

# Women's role in leading organizations

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## **Abstract**

*Good leadership became very important for employees' engagement and productivity, while companies where women are promoted in leadership positions enjoy very good economic results. Starting from these facts, the authors focused their research on studying a triangle of concepts: leadership, gender, generation, aiming to understand which the characteristics of women leaders are, how they are different from those of men leaders, and how the role and importance of women leaders are perceived by different generations of employees.*

*The authors, aiming to check the hypothesis that female leadership is valuable in modern organizations, reviewed the literature, were inspired by the ten descriptors presented by Kouzes and Posner (Checklist of Admired Leaders, 2002) as being the characteristics of successful leaders, and conducted a quantitative research. They developed a questionnaire and sent it out to employees of large companies in Romania. The data were processed with the SPSS program (Statistical Package for the Social Sciences).*

*The research results show differences in perceptions related to this topic between male and female respondents, between those holding different positions in the organizations, and between generations. Similarities and differences between women and men as leaders were also revealed. Starting from the findings of the research, the authors made some recommendation for improving leadership within organizations, pointing out the need of a balance between men and women at the top.*

**Keywords:** *leadership, gender, descriptors, generation, women, career*

**JEL codes:** M10, M12, M14

## **Introduction**

The dynamics of markets, competition, technology, clients' demands, increased risks and uncertainty, and the rapid changes in the environment generated the need for a better leadership. Reality demonstrates the beneficial impact of women's presence at the top of the organizations. However, even if lately the business environment was much more open to gender diversity, we are far from seeing true equality in this respect.

Starting from these facts, the authors decided to study the triangle leadership-gender-generation: (1) the characteristics of effective leaders, (2) the

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differences between the leadership styles of men and women, and the status of women in organizations, (3) the comparative preferences that employees from generations Baby Boomers (1946-1964), X (1975-1979), and Y (1980-1994) have in this respect. Towards these ends, a research, built upon the Kouzes and Posner model (2002) of successful leaders' descriptors (characteristics), was performed.

### **1. Literature review**

Leadership became more important in the last decades, mainly because of the increased uncertainty. Also, it is noticeable that today's successful leaders are quite different than traditional ones.

Authentic leaders stay true to their own principles and values, looking to act because their personal convictions, rather than advancement interests. Modern leaders need to have at least three qualities: emotional intelligence, flexibility, and people skills. Data show that women have a better affinity with this leadership characteristics, and have high performance in leadership positions (Shamir & Eliahu, 2011).

Various researchers (Helgesen (1995) made comparative studies regarding feminine and masculine leadership. The feminine leadership style is described as social-expressive, paying personal attention to subordinates and to a good work environment; while masculine leadership style is instrumental, focused on giving directions.

Traditionally, the most appreciated leadership characteristics were masculine by their nature (Eagly, 2011). Yet, over the last few years, researchers have shown that many of these traits (assertiveness, individualism, task orientation) did not always contribute to an increase of leadership effectiveness (Judge and Piccolo, 2004). Instead of the leadership theory centered on The Great Man, the transformational leadership has emerged, and its effectiveness is backed up by more and more researchers. Traits present in the transformational leadership model (collaboration and empowerment) are associated traditionally with women (Eagly, 2007), feminine features contributing to leadership effectiveness. *Fortune 500* survey showed that the companies with many female managers have a much higher average productivity of their own capital when compared to companies with fewer female managers (The White House Project Report, 2009). Analyses (Eagly, Carli, 2003; Eagly, Johannesen-Schmidt, van Engen, 2003; Eagly, 2003) emphasize that employees position female leaders above male leaders when comparing the majority of traits belonging to transformational leadership (charisma, ability to motivate the employees, and creativity in problem solving). Moreover, these characteristics of leadership are considered a real support for this type of leadership model. Also, as Eagly pointed out after an extensive analysis, subordinates of female leaders have a higher willingness to work over-time, are more satisfied with their leaders and are more competitive in comparison with the subordinates of male leaders. Gorman and Kmec (2007) stated that women have a tendency to work

harder than men when occupying the same position, which is explainable by the strict standards and exigencies manifested towards women.

Women are better viewed as motivators (energetic and enthusiastic), communicators (keep employees well informed), giving feedback (let collaborators know how they perform), and setting goals (at high standards). Men are better viewed at tradition (base their knowledge on experience), innovation (open to new ideas and willing to take risks), keeping their composure (able to control their emotions), delegating (assign objectives and responsibility), cooperating (team players) and persuading (sell ideas and win people over).

