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The Unintended Consequences of Role Modelling Behaviour in Female Career Progression

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Synopsis

Much of our understanding of role models at work identifies the positive nature of role models in career progression. In this research, we take the contrary perspective and explore whether role modelling behaviour of senior female managers can be unintentionally interpreted as negative, with an associated negative impact on career progression decisions of other female managers observing their behaviours.

To address this issue we conducted thirty in-depth interviews with female middle-level managers in a wide range of organisations in Ireland. The findings illustrate that role-modelling behaviour has the potential to negatively, rather than positively affect female career progression choices. This unintended consequence of role modelling behaviour of senior female managers highlights a new concept, that of negative role-modelling behaviour.

Introduction and Background

Despite significant increases in the levels of female labour market participation over the past several decades, the percentage of women occupying senior management positions remains stubbornly low. Although women now comprise a greater proportion of managers than in any previous era, the situation remains one of significant imbalance. An examination of the most senior board level positions in the Fortune 500 companies in 2013 reveals that just 4.6 percent of CEOs were women.

It is in this context that we investigated one of the key elements identified as necessary for female career progression, and consequently, for an increase in the numbers of women in key decision making roles - that of role models. The lack of female role models has been identified as one of the most significant barriers to female career progression. This determinant continues to be cited as detrimental to the development of senior female managers. Role models have been described as individuals whose behaviours, styles and attributes are emulated by others and as people whose lives and activities influence another person in some way.

Interest in role models within the literature stems from the belief that where there are few women at senior levels in organisations it is more difficult for junior female employees to develop gender roles that are satisfying to themselves and consistent with the company's norms and expectations. Research highlights that women holding senior organisational positions unconsciously act as role models and encourage younger women to fulfil their potential as leaders of the future.

Issues and Questions Considered

People are assumed to learn in a social context through the observation of others with whom they can identify, and who perform well in an area in which they, themselves, also wish to excel i.e learning by modelling. Individuals can develop low or high levels of self-efficacy vicariously

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through watching others (that they deem similar to themselves) performance in a given task or area. Therefore, taking the example of a female in a senior management role who successfully navigates both work and family commitments should result in raising the self-efficacy levels of female middle managers with similar lifestyle and career aspirations. The importance of associational preferences in observational experiences, is clear in that the functional value of behaviours displayed by different models is highly influential in determining which models will be closely observed and which will be ignored. Models that possess certain qualities are sought out while those who are lacking pleasing characteristics are ignored or rejected even though they excel in other areas.

While research has indicated that role models are critical for successfully developing young aspiring female managers the area has received limited empirical attention in recent years as research has focused on mentoring as a more generic concept, often encapsulating role models. Interest in role models within the women in management literature stems from the belief that where there are few women at senior levels in organisations it is more difficult for junior female employees to develop gender roles that are satisfying to themselves and consistent with the company's norms and expectations. Women holding senior organisational positions unconsciously act as role models and encourage younger women to 'fulfil their potential as leaders of the future'.

Research indicates that individuals tend to seek role models who are similar to them in some easily identifiable way, such as gender or race. Indeed, supervisors, teachers and mentors are often used as role models. Importantly, in role modelling, individuals select their own role models and also choose how deeply or intentionally they will emulate these role models. The concept of a negative role model is an important one for female career progression, as studies have shown a relationship between role model influence and a variety of career-related outcomes, including career aspirations. As Ibarra suggests role models can define negative behaviours or characteristics, in that the role model represents a feared possible self, a negative role model. Yet, if role modelling behaviour can be identified by the observer as negative, and interpreted as not to be emulated, can this have an impact on career progression choices for women in middle management?

Methodology

In-depth interviews were conducted with thirty middle-level female managers in a variety of organisations across Ireland, and lasted on average, for seventy-five minutes each. The respondents were representative of a

broad spectrum of organisations including finance, retail, manufacturing and the public sector. Questions focused on personal career progression aspirations; obstacles faced and obstacles overcome; and organisational context and culture in relation to female career progression. In relation to the marital and familial status of the respondents, sixteen were married, eleven were single, and three were either separated or divorced. Fourteen women had children.

Outcomes and Findings

The findings of this study highlight firstly that there were few senior women for the respondents to use as role models, as only three of the organisations had female CEO/general managers. Those being used as role models in this study included senior women in the respondents' own organisations; however, this incorporated both past and present holders of the position. Stories about senior women who had left their organisations were regularly recounted by current female managers, some of who had not even worked there at the same time as these previous senior female managers. Organisational narrative had maintained stories about these past employees and more particularly, why they had left the organisation. Thus, those being used as role models by many of the respondents in this study included the new construct of the 'departed' role model.

The second area we explored with the respondents related to their interpretation of the observed role modelling behaviour. The findings here suggest that these women, currently in middle-management roles are using their interpretation of the role modelling behaviour in the career progression choice process. In effect, their interpretations of the observed behaviour of senior women can act in a negative, and unexpected way, rather than a positive manner for women at this management level. This diverges somewhat from previous research on role models which tends to highlight the positive nature of role models, particularly for female career progression. During the course of the interviews the respondents situated the discussion of role models in organisational culture and work family conflict. They argued that the culture of their organisations was one that did not accept that those in senior management positions should avail of work-life balance policies. Interestingly, the combination of these two factors - the use of 'realistic' role models and the male orientated organisational culture associated with senior management roles, regardless of the existence of work-life policies, resulted in over half of the respondents having already made decisions not to pursue a senior management position as their next career move, in the short to medium term.

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