

**VOICES OF WOMEN:
LEADERSHIP IDENTITY IN THE COACHING PRACTICE**

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C'est la femme qui travaille – paysanne, chimiste ou écrivain – qui a la grossesse la plus facile du fait qu'elle ne se fascine pas sur sa propre personne ; c'est la femme qui a la vie personnelle la plus riche qui donnera le plus à l'enfant et qui lui demandera le moins, c'est celle qui acquiert dans l'effort, dans la lutte, la connaissance des vraies valeurs humaines qui sera la meilleure éducatrice.

Le Deuxième Sexe (1949), Simone de Beauvoir, éd. Gallimard, coll. Folio, 1976.

It is the working-woman - a farmer, a chemist or writer - who has the easiest pregnancies because she is not wrapped up in herself; a woman with a rich personal life that enables her to give the best to her child while asking little in return; and a woman who, through effort and struggle, acquires a knowledge of true human values, will be the best teacher.

The Second Sex (1949), Simone de Beauvoir, Penguin Books, London 1972

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ABSTRACT

Despite the fact that in 2010 women made up almost 42% of the total labour force in Europe, they accounted for an average of just 3% of the presidents of the largest listed companies on national stock exchanges in each of the 27 EU Member States and less than 11% of board members. The “*think manager-think male*” stereotype that associates *agentic* characteristics with effective leadership remains dominant in business culture and this phenomenon has a double impact: it undermines women’s capacity to see themselves as potential leaders and makes it more difficult for followers to recognise a woman as a leader as they are unable to associate her with the ideal leader prototype.

This study explores how coaching can support senior female managers in building their *leader identity* and overcoming the invisible barriers to women’s advancement that arise from the so-called *second-generation forms of gender bias*.

Applying the *narrative inquiry methodology* and building on the recent approach to leadership effectiveness based on *leader identity*, the study shows, through the technique of *restoring*, how six women leaders have successfully *co-created* with their coach a *transitional space* in which to experiment new leadership activities in order to define and interiorise their own leadership definition.

The narrative summaries give a vivid picture of how each of the protagonists, using the coach as a mirror, undertakes her journey towards the

self-awareness and *self-esteem* needed to build a *self-view* as a leader. The women voiced what can already be found in the literature, that it is vital to construct a leader identity which fits with own characteristics and values, and that the integration between different social roles is a fundamental ingredient for a balanced life. The study suggests that academic institutions, practitioners, coaches and female managers should look at coaching as a valuable tool in helping women on their leadership journey as they prepare to occupy and function in a satisfactory manner the top positions that are or will be open following the full introduction of European laws on gender equality.

Keywords: Women leaders, leadership identity, coaching, self-concept, self-awareness, leadership development, identity interference, motivation to lead, think manager-think male, gender identity.

INTRODUCTION

In the fourth quarter of 2010 women made up almost 42.6% of the total labour force in Europe (Catalyst, *Women and Men in the Labour Force 2010, 2012*) and more than half of university graduates (European Commission, *More women in senior positions, 2010*) but they are still under-represented in senior positions in many fields. In 2009 women accounted for an average of just 3% of the presidents of the largest listed companies on national stock exchanges in each of the 27 EU Member States and less than 11% of board members (European Commission, *More women in senior positions, 2010*). Across Europe, Norway is the only country where large companies have boards with anything approaching gender equality, with 40.1% women and 59.9% men. Sweden and Finland are the only two countries, in the EU, with more than 20% women on boards (Catalyst, *Women on Board, 2012*).

In the United States, where women make up 51.4% of Management, professional and related occupations, the situation is similar: women constitute only 3.8% of Fortune-500 CEOs and about 16% of these companies' board seats (Catalyst, *U.S. Women in Business, 2012*).

The European Union is taking steps to guarantee equality between women and men, as foreseen by the Treaty of Rome of 1957. Vivian Reading, European Commissioner, has proposed legislation requiring European listed companies to reserve at least 30% of their non-executive board positions for women by 2015, rising to 40% by 2020.

Today in Italy women held only 7% of the board positions of listed companies. Following the introduction of quotas, in August 2012, by the end of the first renewal of the boards the rate is required to rise to 20%, which means 431 more women in boardrooms, while by the second renewal the quotas should rise to 30%. (Il Mondo, *Donne a scuola di neo consigliere*, 2012). A recent study (Cerved Group, Manageritalia, *Le donne al vertice delle imprese: amministratori, top manager e dirigenti*, 2012) shows that, in 2011, only 3.2% of companies with a turnover of more than two hundreds million Euros had a female CEO and only 5.8% had a Senior Management team with at least 50% of women.

In their article “Women and the labyrinth” (Eagly & Carli, 2007) the authors proposed substituting the concept of the *glass ceiling* with the metaphor of the *labyrinth* that better “*incorporates the complexity and variety of challenges that woman can face during their leadership journey. In truth, women are not turned away only as they reach the penultimate stage of a distinguished career. They disappear in various numbers at many points leading up to the stage*”.

