count	15.00 Count	15.00 Count	15.00 Count	15.00 Count	15.00 Count	15.00 Count	15.00

Table 4.

*Executive Level Hogan Derailer Descriptive Statistics*

<i>Excitable</i>	<i>Skeptical</i>	<i>Cautious</i>	<i>Reserved</i>	<i>Leisurely</i>	<i>Bold</i>	<i>Mischievous</i>	<i>Colorful</i>	<i>Imaginative</i>	<i>Diligent</i>	<i>Dutiful</i>	
Mean	62.60 Mean	62.00 Mean	52.60 Mean	54.07 Mean	54.33 Mean	59.13 Mean	53.53 Mean	60.47 Mean	54.67 Mean	53.40 Mean	55.33
Standard Error	5.97 Standard	7.69 Standard	6.75 Standard	8.22 Standard	6.12 Standard	6.60 Standard	7.45 Standard	6.51 Standard	6.91 Standard	8.20 Standard	5.94
Median	69.00 Median	67.00 Median	58.00 Median	66.00 Median	54.00 Median	57.00 Median	49.00 Median	57.00 Median	63.00 Median	53.00 Median	57.00
Mode	69.00 Mode	87.00 Mode	58.00 Mode	66.00 Mode	54.00 Mode	43.00 Mode	34.00 Mode	79.00 Mode	34.00 Mode	69.00 Mode	57.00
Standard Deviation	23.12 Standard	29.78 Standard	26.14 Standard	31.84 Standard	23.68 Standard	25.56 Standard	28.84 Standard	25.22 Standard	26.78 Standard	31.76 Standard	23.02
Sample Variance	534.69 Sample V	887.14 Sample V	683.26 Sample V	1013.64 Sample V	560.95 Sample V	653.41 Sample V	831.70 Sample V	636.27 Sample V	717.24 Sample V	1008.97 Sample V	530.10
Kurtosis	-0.41 Kurtosis	-0.63 Kurtosis	-0.64 Kurtosis	-1.27 Kurtosis	0.13 Kurtosis	-1.09 Kurtosis	-1.11 Kurtosis	-1.46 Kurtosis	-1.17 Kurtosis	-1.20 Kurtosis	0.06
Skewness	-0.41 Skewness	-0.78 Skewness	-0.15 Skewness	-0.34 Skewness	-0.50 Skewness	-0.05 Skewness	0.35 Skewness	0.14 Skewness	0.14 Skewness	-0.21 Skewness	-0.14
Range	80.00 Range	94.00 Range	85.00 Range	95.00 Range	85.00 Range	76.00 Range	88.00 Range	77.00 Range	79.00 Range	96.00 Range	86.00
Minimum	16.00 Minimum	2.00 Minimum	10.00 Minimum	4.00 Minimum	3.00 Minimum	20.00 Minimum	12.00 Minimum	23.00 Minimum	20.00 Minimum	3.00 Minimum	13.00
Maximum	96.00 Maximum	96.00 Maximum	95.00 Maximum	99.00 Maximum	88.00 Maximum	96.00 Maximum	100.00 Maximum	100.00 Maximum	99.00 Maximum	99.00 Maximum	99.00
Count	15.00 Count	15.00 Count	15.00 Count	15.00 Count	15.00 Count	15.00 Count	15.00 Count	15.00 Count	15.00 Count	15.00 Count	15.00

After comparing the means and standard deviations, there were large variations in the means in both groups, although less so in the executive group. Both data sets also possessed large standard deviations in all of the eleven dimensions where the standard deviation is greater than 20.00 in every dimension. Large standard deviations may be attributed to the small sample size of both groups,  $n=15$  for each group.

Despite the variations, a t-test was run to understand the significance of the variables between the two groups. The probability values are listed in Table 5. The probability values were not statistically significant for any of the eleven HDS dimensions. With the probability values in HDS Dutiful and Excitable so high, Proposition 2 was not supported; mid-level females did not have higher scores on the Dutiful and Excitable dimensions.

Reviewing the dimensions of Mischievous and Imaginative, the data analysis revealed that the mid-level leaders averaged lower scores on both the Mischievous and Imaginative dimensions as shown in Table 3. Additionally, both variables revealed probability values that were not statistically significant between the groups. Mid-level leaders did not have statistically higher scores in Mischievous and Imaginative dimensions and Proposition 3 could not be supported.

While the Colorful variable was not included in any hypothesis, the Colorful dimension contained a p value of .08. The Colorful dimension concerns expecting to be seen as talented and interesting, ignoring other's requests, and becoming very busy when under pressure. Healthy displays of the Colorful variable include commanding attention, using charisma, and using social cues to manage situations (Hogan & Hogan, 1997a). The implications of this result will be discussed further in the discussion section.

