

## **Executive businesswomen's learning in the context of organizational culture.**

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**Abstract:** Case study analysis was used to investigate executive women's learning and development in corporate culture. Eleven executives were interviewed. A model of their development is proposed, detailing their learning tactics, negotiation strategies and transition characteristics over the course of their career development.

**Introduction:** Corporations are becoming more diverse, yet, women have made a mere dent in the executive level. Today, women represent approximately 5 percent of the corporate executive population, while making-up nearly 50 percent of the workforce. Corporate power has remained primarily in the hands of white male executives. Some women succeed in these often inhospitable environments. Many others leave. What helps the women who elect to stay survive the climb up the corporate ladder?

This study explored how executive business women function and develop in the context of corporate culture. This research was grounded in the assumption that corporate environments are created, controlled and perpetuated by men who have a stake in maintaining the existing power structures.

**Review of the Literature:** Women have been steadily entering the ranks of management over the last 20 years. Although women hold approximately 42 percent of management, administrative and executive positions, only five percent of the top executive positions are held by women (Powell, 1993). In 1990, only 2.6 percent of the *Fortune* 500 companies' corporate officers were women. That figure dropped to 2.2 % among the *Fortune* 50 (Feminist Majority Foundation, 1991). Corporate cultures have been designed and controlled by a homogenous group of white males throughout history (Ruderman, Ohlott, & Kram, 1995). Most of the research on executives has focused on profiles of successful women (Morrison, White, Van Velsor and Center for Creative Leadership, 1992; Korn/Ferry International and UCLA, 1993), developmental challenges (Ohlott, Ruderman, and McCauley, 1994) and influences on advancement (Tharenou, Latimer and Conroy, 1994). Women indeed learn to be successful executives (Hoy, 1989; Van Velsor & Hughes, 1990), but just how remains less clear.

**Methodology:** Eleven U.S. executive women were interviewed using a case study approach. The selection criteria required that this purposive sample: (1) hold executive level status in *Fortune* 500-type organization; (2) be recognized as "successful" in the organization or having broken through "the glass ceiling"; (3) be responsible for a business unit with supervisory, policy development, or organizational strategy responsibilities; and (4) have a minimum of five years of company seniority. The participants' ages ranged from 33 to 62 years old. Data were collected via in-depth semi-structured interviewing and observation. Observation was used to collect data where permitted in five of the organizations. The interviews were tape recorded on an audio cassette player and transcribed verbatim on an ongoing basis. Data were analyzed according to the constant comparative method.

**Findings:** A model of executive women's development in organizational culture emerged from the data. Through their experience and learning, the executive women defined their organizational cultures as male-centered. Within this learning context, the women experienced development across three stages: Compliant Novices, Competence Seekers and Change Agents. Across these stages, the women exhibited distinctive learning tactics, negotiation strategies, and transition characteristics as they developed in their careers. The model will be described according to stage of development.

Compliant Novices: Seven of the eleven participants vividly recalled a state where they were less concerned with political savvy and more preoccupied with being well-liked and making few mistakes. Hannah referred to this state as, "The Grateful Woman's Syndrome." She recalls, "I was just really grateful to have a job and really hoped that I didn't screw-up so that I got fired. I was of the opinion that if you did good work, someone would tap you on the shoulder and you would move into the next arena of good jobs." The Compliant Novices stage was particularly prevalent and longer among the women who began their careers at an entry level (e. g., clerical), possessed little or no education beyond high school when hired, and were at least fifty years old at the time of this study.

During the Compliant Novices stage, the women devalued their talents, doubted their skills, and attributed getting hired to sheer luck over ability. Monica, prior to her career in the automotive industry, had been a teacher and a lawyer. She had so much difficulty with her first legal case that it had to be turned over to a senior colleague. She was so devastated by the failure that she decided the only remedy was to quit. Only a persuasive male colleague was able to convince her to stay.