Since Schein’s empirical investigations in 1978 on managerial sex role stereotyping, it has been well established in the literature that the “*think manager-think male*” phenomenon has a definite and negative impact on the selection of women for managerial positions. Moreover, an individual “*is more likely to be viewed as a leader and able to influence his/her followers when he/she fits the followers’ cognitive representation of an ideal leader or ideal*

prototype” (Soo Min Toh & Geoffrey Leonardelly, 2012). Traditionally women have been associated with *communal* qualities that see them as *affectionate, friendly, helpful, sensitive* and *soft spoken* while leadership is associated, in most people’s minds, with *agentic* traits in which individuals are seen as aggressive, dominant, result oriented, assertive, ambitious and self confident (Eagly & Carli, 2007).

Apart from the inter-personal perspective, a more intimate process affects the emergence of women as leaders: a woman’s intention to lead or to be recognized as a formal leader. “*Some evidence shows that even when possessing and demonstrating leadership behaviour that is superior to others in the group, women leaders may sometimes prefer to cede formal leadership to men in the group because they, too, believe that being male or masculine is more leader-like*” (cf. Soo Min Toh & Geoffrey Leonardelly, 2012).

Recent literature has developed a new perspective, the so-called *second-generation forms of gender bias*, in an attempt to explain the causes of women’s persistent underrepresentation in leadership positions (cf. Ely, Ibarra & Kolb, 2011). If constructing and internalizing a leader identity is central to the process of becoming a leader then subtle yet pervasive forms of gender bias may impede women’s progress by obstructing the *identity work* necessary to adopt a leadership role (Ely & Ibarra & Kolb, 2011), causing an *identity interference* defined as a perceived incongruity between the roles of woman and leader (Karelaia & Guillén, 2011, 2012).

In Italy, the recent introduction of “quotas” has given a boost to implementation of dedicated women’s leadership programs: since the beginning of this year, a large number of educational programmes have emerged designed to help women to develop the “required” skills for the boardroom. These programmes mainly focus on technical skills such as: governance, finance, law.

The question is: how should transitional educational programmes that focus on technical skills be modified to prepare women for their leadership journey? What I am proposing, therefore, is a coaching programme that enables women to create a *reflective space* in which to explore their *gender identity* and develop and *internalize* their *leadership identity*. This programme should be integrated with more traditional educational programmes to prepare women for leadership positions and to support them in managing the vulnerabilities that come with the higher visibility that result from their traditional underrepresentation in top executive positions.

RESEARCH AIMS AND OBJECTIVES

The objective of this study is to explore how a coaching programme can support female senior managers to overcome the possible obstacles to achieving leadership positions and to be effective in their new roles.

I will build on the concept of *leader identity* and on the integration of the different roles (leader, mother, wife, daughter) that a woman has to face during her life, focusing on the specific elements and the turning points of the coaching process that will be crucial for the development of *one's own definition of leadership*.

I will also investigate how organizational culture and values can help or hinder women's leadership development.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Self-Concept and Leader Identity

A lot has been written in the literature about how to develop leaders based on different theories linked to the definition of *Leader* and *Leadership*.

In this study I will focus on the emerging perspective that links the development of leadership skills with the development on one's personal *self-concept* or *identity*¹. Specifically, I will investigate the challenges that female leaders face in building a *leader identity* due to the so-called *second-generation forms of gender bias* linked to gender stereotypes such as "think manager-think male" and organisational structures and culture (Ely, Ibarra & Kolbe, 2011).

The construct of *self-concept* derives from the formulation of James (1890) and Mead (1934) on the *self*² and can be defined as "*the concept the individual has of himself as a physical, social and spiritual or moral being*" (Gegas, 1982). The self-concept has been investigated for a long time within psychology and sociology, the focus of the former being on the "internal" view as the cause of behaviour while the tendency of the latter is to look for the cause of behaviour outside the individual (cf. Gegas, 1982).

¹ The two terms are used interchangeably.

² The self is a reflective phenomenon that develops in social interactions and is based on the social character of human language. The concept of self provides the philosophical underpinning for social-psychological inquiries into the self-concept but is itself not accessible to empirical investigation (Gegas, 1982).

The dual concept of *intra-personal* and *inter-personal* processes regarding the construction of *self-identity* has been embedded in leadership theory where different authors agree in defining *leadership development identity*³ as a intra-personal cognitive process necessary to elaborate a “self-view” as a potential leader and an inter–individual cognitive process defined as the social perception of the leader’s activities based on implicit theories of leadership and stereotyping, including the effect of gender on leadership (Day, 2000; Hogue & Lord, 2007; Lord & Hall, 2005; van Knippenberg et al.).

The process of developing a leader identity means more than being formally appointed to a leadership position as it involves two core interrelated tasks: internalizing leader identity and developing an elevated sense of purpose (cf. Ely, Ibarra & Kolb, 2011). Internalizing a leader identity requires a person to experiment new behaviours in order to build on experiences that foster his or her sense of self as a leader. The feedbacks received from followers on leadership activities put in place are of fundamental importance to validate one’s self-view as a leader, as the person interprets those reactions and modifies his or her behaviour accordingly. We can define the construction of the leader identity as a *mutual process* that can produce either a positive or a negative spiral (DeRue & Ashford, 2010; Koenig, Eagly, Mitchell, & Ristikari, 2011; Lord & Hall, 2005). In this respect the *social perception* of adequate behaviour, as well as the stereotypes and qualities associated with *effective*

³ In this study leadership and leader identity are used interchangeably and refers to the acquisition of leadership skills by an individual

leadership, doesn't help women in their journey towards leadership positions. In attempting to define their leader identity women often find themselves in the double bind of being accused of being - *aggressive, abrasive and arrogant* - if they display the agentic qualities that when attributed to a man are labelled as - *assertiveness, self confidence and entrepreneurship* – while, at the same time, if they conform to the female stereotype they are judged to be - *too soft, emotional and unassertive to make tough decisions* (Eagly & Carly, 2007; Eagly & Karau, 2002; Ely, Ibarra & Kolb, 2011).

