

## Overcoming risk for women in leader identity development

Nuala Ryan, Michelle Hammond, Sarah MacCurtain and Christine Cross

### Synopsis

The purpose of this study is to address the gaps in our understanding of the role of risk in leader identity development for women, considering elements of both structure and agency. Specifically, we examine the mechanisms through which women work through the perceived risk involved in internalizing a leader identity. Twenty-five women leaders in the Irish healthcare sector took part in an 18-month long identity-based leadership development program. The resulting qualitative data from interviews, focus groups, critical incident diaries, individual exit surveys and observations were analysed using the constant comparative method. In doing so, we present a conceptual model delineating the developmental processes women use to work through perceived risks in developing a leader identity. The study highlights the need to consider structural factors that affect women's perceptions of risks in internalizing a leader identity such as perceptions of organizational support for development, role models, mentoring and behavioural norms. Programs should also aim to increase individual agency through personal reflection and freedom to experiment.

### Introduction and Background

Despite a growing representation of women in leadership positions, women are still underrepresented at the top levels of organizations including healthcare (Stone *et al*, 2019). To address this gap, leadership development programs for women have been recommended. However, as there does not appear to be gender differences in leadership effectiveness (Paustian-Underdahl, *et al*, 2014), a sole focus on developing leadership competence may not be the answer. Despite reduction of explicit bias and an increase in policies promoting gender equality, forms of 'second-generation' gender bias may undermine women's view of themselves as leaders (Ely *et al*, 2011). As recent theory highlights the importance of internalizing a leader identity (Day, *et al*, 2009; DeRue and Ashford, 2010), supporting women through identity work necessary to embrace leadership roles should be a core feature of development programs (Ely *et al*, 2011). Yet understanding of leader identity development remains largely theoretical (Epitropaki *et al*, 2017).

Theory suggests that motivational risks and rewards of claiming or being granted a leadership position may underlie the development of a leader identity (DeRue and

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Ashford, 2010). Leading may be especially risky for women based on a mismatch of prototypical feminine and leader stereotypes (Eagly and Karau, 2002), higher expectations for women leaders (Foschi, 2000), and the types of precarious leadership positions women leaders may be offered (Ryan *et al.*, 2011). Development programs that address and help manage the risks inherent in leading may be crucial for the development of women leaders. Perceptions of risk may lie in the structure of the organization or the agency of individual women. Yet, despite the importance of a balanced consideration of structure and agency, few leadership development frameworks exist addressing both components (see Ely *et al.*, 2011 for an exception).

### Issues and Questions Considered

Leadership development is a complex, non-linear process involving deep-level changes to leaders' identity (Ibarra *et al.*, 2010). The identity development process is an integral process within overall leader development as it provides a motivational force for seeking out development opportunities and experiences (Day *et al.*, 2009). The process of leader identity development has been theorized to occur through various mechanisms including improving the perceived fit between leader role requirements and personal leader identity (Hall, 2004) and the internalisation of leader identity through a process of claiming and granting behaviours (DeRue and Ashford, 2010). Leader identities are strengthened as others grant leadership. Further, Hammond *et al.*'s (2017) multi-domain perspective suggests identity development takes place through a sense-making process at the intersection of two or more domains.

Recent work suggests that leader identity work may be gendered. Zheng *et al.*, (2020) argue that men utilize "performing" frames of leadership such that they rely more on formal positions in constructing leadership identity whereas women utilize "engaging" frames more often, involving a more facilitative approach to leading. They posit that men may receive more leadership grants through formal positions whereas women may rely more on leadership claims through actions. These findings highlight that women may play a more active role in leader

identity work than men by relying on leadership activities "which may make their leader identity more volatile and ephemeral" (Zheng *et al.*, 2020, p. 25). Thus, understanding leader identity development processes of women is essential in supporting women leaders.

The idea that leadership involves risk has been highlighted in theory (DeRue and Ashford, 2010), yet investigations of the risks in assuming a leadership role is mostly absent (notable exception is Zhang *et al.*, 2020). De Rue and Ashford (2010) and Zhang *et al.*, (2020) identify instrumental, interpersonal, and image risks associated with leading. While risk may play an important role in the leader development process, we know little empirically about the process through which women leaders mitigate these risks when developing a leader identity. This is particularly important given that research has found women are more risk-averse than men (Charness and Gneezy, 2012), and that leadership positions themselves offered to women might be riskier than positions taken up by men (Ryan *et al.*, 2011).

Taken together, literature from leader identity development theory (DeRue and Ashford, 2010; Zhang *et al.*, 2020), gender-based approaches to leadership (Eagly and Karau, 2002; Ryan *et al.*, 2011) and risk-aversion (Eckel and Grossman, 2008; Charness and Gneezy, 2012), highlights that working through real and perceived risks associated with leading may be a key process within the development of a leader identity for women. However, we know of no research that examines the processes of development through such risks. This leads to our primary research question: What are the processes women experience in the leader identity development process as they work through perceived risks?

### Methodology

The research took place within the healthcare industry in Ireland. The sample includes 25 women leaders from a group of six clinical sites providing acute care for the mid-west region of Ireland.

This study takes place in the context of an 18-month long leader development program focused on developing healthcare leaders and included both individual leader development

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activities (360-degree feedback, 1:1 coaching, personal critical incident diaries) as well as social leadership development (activities including full-group workshops, focus groups and seminars as well as small group sharing. In total, qualitative data included over 50 hours of recordings from 25 interviews and 7 focus group workshops, as well as 194 written critical incidents, open-ended questions on an exit survey, and observational notes of the first author.

Data were collected, transcribed, and analyzed using NVIVO 12, a qualitative data software that allows comparison and contrasting themes across data (Welsh, 2002). Data were analyzed using the constant comparative method (Glaser and Strauss, 1967), which “combines systematic data collection, coding, and analysis with theoretical sampling to generate theory that is integrated, close to the data, and expressed in a form clear enough for further testing” (Conrad *et al.*, 1993, p. 280).

## Outcomes and Findings

Participants identified a number of risks associated with the claiming of leadership including risk around responsibility and blame, risk to interpersonal relationships and judgment of others when publicly identifying as a leader as well as risks associated within the context in which they lead such as a lack of alignment between their conceptualization of leadership and the organization’s.

Analyses revealed participants experienced four developmental processes as they worked through risks associated with identifying as a leader: perceiving, mitigating, accepting and developing (see Figure 1). *Perceiving and mitigating* involve the leaders’ perceptions of the risks associated with the **structure** or social systems that are largely outside of the control of the leaders but impact the claiming of a leader identity. *Accepting and developing* involve enacting and strengthening leaders’ **agency** increasing their willingness and capacity to accept and deal with the risks that are present. It should be noted these four components do not reflect a linear process, but rather, a dynamic interplay of thought, action, and interaction. These involved both individual, reflective processes and social, interactive processes and highlight the importance of both individual interventions and social and organizational structures to facilitate leader and leadership development. That is, both typical leader development and leadership development activities (Day, 2000) played a role in women’s leader identity development. Identity development research has concentrated on the role of individual agency almost to the exclusion of social structure (Shanahan, 2009) neglecting the important consideration of “risk perceptions as a situation based judgment” (Zhang *et al.*, 2020, p.2) when identifying as a leader. Our findings suggest that development programs should address both collective leadership development as well as individual leader development (Day, 2000) to help women work through such risks.

The underlying paper was published in the *Journal of Managerial Psychology* and a full copy can be obtained at <https://doi.org/10.1108/JMP-03-2019-0178>

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Figure 1: Developmental processes in managing risks associated with identifying as a leader

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