From the analysis of the Hogan Development Survey, Propositions 2 and 3 were not supported. However, there are some interesting possibilities for future studies in analyzing the differences in female leader groups on the Colorful variable. These possibilities will be explored in the following paragraphs. Additionally, larger sample sizes may yield data sets that are less variable and may uncover differences originally proposed in this study.

Table 5.

*Probability Values by Hogan Dimension*

Dimension	P-Value
Excitable	0.308417
Skeptical	0.174276
Cautious	0.257506
Reserved	0.103412
Leisurely	0.127318
Bold	0.443456
Mischievous	0.448463
Colorful	0.056645
Imaginative	0.372476
Diligent	0.203661
Dutiful	0.382062

### Qualitative Results

The aim of the mixed methods explanatory design was to conduct a quantitative analysis that was informed and elucidated by a qualitative method. However, there were also propositions aligned to themes that were expected to emerge. Propositions 4 through 6 were contingent upon the qualitative results and the themes around those results are outlined below.

#### **Proposition 4: Familial Responsibilities.**

In all the interviews conducted, a consistent theme emerged among female leaders; a desire to perform well at work, while caring for the family unit. The angst among female leaders was palpable in that they cared deeply about investing time contemporaneously for their families and their careers without either facet suffering. One leader shared her strategy for coping with work-life demands:

I always believed that if you worked really hard and smart, you were a good team player, and built a good reputation for yourself, when you needed a favor, flexibility would be given. I always loved working, but I got to the point where I had achieved the highest level without sacrificing what was important to me at home. There are always trade-offs (Executive Leader 3, personal communication, February 16, 2016).

Other leaders also echoed the practice of starting early or working late to meet all the needs in their lives.

I place added pressure on myself not to be seen as a “working mom” who needs to leave to go take care of my kids. Even if I take off early, I get back online later to make sure I am visible and seen as contributing (Mid-Level Leader 2, personal communication, January 12, 2016).



Ninety-five percent of the time, I am the one taking the kids/pets to the doctor/vet appointments and going to the school shows. To do all of this, means I have to make up the time to get my work done and give up time in other areas like sleep sacrifice and missed workouts (Mid-Level Leader 6, personal communication, March 15, 2016).

Familial responsibilities clearly emerged as a theme for female leaders both at the executive and mid-level. Proposition 4 is supported in that some women have chosen to remain at certain levels as a strategy for balancing their work and home lives, but both groups of women struggle with competing priorities. In the executive leader group, women tend to put in additional hours (before or after schedule) to negotiate flexibility when family needs to take priority or as a means to be seen as a visible leader.

### **Proposition 5: Role Conflict.**

In the interview protocol, role conflict was not directly structured as a topic for the leaders. The question was constructed broadly to expound on a multitude of challenges. In this fashion, several leaders recalled role incongruence and conflict throughout the lifespan of their careers.

I learned to just go with the flow... I did have to constantly prove myself and prove that women could do the job (Executive Leader 4, personal communication, February 29, 2016).

I have a fairly direct style... Male executives loved that style until it came to them. I had to change my style to accommodate the male executives and let an idea be *their* [emphasis added] idea (Mid-Level Leader 3, personal communication, February 16, 2016).

In both narratives, the female leaders are adapting their style to reshape male perceptions of a female leader's role. However, the individuals themselves do not feel incongruent with their role and gender. The theme of influencing is present among female executives. Being flexible and adapting to the situation to get results is also threaded in the executive females' interview responses. In the mid-level arena, other themes bubble to the surface.

I have been more dependent on sponsors to help me get to the next level and some of those female sponsors I didn't want to emulate. It was really focused on emotion. I love that passion but you have to contain those emotions (Mid-Level Leader 2, personal communication, January 12, 2016).

I don't think gender or role issues are due to men being used to working with men. I think it is more that they are threatened by an intelligent woman or they do not feel comfortable with the differences in style between men and women (Mid-Level Leader 6, personal communication, March 15, 2016).

At the executive level, the story line consisted of influencing other leaders with opposing styles. Executive leaders also commented on the level of flexibility and change required to

operate at a senior level. In contrast, mid-level leaders noticed and commented on the differences of “fit” or leadership style, but the comments were absent of any focus on adapting one’s style or influencing as a coping mechanism for role incongruence. While Proposition 5 is supported in that role incongruence hinders some women from ascension, the qualitative interviews provide clues about the themes and are involved with modern-day role incongruence.