The women's learning at this stage was formal occurring in both university and company training courses. Both the formal and informal learning was usually controlled or suggested by an authority figure in the organization, rather than self-initiated. For instance, four of the women pursued college degrees upon the urging of their male bosses without questioning whether it was the right thing for them to do at the time.

The women also had informal learning experiences that made strong impressions. For instance, Tina, in her first job after receiving a Ph.D., unquestioningly rewrote one of her first reports

seventeen times for her boss. Each time she would tell him, "it's not good enough yet," and he would tell her to rewrite it. The seventeenth time her boss asked her to rewrite the report, she finally lost her temper and asked him, "What will it take to make this good enough?" Her boss exclaimed, "Ahah! Finally you are angry enough to defend yourself."

The Compliant Novices' negotiation strategies in the organization were based on acquiescence to the ways of the organization and the people in positions of power. This behavior was based on a belief that if they were nice and never caused any trouble, they would be rewarded with advancement.

As the women gained confidence and discovered that they added value to their organizations, they developed stronger interest in advancing in the company and acquiring the skills to attain promotions. The Compliant Novices felt rudely awakened when they realized that good manners and a friendly smile were not enough to be promoted. Often this insight was accompanied by an awareness that their skills were deficient in some way and that they would need additional experience and/or education if they were to advance. The women's movement into the next stage was also precipitated by less reliance on the opinion and direction of authority figures, replaced by a stronger tendency to follow their own intuition.

Competence Seekers: Five of the eleven women were in the Competence Seeking stage at the time of this study. These women tended to be either the eldest women--with ten to thirty years of seniority, or the youngest women--under age thirty-five with ten years or less seniority in their companies. Based on the women's recognition that they needed to achieve experience and education to advance, the Competence Seeking stage learning was dominated by pursuit of competence via formal education programs, work experience and affiliation with professional associations. Authority figures lost their luster as dispensers of advice to be taken without question. Instead, the women relied on peer groups and mentors for much of their informal learning. The women sought risky positions and projects and accepted their mistakes as learning experiences.

The negotiation strategy of Competence Seekers was adaptation to the prevailing culture. The women had a near-obsession with being highly competent. Competence was oft described as the key to gaining access to and acceptance in the male-dominated culture. Competence Seekers were primarily motivated toward developing technically and professionally. They were inwardly oriented focusing on self- and intellectual development. They were motivated by a fear of not fitting in, not being competent enough, and offending the men. They were often silent regarding issues in the organization that they disagreed with. Women at the Competence Seeking stage accepted the male-centered cultural context at face value without questioning its authority. The women all recognized the power of the male-dominated culture and, in fact, defined their cultures with respect to it. Yet, these women did not believe in "rocking the boat," instead favoring evolutionary change. They cooperated with the existing culture without challenging it. This cooperative attitude toward the male-dominated system was evident in statements like, "That's just the way it is," or "It's a man's world," or "the men don't need that [women's libbers]." There was an orientation toward rules of the culture exemplified by statements such as: "Sometimes your feelings get hurt," to "Being part of the group is being willing to accept the mores of that group," or "There's still places in the company [where] it's perfectly okay to be a

woman, but you have to play by exactly the same rules. And to be honest, I don't really object to that so long as the rules are reasonable."

As the Competence Seekers developed in this stage, they began discovering that even competence and adaptation were not enough to move ahead. As the women neared the end of the stage, they had acquired high levels of stature in their respective organizations. All of these women were regarded as "glass-ceiling breakers". The women saw themselves in positions to mentor other employees and influence the organization. Some also became disenchanted with the limits of the culture that they were increasingly viewing as male-dominated.

Change Agents: The third stage along the continuum, Change Agents, was characterized by the realization that competence and adaptation were insufficient to influence the culture, and that the sometimes the culture itself was problematic. At this point, the executives moved into a mode of critically reflecting on and advocating change in the culture. Seven of the eleven participants functioned at this level at the time of the study. These women ranged from age thirty-five to fifty. They had worked for their companies for ten or more years.