Kim Campbell who briefly served as prime minister of Canada in 1993 described this phenomenon well in one of her speeches (cf. Eagly & Carli, 2007):

“I do not have a traditionally female way of speaking. I am quite assertive. If I didn't speak the way I do, I wouldn't have been seen as a leader. But my way of speaking may have grated on people who were not used to hearing it from a woman. It was the right way for a leader to speak, but it wasn't the right way for a woman to speak. It goes against type”.

The paucity of role models for women makes it more difficult for them to experiment with *provisional identities* in order to construct their leadership

*self-schemas*⁴ (Hogue & Lord, 2007). Because leadership is social, self-schemas may incorporate implicit learning from many social situations: as women are still predominately exposed to male leadership models they can encounter *identity conflict* if they base a leadership identity on standards and values far from their “core-self”. Furthermore leaders are more effective when they pursue objectives that are aligned with their personal values (cf. Ely, Ibarra & Kolb, 2011).

A recent study (Karelaia & Guillén, 2012) confirms the importance for women of holding a *positive gender identity*, which is positively correlated with the proportion of women in the organization, as it reduces women leaders perceived conflict between their self-views as women and leaders. Seeing oneself as a leader fosters the *motivation to lead* and the seeking out of leadership responsibilities and opportunities to develop leadership skills (Chan & Drasgow, 2001; DeRue & Ashford, 2010; Kark & van Dijk, 2007). Gender stereotyping that associates leadership with behaviours believed more common or appropriate for men can interfere with women’s ability to see themselves and be seen by others as a leaders (Ely, Ibarra & Kolb, 2011) and this will have an impact on their self-motivation to actively “promote” their career in order take up leadership “roles” (cf. Ely, Ibarra & Kolb, 2011).

⁴ Self-schemas can be viewed as meta-structures that are internal to an individual and reflect the individual’s accumulated experience in a particular domain.

My hypothesis is that coach and coachee can co-create the reflective space where the coachee can access to her own unique value, identity, emotions, goals and motives that form the basis of the construction of her self-view as a leader.

The theory of possible selves considers multiple selves as systematic components of self-concepts (Markus & Nurius, 1986), which means that a person can have different identities linked to different social circumstances without feeling fake. It has been demonstrated that possessing multiple roles promotes psychological well-being (Thoits, 1983) and that self-complexity is associated with good coping (cf. Markus & Nurius, 1986). Such a construct could be of particular interest for women leaders who play a larger number of roles in their lives than men usually do and are subjected to feeling the pressures of being complaint with different expectations but who could, at the same time, benefit from the integration of multiple identities to satisfy their psychological needs.

My hypothesis is that coaching can help women to better integrate their different roles (leader, mother, wife, daughter), allowing them to achieve a higher level of harmony while avoiding the possible effects of identity interference.

Leadership Development and Coaching Practice

Day's conceptualization of leader development and leadership development (Day, 2000) clearly identifies the two "facets" of the leadership construct: the *intra-personal* (Leader) and the *inter-personal* (Leadership) and this is of great interest for coaching practice.

In his article ("Leadership development: a review in context" p.586) Day states:

*".....**leader development** can be interpreted as a form of individual-based differentiation in terms of helping the individual enhance a unique self-understanding and construct independent identities. **Leadership development** can be thought of as an integration strategy by helping people understand how to relate to others, coordinate their efforts, build commitments, and develop extended social networks by applying self-understanding to social and organizational imperatives".*

Day identifies coaching, together with 360-degree feedback and mentoring, as the most popular practices used to develop leaders and leadership.

In a recent paper the authors (Ibarra & Snook & Guillén, 2008), based on an extensive literature review, affirm that *"one of the most significant advances in executive development has been the increasing reliance on methods that take place in situ, notably action learning and coaching..... helping people bridge the interval between gaining new insight (knowing) and translating that insight into new behaviour (doing)".*

In their recent paper Karelaiia & Guillén (2012), while analysing “*the identity conflict which occurs when women leaders perceive an incongruity between their gender and professional identities*”, suggest that a coaching intervention “*should not only address specific leadership skills but also explore the client’s perceptions of the fit of their gender identity at work*”.

In their article (“Identity, deep structure and the development of leadership skill”, R.G.Lord & R.J Hall, 2005) the authors define an interesting model for the development of leadership skills based on the leader’s self-identity. Based on research in cognitive science they define three levels for the development of leadership skills: *Novice*, *Intermediate* and *Expert*. As leaders progress from Novice to Expert he/she will be more driven by internal values rather than by the leaders’ desire to match their behaviours to implicit theories of effective leadership.

I speculate that this statement is of particular interest for female leaders as it implies that while developing their leadership skills female leaders will perceive a reduced identity interference and be able to develop an “internal” leadership construct that differentiates them from the stereotypes linked to agentic characteristics.