Kobacoff (1998) has revealed that women tend to be well evaluated when it comes to empathy (a good understanding of people and their needs, a strong support relationship) and communication (set clear goals for others, clearly express ideas and thoughts and maintain a good flow of communication) when compared to men. Also, women are better viewed in regards to people skills (sensitivity towards others, kindness, the ability to listen and develop efficient relationships with co-workers and employees). Women also score higher on the leadership scale which measures the focus on production (strong interest in achieving their goals and high expectations of themselves and others). Men tend to get better results at strategic planning and organizational vision.

However, it is still widely believed that the role of women in leadership is still small (Ryan, Hasiam, 2005). Despite the fact that clear improvements have been gradually made in terms of women's career path and choices, and people's perception is favorable to women leaders, the number of women in top positions has not proven that the glass ceiling disappeared.

It seemed obvious that this clear discrepancy should be analyzed in order to identify the barriers which bog down women's career evolution. Women in Business and Management (ILO 2013) formulated several viewpoints regarding these barriers: family responsibilities for women (more than men); roles assigned by society; lack of experience in managerial roles; masculine corporate culture; lack of successful models for women; family culture in which women take primary responsibility; lack of company gender equality policy; stereotypes regarding women; lack of leadership trainings for women; inflexible time schedule and work arrangements; lack of strategy concerning retention of competent women; prioritizing the recruitment and the promotion of men; lack of legislation to ensure gender balance.

Other barriers which prevent women from reaching the top leadership level, are : women don't act in an authoritarian manner and don't use imperatives; they have a non-aggressive behavior: they avoid conflicts; feel responsible; are available - their door is always open; get personally involved as they feel that relationships are extremely important; seek approval, they use indirect speech, have different intonations when speaking; want to be perceived as „nice”, they smile, are hesitant and they resent the abuse of power; attribute their success to someone else. Some studies, that investigated the matter further, found the education that men and women receive regarding their supposed roles as being a reason for such barriers

that are so deeply ingrained in our culture. Some of these barriers are: when they get promoted to traditionally male positions, women have a tendency to see their abilities as not suited for those positions; they believe that, in order to be socially accepted, they have to avoid success or „the appearance of success”; women have been often taught to not be aggressive or assertive, and to not seek power and control (Kanter 1977).

## **2. A generational research on effective leadership**

The authors' research aimed to answer the question: *“Is female leadership a valuable solution for a modern organization?”* It is based on ten descriptors (characteristics) defined by Kouzes and Posner and included in the Checklist of Admired Leaders (2002): The model is rather well-known, it was previously used research and it is easily applied.

### **2.1 Research objectives, hypotheses, method, and instruments**

To answer the research question, we set as objectives: (1) to study Kouzes and Posner gender descriptors of a successful leader; (2) to analyze how gender, generation, and hierarchical position in organizations impact the perception regarding gender in leadership; (3) to identify and prioritize the characteristics of the effective leader;

The research hypotheses are: (H1) The averages for female and male descriptors are equal in terms of impact to leadership effectiveness; (H2) There are generational differences in valuing female leadership; (H3) There are gender differences when valuing female leadership; (H4) There are hierarchical differences when valuing female leadership.

The research methods used are questionnaire enquiry and focus group. The questionnaire contained two parts: (1) questions referring to personal information (age, gender, field of activity, professional status - manager/non-manager); (2) questions meant on the one hand to relate the leadership characteristics, as seen by Kouzes and Posner, to a gender: (masculine, feminine or neutral), and on the other to rank the characteristics on a scale from 1 to 10, 10 being the most important. The focus group included specialists in management and English language that validated the meaning of the descriptors (characteristics). Table 1 presents these descriptors.

Hierarchical structure: 30% managers, 70% non-managers. According to specialists from different big companies, this structure is relevant, reflecting the employees' structure in companies based in Romania.