At the Change Agent stage, learning was deeply reflective and highly collaborative. Self development shifted from a focus on competence to self-exploration and fulfillment. Development of other people (both inside and outside the organization) took on as much importance as self-development. Through mentoring others, the women who were highly influential took significant career risks to do what they believed was right. For instance, one executive chaired a women's network with the knowledge that none of the original team members were still employed by the company. Negotiation tactics were targeted toward influencing the organization. The women spent significant time reflecting on the organization, developing networks, and strengthening relationships. These connections became powerful forces in advocating and activating change in the organizations. Pam indicated that she did not have all the answers but, "If you have a good network you can utilize that network to help you solve problem[s]."

The women saw themselves as uniquely positioned to use their power to lobby for and implement change. Often they spoke of using their positions as platforms to promote change and referred to themselves as "change agents." Although they had felt cultural resistance, none were willing to accept it and go quietly about their business. Some challenged it overtly, others used their positions to educate employees and change the culture. Unquestionably, all of the women used the power of their position, expertise, and others to counter the career damaging or stalling effects of the male-dominated culture.

**Discussion:** This study offers a glimpse of how executive women learn and develop in the context of organizational culture. This study illuminates how a marginalized group, in this case women in corporate environments, used learning to gain access to, excel in, and change a culture. The model of executive women's development identified in this study is instructive as it contributes to the understanding of how subordinate members of a culture wield influence. It is also important because learning was fundamental to the women's success in the culture.

The experience of the women in this study parallels what we know about adult development. Yet, Belenky et al. (1986) underscore that conceptions of knowledge and truth have been influenced by the male-dominated culture. In fact, they state that, "Nowhere is the pattern of using male experience to define the human experience seen more clearly than in models of intellectual development" (p. 7). Synergies with existing development theory were notable in the executive women's deference to authority, particularly in the Compliant Novices stage. This parallels the reliance on authority for direction in the initial stages of the developmental theories of Belenky et al. (1986), Kohlberg (1973) and Perry (1968). The tendency to engage in self-protection, particularly in the Competence Seeking stage is also apparent in the development theories proposed by Kohlberg (1973).

Feminist pedagogy and new literature on women's development have offered alternative models (see for instance, Belenky et al. 1986; Gilligan, 1982; Miller, 1976; and Shrewsbury, 1993). Caffarella and Olson, in their 1993 review of the psychosocial development of women conclude that in addition to understanding women's development, attention must also be paid to the importance of relationships and interconnectedness among women learners, creating a democratic process for learning, and cooperative communication styles. With relation to women's functioning in organizational culture, Helgesen (1990) also concluded that a web of relationships was of fundamental importance to the women's success. Relationships were highly important to the women in all stages, but particularly in the Change Agent stage. Caffarella and Olson (1993) observe that the more traditional models (e.g., Erickson, 1963; Kohlberg, 1973; Levinson et al., 1978; Perry, 1968) of women's development do not capture the essence of women's learning and women's lives. They conclude that only two key assumptions hold particular relevance to women's development. These are 1) that periods of stability and transition are a part of adult lives, and 2) that identity and intimacy are issues of prime importance.

These findings also underscore the importance of the context in the women's learning, identified by both Merriam (1993) and Wilson who notes, "Adults no longer learn from experience, they learn in it, as they act in situations and are acted upon by situations" (1993, p. 75). The women also spent significant time in reflection, particularly as they advanced into the change agent stage. This parallels Schon's work on reflection-in-action (1983, 1987).

The practical application of these findings is that they shed light on how subordinate newcomers (in this study, women in male-dominated culture) learn and negotiate in organizational culture. This understanding is important since previous emphases have been on white male experience and learning in organizations. As the workforce becomes increasingly diverse, it is more important than ever to understand the learning processes of new entrants.

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