In order to progress through the three levels of “leadership status” one needs both identification with the role and sufficient self-confidence to attempt development leadership activities (R.G.Lord & R.J Hall, 2005). As gender roles

are consensual beliefs about attribute of women and man, leadership actions that are associated with agentic characteristics may receive less social acceptance for woman than for men (Eagly & Karu, 2002). Therefore, women tend to fulfil more communal than agentic roles that become part of their self-schema in order to avoid their perception of identity conflict (Hogue & Lord, 2007).

I hypothesize that coaching could be helpful for women by supporting them in trying to implement leadership actions even in a situation that is less favourable than it would be for a man.

METHODOLOGY

Procedure and sample

I employed a qualitative methodology for my study, using a technique called narrative inquiry that *“is the best for capturing the detailed stories or life experience of a single individual or the lives of a small number of individuals.”* (John W. Creswell, 2012).

The study was conducted through the use of qualitative interviews, on the basis of an ad hoc interview guide (see Annex). The interviewer presents as a “fellow traveller” to elicit stories about specific incidents, as well as anecdotes and examples. This facilitated the stories of the participants, enhancing their individual and diverse experiences and reflections on and reconstructions of

their experiences providing detailed information pertinent to the research. Like other qualitative techniques, the primary objective of narrative inquiry is to access the perspective of the subject studied, identifying her/his conceptual categories, interpretations of reality and motivations for actions.

The research was conducted by recruiting six women who had had experience, during their career, of coaching specifically to work on the development of their leadership. The women hold leadership roles in different functions and come from different Italian regions (large urban North-east, medium urban North-west, large urban North). The subjects are aged between forty and fifty and have different family and social situations (single, married without children, married with young children or adolescents). They work in different sectors: consumer goods, financial services, distribution and manufacturing. To ensure anonymity and non-identification of the respondents from their stories, invented initials have been adopted. The interviews lasted approximately two hours each and took place at the workplace of the subjects who were contacted in advance by email to check availability and the relevance of their experience of coaching to the aims of the research. Subsequently, the subjects were contacted by telephone and informed that the general topic related to female leadership, but without going into details of the research in order to prevent them being “influenced” by social desirability and preparing themselves rather than spontaneously providing an account of their process of construction an identity as a leader.

Of the six subjects interviews, three had followed a coaching programme with me. Consequently, to avoid distortions, the interviews with these three were conducted by a neutral figure specialized in conducting qualitative research. The other three were recruited through my personal network and had followed a coaching programme with different coaches. All of the interviews were recorded (with the consent of the subjects) and subsequently fully transcribed. This made it possible to quote “verbatim” the most significant phrases. I created a “narrative summary” (see Results) for each interview to illustrate the experience of the interviewee with respect to the coaching process and to highlight the “turning points” concerning the definition of their identity as a leader.

Instrument

I constructed an ad hoc semi-structured interview guide that would allow me to investigate the different research issues (see Annex). Using the funnel technique, I placed the areas of research in the most appropriate sequence, placing the sensitive issues later in the interview to allow the interviewees to feel at ease. Specifically, the interview was structured as follows: the opening of the interview introduces of the theme (“....*how your coaching experience contributed to the development and internalization of your leader identity as well as to the reconciliation of the different roles that a woman must face over the course of her life.*”) in order to create an atmosphere of empathy and

acceptance. The interviewee is also reassured regarding anonymity, the protection of the data collected and the integrity of the aims of the interview. Furthermore, as additional reassurance and to ensure that the reading of the results is consistent with reality, it was agreed that the “narrative summary” would be sent to each interviewee before inclusion in the final draft of the thesis.

The body of the interview was divided into three parts:

SECTION 1: Personal details and employment history

In this section we collected the personal information, and a brief history of education and employment.

SECTION 2: Information about the company

In this second section, we⁵ investigated the characteristics of the company where the subject works to understand the organizational context, for example, the percentage of women at various levels of the company.

SECTION 3: Experience of coaching

This third section was divided into three areas of investigation that correspond to the three stages of life crossed by the interviewees:

- a) Life pre-coaching
- b) Experience of coaching
- c) Post-coaching

⁵ The external interviewer and myself

In the analysis of each subject's life, *prior to the coaching experience*, we concentrated mainly on exploring different models of leadership with which the interviewee was familiar and her definition, at that moment, of the leadership construct. We also verified the model of leadership at the company and whether there were role models for the subject to draw on. We also asked the interviewee to describe herself through self-perception and hetero-perception, highlighting areas of satisfaction and those for improvement. We investigated the reasons that had led her to undertake coaching, and with what expectations and goals.

In the part regarding the *period of coaching* we asked the interviewee what transformations she had felt as a leader and as a woman. We also investigated the attitude of the organisation with respect to this experience. And, finally, we asked the interviewee to give a brief account of the coaching experience.

Moving on from the discussion of the coaching experience, we asked the interviewee how her definition of leadership had changed after coaching and if she had achieved her objectives. Finally, we examined the extent to which coaching had helped her find a greater level of harmony between the different parts of her self.

After completing the six interviews I transcribed them and wrote a summary of each of the accounts, touching on various points of the interview

guide, and proceeded to make a vertical and horizontal analysis. The analysis of what emerged from the accounts of each of the interviewees brought to light a number of interesting issues concerning the experience of building an identity as a leader. By looking more closely at the vertical, in addition to the factual description of the leadership development process made by each individual interviewee, I also made note of the more emotional and profound aspects of the construction of the self. This allows the reader not only to understand the turning points of the experience of coaching with regard to the construction of the identity of leader, but also to get emotionally closer to the protagonist of the story. From the horizontal analysis, meanwhile, I noted that there were overlaps between the different stories in order to highlight the main findings with regard to the research objectives.