**Table 1 Description of the leadership descriptors**

<b>Leadership descriptors</b>	<b>Descriptor significance</b>
<b>1. Ambitious</b>	Dynamic, busy, hard working
<b>2. Caring</b>	Protective, understanding, kind-hearted, careful, thoughtful, selfless, compassionate
<b>3. Competent</b>	Capable and well equipped to meet objectives
<b>4. Determined</b>	Takes and implements decisions without making any change. Perceived as firm, and, sometimes, obsessive about their tasks
<b>5. Forward looking</b>	Innovative, generating progress and development. Dynamic, modern, radical, entrepreneurial, pioneer
<b>6. Honest</b>	Relies on truth in his relationships. Loyal and trustworthy, virtuous, and innocent
<b>7. Imaginative</b>	Has the capacity to create new representations, comfortable with using the own creativity
<b>8. Inspiring</b>	Provokes certain feelings and thoughts, influences people to think and act in a certain way, helps them to become more creative
<b>9. Loyal</b>	Devoted, dedicated,
<b>10. Self-contained</b>	Calm, balanced, quiet, discrete, disciplined, strong-minded

## *2.2 Sample and Data Collection*

The questionnaire was sent to 100 employees working in companies operating in Romania. 80 of them responded. Sample gender structure (Table 1): 50% women, 50% men. Age structure: 35% Generation Baby Boomer (B) (1946-1964) and Generation X (1965-1979); 65% Generation Y (1980-1994).

The collected answers were processed using the SPSS program (Statistical Package for the Social Sciences) due to its large scale use and its data crunching capabilities.

**Table 2 Sample structure**

<b>No of respondents</b>	<b>Gender structure</b>	<b>Generational structure</b>	<b>Hierarchical structure</b>	<b>Structure by activity</b>
	50%/50%	35%/65%	30%/70%	
80 respondents	40 female	28 Baby boomers& X	24 managers	12 respondents production 23 respondents services 20 respondents banking 15 respondents communication
	40 male	52 Y	56 non-managers	10 respondents others

**Source:** Authors' contribution

### 2.3 Key Results/Conclusions of the Survey

Processing the answers provided by the 80 people in the sample, we came to some conclusions, in relation with the research objectives and hypotheses.

Thus we determined that the *Ambitious, Caring, Honest, Imaginative and Loyal* characteristics are attributed to the female style of leadership, whereas the *Competent* and *Forward looking* are associated to the male style of leadership; there are three descriptors which, according to the respondents, can be equally attributed to male and female leadership style: *Inspiring, Self-controlled and Determined* (Table 3).

**Table 3 Characteristics of the successful leader, by gender**

Leadership characteristics	Feminine	Masculine	Neutral
1. Ambitious	40	31	9
2. Caring	67	-	13
3. Competent	31	35	14
4. Determined	33	32	15
5. Forward looking	22	39	19
6. Honest	46	23	11
7. Imaginative	42	29	6
8. Inspiring	34	35	11
9. Loyal	45	27	8
10. Self-contained	37	37	6

**Source:** Authors' contribution

According to the results presented in Table 3, only a few of the characteristics clearly correspond to a certain gender, for the others the values being very close. This research demonstrates that there is a slight advantage of female leadership characteristics, as others do.

It can be observed that the differences in perceptions are minor, when generations B+Y, on the one hand, and generation X, on the other hand, are compared. For members of generation Y, a leader's success is not influenced at all by gender. This change of mentality, which occurred in a relatively short time interval, is a positive one.

Furthermore, the study suggests that respondents belonging to generation Y associate female leadership with *Loyalty* (less than generations B+X), *Imaginative* (more than generation B+X), *Honesty* (less than generation B+X) and *Caring*. Another interesting fact is that the characteristics *Determined* and *Competent* characterize almost equally male and female leaders, according to members belonging to generation Y. *Self-controlled* and *Forward looking* remain mostly masculine characteristics, while *Competent* is nearly the same for male and female successful leadership.

The authors analyzed the ten characteristics in accordance with the gender, the hierarchical position, and generation of respondents. For instance, Tables 4 and Table 5 illustrate the results for the characteristic “Ambitious”, according to the gender of the respondents. Tables 6 and Table 7, according to their generations, while Tables 8 and Table 9, according to their positions in the organization.