Whereas Proposition 5 was supported because mid-level leaders clearly noticed the role conflict by their male counterparts, a key difference between the two groups emerged. The executive leaders were able to successfully navigate through the conflict as evidenced by their interview responses. Mid-level leaders conveyed their awareness of differences and conflicts, but did not mention how they navigated through those differences.

### **Proposition 6: Leadership Style.**

In the interviews conducted, adaptability and flexibility emerged as a theme for the executive leader group. Not only was flexibility employed to manage the increasing demands of an executive role, but it was also used to adjust leadership styles and hone skills needed to perform at more complex levels.

I would say I am also a transactional leader with a focus on being strategic. I was taught early by a male leader to be prepared with facts and data and to tow the company line and be flexible if I want to be an executive (Executive Leader 1, personal communication, January 11, 2016).

Repeating the sentiments of the executive above, leadership style parlayed into the theme of role conflict. There are also elements of adapting the leadership style in an effort to mirror an executive male. This feeling is articulated by another executive and mid-level leader, “I had to change my [leadership] style to accommodate the male executives and let an idea be *their* [emphasis added] idea,” (Executive Leader 3, personal communication, February 16, 2016).

What I have noticed is that executive leaders are morphing into their leaders, particularly women morphing into male leaders. At the start, they tend to have the same views [as a lower level leader] even though knowing someone for years before that is the exact opposite of how they used to be. I don’t necessarily see (adapting leadership styles) being a trend a little further down you go in the mid-levels, but definitely at the executive level (Mid-Level Leader 5, personal communication, March 10, 2016).

Ironically, very similar themes and comments emerged for leadership style and role congruence. Very simply, when conflict is sensed by the executive females, the leaders immediately begin to assess what adjustments need to be made to the leadership style to effectively guide the relationship to a productive place. The adjustment of leadership style may also be underpinned by an effort to avoid the perception of role conflict by male executives.

Mid-level leaders also sensed the conflict, but did not translate the moment into an opportunity to adjust the leadership style. Proposition 6 is supported in that women who employ multiple leadership styles to fit a situation emerge in the executive levels. The concept of

navigating role conflict and styles is a subtle nuance that may hold the key to unlocking why some women attain higher levels, and others remain at the front and mid-levels.

Through this mixed methods research, the NEO-PIR results supported Proposition 1; females at the mid-level met the predictive criteria for leader effectiveness. Assuming that the mid-level females are predicted to be effective, they are primed for the executive levels of leadership. The quantitative portion of the study also uncovered that women have significantly different behaviors around the Colorful variable. The Colorful variable mean was much higher for women at executive levels than for women at mid-levels of leadership. While this discovery warrants further discussion, Propositions 2 and 3 were not supported by the HDS assessment analysis.

In the second sequence of the mixed methods research, the qualitative interviews revealed interesting insights about the challenges female leaders face and how they approach these challenges with respect to prioritizing family life, congruence, and leadership styles. The hand-coded comments and subsequent themes proved to elucidate key differences in how women in either group approach each of these challenges (these themes support Propositions 4-6). The themes were gathered by looking for key words and phrases that aggregated into topics.

## **Discussion**

This mixed methods study uncovered interesting results in unexpected places. First, Proposition 1 was supported by an indication that our samples of women at mid-levels are effective leaders and leader-ready. The NEO-PIR assessment affirmed that women have the right mix of leadership capabilities to emerge. The mid-level leaders who were interviewed acknowledged that they wanted additional responsibility, but for a myriad of reasons, were not at the executive level. These reasons will be discussed in subsequent paragraphs. Because our mid-level leaders demonstrated the traits for leadership effectiveness in the NEO-PIR assessments, the interviews elucidated some of the reasons why the mid-level females did not emerge in the senior levels. In other words, our mixed methods qualitative study informed the quantitative study in our first proposition.

Surprisingly, the Hogan Development Survey did not support our second and third propositions. Nevertheless, an unexpected finding occurred. The Colorful variable mean was much higher for women at executive levels than for women at mid-level positions. How can the difference in the Colorful variable help us understand why women remain at mid-levels?