RESULTS

Case 1 - LD

This first interview was carried out with a woman aged forty-two, married with two children aged eleven and eight. She has a Bachelor's Degree in Mathematics and obtained a post-graduated degree in Textile Marketing. LD is the Managing Director of an American multinational company operating in the distribution of consumer products. The company has a turnover of 150 million

Euros and a total of 300 employees, equally divided between men and women across the different hierarchical ranks.

LD describes the period prior to coaching experience as “*stable*” during which she was the Marketing Manager of the same company where now she covers the role of Managing Director. LD depicts this period of her life as focused mainly on bringing up her two young children since she strongly felt the desire to fulfil their need for a maternal figure despite managing the challenge of reaching company objectives. This approach to work was strengthened by the fact that LD perceived that the company did not pay enough attention on the development of professional skills required in order to move up the ranks. Corporate culture was strongly influenced by the Managing Director, a controlling and authoritative father figure, who imposed his own ideas without sharing the strategies with his direct reports or promoting best practices exchange within the Senior Management Team.

Things start to change when the Headquarters asks LD to participate in a Development Centre⁶ in May 2011 so as to evaluate her potential to take over from the current Managing Director within the next few years. The Development Centre is preparatory to the start-up of an annual coaching programme planned in order to develop her leadership skills. What she experiences during the day of the Development Centre allows LD to get in

⁶ Development Centre: individual and/or group sessions aiming at evaluating the competencies and the development needs of an individual through structured exercises and psychometric tests in order to help him/her to discover his/her strong points and areas of improvement and, consequently, elaborating a personal development plan.

touch with her *professional identity* that she describes as “*closed, dark, flattened and negative*”. For LD it is a revelation: what she had experienced up until then and recognized as “*stability*” turns into something which she no longer recognizes and which she wants to distance herself from. For this reason she enthusiastically accepts to be enrolled in the coaching programme since she is highly motivated to grow professionally and to cover a role which offers more responsibility that would in turn allow her to give a female imprinting to the running of the company by creating a workplace environment “*where people do not feel oppressed but are pleased to come to work*”.

LD describes the experience of coaching on different levels: in an initial phase acquiring the necessary skills required to cover more effectively the role of Marketing Manager and at the same time develop the skills which are closely connected to a possible future Managing Director role, including strategic vision, financial, budget and logistic skills. Subsequently, with the help of the coach, in her everyday working activities she experiments alternative behaviours needed to develop her capability to decide independently, to persuade and to communicate in a more assertive manner and thus improve her leadership style.

On a more profound level LD says that the coaching allowed her “*to acquire greater awareness of who I really am*”, through the appreciation of her own resources and capabilities, increasing her self-esteem and gradually building up the confidence needed in covering a role of command, on the basis of a different style of leadership to that of the former Managing Director.

During the interview LD tells that having reach her goal to be appointed Managing Director has had repercussions on her identity as a woman within her family of origin as she is now able to projects an image of a self-confident person, autonomous and satisfied with her physical appearance. Indeed, she recounts how her parents and her two younger sisters had always assigned her the role of “underdog”. The sisters left their small hometown after graduating to catch up challenging working opportunities while LD decided to move back and set up home close to her parents after obtaining her First Class Degree in Mathematics. LD describes her younger sisters as attractive and elegant as well as successful professionals while she used to be seen as scruffy and not wholly independent in almost all situations. A role which has been assigned to her by family members and which she has made her own both in a family setting as well as work setting. The dominating character of the Managing Director and his authoritative and controlling behaviour did not help LD to define her “working-self” and led her to accept and interpret a role which had been assigned by him: a good executor, with a low level of autonomy and a limited strategic vision.

Through coaching LD describes her path as beginning with a distancing of her submissive behaviour and then leads through to the expression her own ideas in front of colleagues and even if in contrast to those ideas expressed by the boss. Moreover, she begins to draw borders to the intrusive behaviour of the Managing Director that allows her to begin to have a look at herself and her skills, to appreciate and express them. The coach helps her to build and consolidate her own style of leadership, leveraging on her ability to motivate

and aggregate people towards a common objective, being a good listener but also on her competencies in analysing figures, reading business trends and drawing marketing strategies. It is interesting to highlight the fact that the construction and making up of the *leader identity* does not mean a change or move to the *agentic* characteristics but a strengthening of the *communal* ones traditionally associated to a female role. In fact she puts in place behaviours in order to develop the leader-coach skills by exploiting her ability to delegate and empower her team members.

To date LD declares not to feel any conflict in identity between the role of leader and that of being female. On the contrary, the integration of these two identities is fundamental in order to guarantee a correct life balance. Her professional success has led to affirmation in her family of origin where LD now feels that the others see and recognise her value and her will and ability to be autonomous. The support of her husband, who following her nomination as Managing Director, re-organised his life by seizing the opportunity of a professional experience which allows him more time for looking after the children. Organising her work to comply with the family rhythms and routines allows LD to enjoy her role as mother and wife. LD states that her appearance has also changed and that *"I like to wear more feminine and elegant clothes, choosing heeled shoes and clothes which suit her slim figure, wearing make up and changing her hairstyle"*. The subject of appearance was touched on during the coaching conversations and LD realised that her inner state was reflected in her external appearance.