**Table 4. Number of Respondents by Gender**

<b>Ambitious</b>			
<b>Male</b>	N	Valid	39
		Missing	0
<b>Female</b>	N	Valid	41
		Missing	0
	N	Valid	0
		Missing	1

Source: authors' contribution

**Table 5. Perceptions regarding “Ambitious” according to the respondents' gender**

<b>Ambitious</b>						
<b>Respondent's gender</b>	<b>Validity</b>	<b>Gender</b>	<b>Frequenc y</b>	<b>%</b>	<b>Valid %</b>	<b>Cumulative %</b>
<b>Male</b>	valid	masculine	14	35,9	35,9	35,9
		feminine	22	56,4	56,4	92,3
		neutral	3	7,7	7,7	100
		total	39	100	100	
<b>Female</b>	valid	masculine	17	41,5	41,5	41,5
		feminine	18	43,9	43,9	85,4
		neutral	6	14,6	14,6	100
		total	41	100	100	
	missing	system	1	100		

Source: authors' contribution

**Table 6. Number of Respondents by Generation**

<b>Ambitious</b>			
	N	Valid	0
		Missing	1
<b>B+X</b>	N	Valid	28
		Missing	0
<b>Y</b>	N	Valid	52
		Missing	0

Source: authors' contribution

**Table 7. Perceptions regarding “Ambitious” according to the respondents’ generation**

**Ambitious**

Respondent’s generation	Validity	Gender	Frequency	%	Valid %	Cumulative %
	missing	system	1	100		
<b>B+X</b>	valid	masculine	10	35,7	35,7	35,7
		feminine	16	57,1	57,1	92,9
		neutral	2	7,1	7,1	100
		total	28	100	100	
<b>Y</b>	valid	masculine	21	40,4	40,4	40,4
		feminine	24	46,2	46,2	86,5
		neutral	7	13,5	13,5	100
		total	52	100	100	

Source: authors’ contribution

**Table 8. Number of Respondents by Position in the Organization Chart**

**Ambitious**

	N	Valid	0
		Missing	1
<b>NON_M</b>	N	Valid	56
		Missing	0
<b>M</b>	N	Valid	24
		Missing	0

Source: authors’ contribution

**Table 9. Perceptions regarding “Ambitious” according to the respondents’ position in the organization chart**

**Ambitious**

Respondent’s generation	Validity	Gender	Frequency	%	Valid %	Cumulative %
	missing	system	1	100		
<b>NON_M</b>	valid	masculine	23	41,1	41,1	41,1
		feminine	27	48,2	48,21	89,39
		neutral	6	10,7	10,7	100
		total	56	100	100	
<b>M</b>	valid	masculine	8	33,3	33,3	33,3
		feminine	13	54,2	54,2	87,5
		neutral	3	12,5	12,5	100
		total	24	100	100	

Source: authors’ contribution



The authors analyzed the hierarchy of the ten characteristics, in terms of their importance for leadership success. The analysis focused on the gender of the respondents (Table 10), on their hierarchical positions (Table 11), and on their generations (Table 12).

**Table 10: Descriptors hierarchy/gender**

**Descriptive Statistics/a**

<b>Respondent's gender</b>	<b>Characteristic</b>	<b>N</b>	<b>Minimum</b>	<b>Maximum</b>	<b>Mean</b>	<b>Std deviation</b>
	<b>Ambitious</b>	39	1	10	6,77	2,700
	<b>Caring</b>	39	1	10	5,03	3,528
	<b>Competent</b>	39	1	9	3,87	2,505
	<b>Determined</b>	39	1	8	4,08	1,965
	<b>Forward looking</b>	39	1	5	2,49	1,189
	<b>Honest</b>	39	1	10	5,00	2,743
	<b>Imaginative</b>	39	5	10	7,62	1,583
	<b>Inspiring</b>	39	5	10	8,00	1,638
	<b>Loyal</b>	39	1	10	6,36	2,265
	<b>Self-controlled</b>	39	1	10	5,79	2,726
	<b>Valid N (list wise)</b>	39				
<b>Female</b>	<b>Ambitious</b>	41	1	10	6,46	2,820
	<b>Caring</b>	41	1	10	4,85	3,351
	<b>Competent</b>	41	1	9	3,88	2,472
	<b>Determined</b>	41	1	8	4,41	1,949
	<b>Forward looking</b>	41	1	5	2,78	1,333
	<b>Honest</b>	41	1	10	4,93	2,678
	<b>Imaginative</b>	41	5	10	7,71	1,470
	<b>Inspiring</b>	41	5	10	8,15	1,652
	<b>Loyal</b>	41	1	10	6,22	2,660
	<b>Self-controlled</b>	41	1	10	5,61	2,940
	<b>Valid N (list wise)</b>	41				

a. No statistics are computed for one or more split files because there are not valid cases.