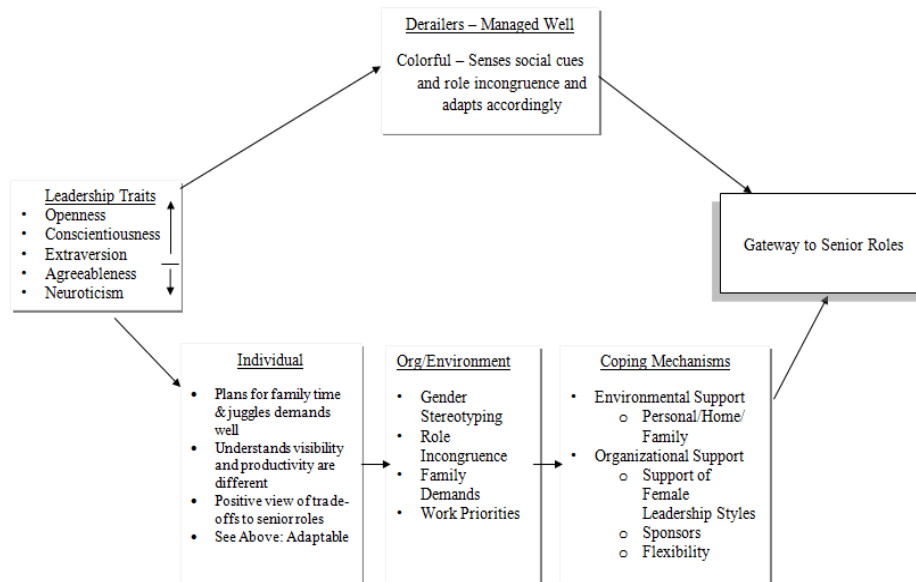
Individuals who have high ratings on the Colorful domain are seen as talented and interesting, and become very busy when under pressure (Hogan & Hogan, 1997a). Healthy displays of the Colorful variable include commanding attention, using charisma, and using social cues to manage situations (Hogan & Hogan, 1997a). Participants who score high in the Colorful domain also tend to self-promote (Hogan & Hogan, 1997a). Individuals who score lower in the Colorful domain are more modest (Hogan & Hogan, 1997a). Low scores also indicated that individuals tend to work behind the scenes, and avoid calling attention to themselves (Hogan & Hogan, 1997a). Low scoring individuals also feel comfortable when others take the lead (Hogan & Hogan, 1997a).

Using these indicators, we can begin to connect how our executive leaders responded in the interview phase to ascertain ways the groups of women are different. Women at executive levels spoke about their willingness to lead and find multiple pathways to adjust leadership styles and get results. Women at the mid-levels did not mention pathways or style adjustments in their qualitative interviews. Executives also spoke about ways in which they showcased an idea or looked for an opportunity to be involved in a big project or contract. The Colorful variable's nature of being dominant and using cues from the situation parlays into the themes discussed by the executive group. Perhaps mid-level leaders are not derailing from executive levels, but mid-level females are not navigating pathways and opening the leadership aperture to find ways to influence their male counterparts. These differences in the two groups highlight the importance of maneuvering through one's organizational environment and daily interactions.

Focusing on the qualitative study, there were other themes that emerged as differences between the two groups. In the interviews conducted, adaptability and flexibility emerged as a theme for the executive leader group in a number of situations. First, executives and mid-level leaders spoke about juggling the demands of work and family. Both groups of females articulated flexibility in managing competing priorities, but the executive group focused less on flexing work schedules to be visible. Instead, the executive group forged pathways that generally involved starting early in the day to get a read on the priorities and jump start productivity. The executive group spoke specifically about how they plan and build specific routines into work and family events to meet competing demands.

The mid-level group spoke less of routines and more thematically about supporting doctor's appointments and events at a more tactical level. The mid-level group expressed more concern about visibility when they were not in the workplace rather than being seen as productive or effective. The subtle nuance of building in routines and flexible work habits was very revealing about how women in the two groups balance demands differently. The concepts of flexibility and adaptability transferred into other situations that were described by both groups of leaders. Specifically, both groups of women faced situations where they encountered more dominant leadership styles or subtle bias. In the executive group, the females quickly assessed the leadership landscape and adjusted their style to achieve the best result. Several executives spoke of effectively influencing and giving up credit for an idea in an effort to make another leader believe the idea was his or her own idea.

The mid-level leader had an awareness of different leadership styles, but did not articulate any attempts to modify a leadership style to be more effective. Mid-level leaders were also acutely aware when style differences were present and articulated these differences as a part of gender roles. While the mid-level leaders expressed awareness of different styles, the group did not verbalize attempts to adapt the leadership style. The preceding paragraphs discuss how the leadership style differences were articulated as inclusive of gender differences and preferences. The role incongruity or leadership disharmony and lack of adaptation may also provide important clues about why mid-level females may not transition into the higher rungs of leadership. The research findings are visually depicted in Figure 2.



*Figure 2.* Research findings. The figure represents the individual, organizational, and coping mechanisms that lead to senior roles for female leaders.