A turning point in the coaching was when LD realised that she has the necessary resources to have an autonomous strategic way of thinking and that the business results are firmly in her hands and in the hands of her team and therefore is not a business liability being independent and autonomous in relation to the Managing Director.

LD concludes the interview by defining the coaching experience as demanding, constructive and enriching which allowed her to “*place brick upon brick*” building up to the conclusion that “*I am worth something*”. Moreover, she states that her nomination as Managing Director has had repercussions at company level: LD says quite emotionally that there “*has been an awakening in the female world.....as if liberated from a tyrant*” and rationally adds that she has gained the trust even from a large number of men which has been shown through means of declarations of esteem which recognise her leadership skills in carrying out the necessary changes as requested by the Headquarter.

Case 2 - SF

The second interview was carried out with a single woman aged forty-two, a graduate in Industrial Engineering who had subsequently completed an MA in e-commerce. SF is a senior executive at an online services company. The company's has a total of 300 employees equally divided between men and women; in addition to the Managing Director, the Management Committee is made up of three women and three men. The MD, who has led the company since start-up, has established a corporate culture in which “*gender does not*

matter, because it is the qualities and skills of the individual that make a person a leader.” This approach has allowed the women in the company to hold not only board positions but also to be in many of the key positions in the organisation. In addition, the HR department is very advanced in terms of the development of leadership skills, having set-up an internal Academy: people identified by the Management Committee as talents are invited to join a Development Centre and a 360 – degree process. Based on the feedback received each participant, with the help of an external coach, draws an individual development plan that form the basis of the coaching programme. In line with her possible future promotion to Director, SF, two years ago, was included in the development programme.

SF says that she started feeling the need to work on her own leader identity when she passed from coordinating a team of women “*with whom it was possible to organise motivational activities that might include a day together at a spa*” to a bigger, more complex and mixed (men and women) team, that also included members from a merger with another company with a very different organisational culture.

SF describes herself as being “*very strict with herself and a control freak*” but also “*passionate about her work.*” She says that despite being confident in her own abilities when she was given more responsibility she began to have a thought that often crossed her mind, “*I know that people expect a lot from me, both my team and my boss*”. SF also noted that people say she is, “*a hard worker, a perfectionist, reliable and with a good sense of humour.*” However,

before beginning coaching SF was aware of having room for improvement in the management of employees in that the people in her team, through the 360 - degree process, had noted that she did not delegate enough, did not provide sufficient feedback on their performance and that they had a need for greater autonomy, accompanied with a more detailed process of monitoring of the activities to which they were assigned.

SF says that the reflections she had made on her *professional-self*, during coaching sections, she also translated to her *private-self*, as she put it: *"I am a very rational person, sometimes too much and tend to stifle my emotional side, consequently I do not take sufficient account of the emotional impact of my actions on others..... I realized that when I am under stress I tend to decide for others by adopting a parental mode."*

Speaking of leadership SF says that before coaching she was inspired by two role-models, a former university professor and the current Managing Director of the company where she works and says, *"they are people who can speak to the belly and really reach other people."* Regarding her formulation of a *leader identity* compared with the models of leadership embodied by the two key figures mentioned above SF says, *"I believe that leadership should be acquired, but must also be based on an ideal that you have inside you. Consequently I tried to acquire some of the aspects of my role-models, but reworking them in line with my own sensibilities in order to remain authentic."*

During coaching SF invited the coach to observe her for half a day during a meeting in which she wanted to work with the new team to convey her vision

and values with the aim of building together a new way of working that encourages teamwork and the exchange of experience. SF says that she believed one of the most important moments of coaching was receiving feedback from the coach about her difficulty in adopting a leadership transformational style. Working with the coach SF realised that she finds it hard to get in touch with the emotions of others given that, in the first place, she is not able to express her own emotions. Of the coaching experience she says, *“it helped me to understand that emotions are not necessarily a by-product of the work experience.”*

Reconstructing with the coach her own personal history SF realised that the parental model had had a significant effect on her difficulty in bringing out her more emotional side and had been the basis on which she had built her leadership style. The only daughter of an navy officer and engineering graduate, and subsequently successful businessman, SF describes the message received during her childhood and adolescence as *“pay attention to the essential, this is your duty, duty first and then pleasure, functionality first and then the aesthetic.”* Alongside the figure of the “military father” SF says she was also inspired by her paternal grandmother, a war widow, an *“iron-willed woman, with a life based on a few but clear values, tenacious, with a great capacity for synthesis and not easily enchanted by bombastic speeches”* and that under her own steam in the post-war period raised eight children, giving each of them the opportunity of a university education regardless of gender (in the post-war period, the number of women attending university in Italy was very small).