**Source:** authors' contribution

Table 11. Descriptors hierarchy/M/NON\_M

Descriptive Statistics/a

Respondent's position	Characteristic	N	Minimum	Maximum	Mean	Std deviation
NON_M	<b>Ambitious</b>	56	1	10	6,57	2,716
	<b>Caring</b>	56	1	10	5,02	3,382
	<b>Competent</b>	56	1	9	3,64	2,315
	<b>Determined</b>	56	1	8	4,07	1,886
	<b>Forward looking</b>	56	1	5	2,55	1,190
	<b>Honest</b>	56	1	10	5,20	2,652
	<b>Imaginative</b>	56	5	10	7,59	1,523
	<b>Inspiring</b>	56	5	10	8,09	1,587
	<b>Loyal</b>	56	1	10	6,59	2,418
	<b>Self-controlled</b>	56	1	10	5,68	2,949
	<b>Valid N (listwise)</b>	56				
M	<b>Ambitious</b>	24	1	10	6,71	2,881
	<b>Caring</b>	24	1	10	4,75	3,566
	<b>Competent</b>	24	1	9	4,42	2,781
	<b>Determined</b>	24	1	8	4,67	2,078
	<b>Forward looking</b>	24	1	5	2,83	1,435
	<b>Honest</b>	24	1	10	4,42	2,765
	<b>Imaginative</b>	24	5	10	7,83	1,523
	<b>Inspiring</b>	24	5	10	8,04	1,781
	<b>Loyal</b>	24	1	10	5,58	2,466
	<b>Self-controlled</b>	24	1	10	5,75	2,588
	<b>Valid N (list wise)</b>	24				

a. No statistics are computed for one or more split files because there are not valid cases.

Source: authors' contribution

**Table 12: Descriptors hierarchy/Generation**

**Descriptive Statistics/a**

<b>Respondent's generation</b>	<b>Characteristic</b>	<b>N</b>	<b>Minimum</b>	<b>Maximum</b>	<b>Mean</b>	<b>Std deviation</b>
<b>B+X</b>	<b>Ambitious</b>	28	1	10	6,43	2,974
	<b>Caring</b>	28	1	10	5,07	3,579
	<b>Competent</b>	28	1	9	3,93	2,508
	<b>Determined</b>	28	1	8	4,14	2,031
	<b>Forward looking</b>	28	1	5	2,71	1,357
	<b>Honest</b>	28	1	10	5,00	2,776
	<b>Imaginative</b>	28	5	10	7,57	1,574
	<b>Inspiring</b>	28	5	10	7,93	1,654
	<b>Loyal</b>	28	1	10	6,21	2,470
	<b>Self-controlled</b>	28	1	10	6,00	2,722
	<b>Valid N (listwise)</b>	28				
<b>Y</b>	<b>Ambitious</b>	52	1	10	6,71	2,645
	<b>Caring</b>	52	1	10	4,87	3,361
	<b>Competent</b>	52	1	9	3,85	2,476
	<b>Determined</b>	52	1	8	4,31	1,925
	<b>Forward looking</b>	52	1	5	2,60	1,225
	<b>Honest</b>	52	1	10	4,94	2,675
	<b>Imaginative</b>	52	5	10	7,71	1,499
	<b>Inspiring</b>	52	5	10	8,15	1,638
	<b>Loyal</b>	52	1	10	6,33	2,479
	<b>Self-controlled</b>	52	1	10	5,54	2,886
	<b>Valid N (list wise)</b>	52				

a. No statistics are computed for one or more split files because there are not valid cases.

**Source:** authors' contribution

### **2.4 Limitations of the study**

During the result interpretation phase, we realized that the research could be more valuable with a bigger sample size of respondents and with fully separated generations (B, X, Y and maybe even Z).

### **3. Conclusions and recommendations**

The research allowed us to outline some initiatives that could lead to a gender balance and gradually enhance transformational leadership. We are in favor of a strategic, integrated approach, considering that two factors have a powerful impact: academic education and company management.

With regard to *academic education*, we recommend: education programs aimed at developing leadership skills; leadership courses at graduate level, as a premise for developing strong, positive leaders; students' involvement in

extracurricular activities that would develop their leadership skills; mentoring programs for personal development, confidence and self-motivation increase; strategic thinking (forward looking) development, as respondents considered it as being extremely important for a leader's success; meetings with successful leaders, both men and women;

For *company management*, we recommend: in company training and coaching, to develop management skills; non-discriminatory career strategies, based on competence; evaluation criteria pointing out the required characteristics of a potential leader; a set of values (equity, professionalism, competence, team spirit, etc.) that are to be respected by every member of the organization.

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