## Themes Across Both Groups

Across both populations of leaders, females expressed the concept of “proving herself” to her male counterparts. At both levels, females expressed that they sensed that men did not perceive them as capable. Enshrined in this sentiment, is that women are not capable, because they are not men. All of the female leaders interviewed worked diligently to debunk capability concerns, but at a price. Women reported that they worked harder and longer than their male counterparts and had to display a much broader array of skills to be perceived as capable.

Furthermore, emerging female leaders were not encouraged and welcomed, but often thrown additional obstacles and barriers in their ascent. Female leaders shared elaborate stories of being mocked, demeaned, and ridiculed by their male counterparts. However, both groups of women demonstrated tremendous resilience in taking the most difficult roles and working harder and smarter in an effort to prove their worthiness.

## Limitations

The sample size in this study was small, despite casting a wide net for a much larger population of participants. As a result, caution is extended in generalizing the results. The small sample size also created homogenous populations with respect to race and industries in the study.

Notwithstanding the small sample size, the question still remains if there are other HDS variables that could reveal important differences between mid-level and executive females with additional research. Beyond the quantitative sequence, the qualitative sequence does not fully explain why some women remain at less senior levels of the organization. Certainly, the themes

of pathways to influences and toggling priorities were consistent monikers; however, were there other reasons that the executive females excelled and the mid-level leaders did not? Further research is warranted.

## **Implications**

There is a global call for women to be represented at executive levels of leadership. From Europe to Asia to North America, the world is watching what transpires as women move at a glacial pace up the icy corporate ladder (Miller, 2014; U.S. Bureau of Economic and Business Affairs, 2012). As the executive females increase in population, what are the implications for those women in leadership roles and for organizations?

## **Women as Practitioners**

First, women who are looking to participate in the senior leader levels need a heightened awareness of the flexibility required to manage competing demands. While there are competing demands for all individuals who work, the demands of the job at a senior level often take a front seat. As female leaders who are balancing these professional demands, the most successful leaders are able to adapt nimbly.

The executive females interviewed articulated pathways and alternative approaches to help them balance demands. These included flexible hours, earlier hours, nannies, and neighbors. Women must be prepared to create pathways that establish personal guardrails that protect their family priorities. Women must also scan their personal landscape to understand what tasks can be delegated at the office and at home.

Additionally, women need to understand how their own personal leadership styles may conflict with the expectations of senior leader behaviors. Although the leadership lens has been widened to include more female-friendly leadership styles, *think manager-think male* behaviors are still fondly embraced (Schein, Mueller, Lituchy, & Liu, 1996). Females in the mid-levels need to understand that their personal style may not be embraced by their male counterparts. Females should look to leverage transformational styles when the moment calls for those characteristics and adjust to styles when the situation demands less charisma and more transactional management of a situation (Bass, 1985). In other words, women should curate leadership traits from multiple theories rather than stay confined to the most comfortable or native styles.

## **Organizations**

Organizations have a role in helping women to their ascent to senior status. While individual women share the responsibility of moving towards senior roles, organizations can scaffold the success. Many organizations like Telstra have begun more flexible work policies for working women, but more companies need to enable flexibility for its senior female leaders (CEB Corporate Leadership Council, 2014). Flexibility could mean variation of hours, working locations, or working days. Organizations must evaluate the demands of the business, the

employee, and the customers, but be mindful of how the firm can support its female talent through the ascent of their careers.

Organizations can also benefit from embracing multiple ways of leading. Harkening back to the *think manager-think male* concept, organizations continue to embrace more traditional leadership behaviors rather than accept multiple styles (Schein et al., 1996). Organizations can increase female representation by evaluating processes that traditionally bias female behaviors. Recruiters can be trained and processes can be improved to reduce bias against female candidates (Hunt-Earle, 2012). Interventions can be deployed to address different ways women and men lead to raise awareness in the legitimacy of behaviors inherent in both genders (Ibarra & Obodaru, 2009). More formal sponsor programs can be created for mid-level leaders to help women create pathways to effective leadership, toggle the labyrinth of work and home demands, and advocate for the lower-levels of talent (Ibarra, Carter, & Silva, 2010)

## Future Research

Given that the representation of senior females has moved at a sluggish pace over the last half-century, more research is warranted. Moreover, additional mixed methods research is needed to provide the “why” behind the “what” of female leader differences. Very few studies about female leaders include a mixed methods study.

Clearly, larger sample sizes are needed to generalize the findings and potentially uncover other derailing differences between female leader groups. Future researchers could also analyze how interventions minimize derailing behaviors and impact the movement of females to higher levels. Researchers can then understand if specific interventions improve the movement from mid to senior levels. Most importantly, future research should continue to build on studies like these that uncover why women largely stay midstream in the organizational waters.

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