Coaching enabled SF to get away from an *“almost mystical, more distant and more difficult to achieve”* vision of leadership *“that require an ability to talk to people’s guts, to move them, that scared me. I gained awareness that there are many different leadership styles and that the one closest to my nature, a more sober, more relaxed style with fewer slogans and fireworks, but no less effective for that and that I would describe as a nice pair of simple, black court shoes, timeless but with a twist, like red heels, a detail that at first sight can be missed and I don’t even think that my sobriety is boring because I put passion into everything I do.”*

SF says that coaching *“helped me to develop and bring out leadership behaviours I am a person who values transparency, reliability and integrity and coaching has helped me to enhance these skills.”*

Working with the coach on conflict management SF realised that her ability to manage conflict in a sober manner, to face and be able to resolve disputes is a point of strength in her leadership style.

SF says she has never felt a conflict between her feminine side and her working identity and says of herself that *“first comes my rigour and then the fact of being a woman”* and describes the environments in which she has worked as a *“neutral, open to the contributions of everyone regardless of gender and based on the numbers, that of course have no gender.”* SF cares deeply about her feminine side that she developed as a young woman thanks to a strong relationship of complicity with her mother, a very beautiful and very feminine

woman, with whom she had been in conflict during adolescence. She says, *“it is important to take care of yourself, to look good and feel good about yourself.”*

SF briefly describes the experience of coaching as *“a great journey, made to a place I did not know, and where I’d probably be afraid to venture alone, but which I’m finding enjoyable and with someone who will pass me a torch or a compass when I need them this place means I can explore those parts of my personality that I previously did not want to know, such as being too bossy or not wanting to get in touch with my feelings.”* Of the people she works with she said that before coaching they would have described her as a rather interventionist *mechanic*, while today they would describe her as a *watchmaker*, more thoughtful and attentive to the implications of relationships between people.

Case 3 – LB

The third interview was carried out with a forty five year old woman who is married and has a fifteen-year old daughter. She is graduated in Business Economics. Today she is the Human Resources Director in a large manufacturing company. Her career development path was within the Information Technology / Organisational Development areas and, at a later stage, in the Human Resources within multinational companies operating in different sectors.

LB says that coaching has been a permanent feature throughout her professional development, first as a coachee then as a coach. She has always had a specific interest in coaching and in counselling and throughout her career she has had the opportunity to work with different coaches on a wide range of issues related to her professional growth. She has also followed a counselling course based on self-empowerment and has recently become a fully certified coach.

During her professional career LB has had mainly male role models as leadership figures who she described as *“tough but transparent”*. She acknowledges to have learnt a great deal without having been masculinized in her style of leadership. An important turning point in building her *leader identity* came while working with the coach on the concept of power. Prior to the coaching programme she describes her relationship with power in the following words: *“I had always experienced power as a negative thing, I was afraid of it and therefore tried to avoid it and I thought that women had a more ethical vision of power compared to men”*. By working together with the coach LB is able to rethink and remodel her belief about power being able to define it as *“a container in which there are roles and responsibilities and where it is important to have the tools to influence the situation”*. She understands the importance of handling power in order to build alliances within the company, a skill she acknowledges that the male leaders within the company have and which is underdeveloped in female leaders. Through coaching she says that she has been able to comprehend and accept that top management positions involve

power as a characteristic, understood as the ability to influence others while keeping one's own free thoughts. She feels to have developed a leadership style particularly suitable to constantly changing circumstances in which companies normally faces some difficulties.

LB adds that the coaching has helped her to strengthen her *self-esteem* and she describes the coaching sessions in the following way "*windows which allowed me to rationalise some issues which were taking place and to practice as well as moments of confrontation and comparison with a trusted person with whom I could be myself in complete transparency*".

To sum up, LB believes that the support she received from her husband and family both in terms of encouragement to pursue her career as well in terms of practicality in taking over/on some of the activities related to the household running was fundamental for her

Case 4 - TV

The fourth interview was carried out with a married woman, aged forty-three with two preteens. She graduated in Economics and covers a managerial role in an Italian branch of a multinational operating in the manufacturing sector. She is a board member in two companies.

After an initial experience within an Accounting firm, she seizes the opportunity to enter into a corporate environment in which she develops her

own professional career characterised by frequently changing roles and responsibilities

It is while changing role from a professional to a team manager that TV has her first coaching experience which consists of ten sessions during which the practical and managerial topics related to the new role are touched on. However, during the last two sessions of this first coaching experience she begins to confront herself with the issue of leadership and she understands that she needs to develop her skills further in this area. Thanks to an influential mentor in the company she is able to get herself assigned an external coach who is specialised in leadership issues. She describes the company's top management and the Human Resources Management as not particularly inclined to use coaching as a tool for personal development as corporate culture is oriented on "doing" rather than "being". TV says to have perceived a certain amount of scepticism from the organisation regarding the path she wants to follow as if it were a "*waste of time*" in relation to those more pressing business priorities. Nonetheless, with the support of her mentor, she begins her coaching programme that lasts approximately one year.

TV describes the pre-coaching period as focussed on looking for a *leader identity* and in her journey she has two main reference points: the first being her mentor in whom she recognises an example of *transformational leadership* but considering he is male she is unable to see him as a *female leadership* role model; the second being her previous boss, the only female member on the

Senior Management Team, who is perceived as a negative role model as she is distant from her own "*female identity*".

TV describes the leadership model expressed by her ex-boss as one characterised by a "*high level of technical skill but also closed to relationship and missing emotional intelligence skills*". TV says her ex boss had forgone her female side embodying with her behaviours "*the worst of the male authoritarian leadership style which characterizes the company*". Moreover, TV states that within the team any mention of the characteristics connected to the role of women was "*forbidden*" and that her ex-boss had requested to be "*aseptic and cold*": to show oneself to be a woman in one's behaviour and in one's thoughts was not compatible with moving up the career ladder. Despite the fact that her ex-boss was married with a child TV says that during their long collaboration the issue of children was never brought up unless to remind TV that having two children was detrimental to her career.

The second year-long coaching programme begins with a reflection upon the external view that other people have on women in positions of leadership. In her company women are considered in second place, and those women in top positions do not encourage female talent. She does not have a female leadership "role model" as she does not feel that the model expressed by the few executive women in the company is her own as it would entail denying a female side which she describes as "*cooperative, geared towards the common good, empathetic and sensitive*".

The new position, which involves the co-ordination of a team, raises her awareness of her inadequacy in not having interiorised a model of leadership that would allow her to manage the different hierarchies - in short to be a boss. During the coaching sessions, while discussing the practical cases from the day-to-day business life with her coach, she realises to have applied unconsciously some types of behaviour learnt from her former boss's leadership style that she disliked. The discussion with her coach allows her to understand that there are no absolute reference models but that the definition of a leadership style must go through "*self-examination*" in which it is necessary to identify "*ones own values*" and to "*identify ones owns limits to work on*". TV describes this path in the following terms: "*I found peace of mind and accepted the fact that there is no abstract model of leadership but the model is inside you, you cannot force a model if you want to be authentic and find a balance for yourself and to be perceived by others as complete*".

It was particularly important for TV to understand that she could bring her authenticity to the company and therefore live her femininity to the full (previously denied by the model of leadership within the company). This was made possible because the coach helped her *unconscious need of recognition* to emerge and made TV realised that she had been shifted it in the workplace by the parental model. Due to her need of inclusion it was difficult for TV to construct a *leadership identity* different to the leadership model provided by the company which she perceived distant from her own definition but at the same time felt the need to adapt in order to be accepted. The liberation from the need

to *“gratify those who judge me”* was one of the turning points for TV as it allowed her to develop a *self-view as a leader*, to improve her *self-esteem* and to begin building a leadership model fitted to her female identity. Today she says that she is particularly satisfied by the fact that colleagues acknowledge that she *“knew how to create a leadership model which combines the traditional elements of leadership with the attention to relationship, sensitivity and regard for female qualities, in a male dominated corporate culture”*.

Case 5 – AZ

The fifth interview was carried out on a forty-seven year old woman who has been married for seven years without children. She is a graduate in Economics but has always had an interest in psychological subjects. She is a board member in two companies. The first part of her career is spent within a leading consultancy company. After approximately nine years she decides to resign because she *“wanted to apply a different leadership model, to experiment first hand right and wrong decisions and to leave an imprint in a more effective manner”* and to accept a managerial position in business planning and control within a fast- moving consumer goods company.

In this work experience AZ has a typical dominating male boss who is self-confident, action-oriented, with a direct communication style, highly disciplined and with high performance expectations for himself and others. A tough man showing little sensitivity to emotional intelligence contents; AZ is

able to earn his trust by showing herself to be reliable and persistent, able to build up a professional relationship based on frankness, directness and reciprocal respect. Despite the rather rough manners of her boss, AZ is able to find the right way of communication in order to put forward her own ideas assertively. Moreover, she is able to use her networking and social skills in order to be integrated in the group. During that period AZ describes herself as *“result oriented, solid, extremely determined, transparent and principled as well as a good listener”*.

After approximately three years she is called in Corporate as Planning and Control Director. The workplace environment is characterized by the predominance of a male leadership style, women underrepresentation at every company level and a company culture based on figures. AZ describes that period as stimulating but unbalanced from a work-life point of view. Her leadership style is similar to *“that of a General in the Marines”* and her quest for perfection leads the team to work at fast paced rhythms, as *“the compliance to deadlines and delivery at any cost”* are the bases for *“earning the esteem of the company’s top management”*. The leadership “role-model” is that of the dominating male top management and that of her father who she perceives as a great professional *“correct, wise and extremely well prepared”* for whom she has always thought to have to give her best in order to receive respect.

The first turning point for AZ is the simultaneous illness of her parents and the sudden death of her father: at his funeral she realises from the dedications and kind words from her father’s collaborators that first and

foremost his leadership style was “*driven by the heart.*” At the same time, an employee survey, carried out on her team, reveals signs of exhaustion in all collaborators, who recognize in her transparency, integrity and professionalism but demand more delegation, exposure and a better work-life balance. It is a revelation for AZ who realises to have a managerial and directive leadership style characterised by a lack of attention to the needs of others.

Almost at the same time AZ receives an opportunity which leads her to become head of company start-up in the service industry: she realises that her leadership style must change in order to be able to be more effective in her new role which includes the coordination of resources who are used to working in complete autonomy on Change Management projects which require excellent interpersonal skills and influence.

She realises that she wants to develop a new leadership style similar to the “boss-coach” approach, able to guide and direct, advise and empower the resources. This reflective space includes the importance of working on oneself, on one’s emotions and how these can have an impact on others. Being interested in psychological matters but never having had the opportunity to develop them further throughout her university studies she decides to undertake a coaching programme. AZ describes this experience as the possibility to “*see things through new eyes*”, to have peace of mind and to give herself the possibility to “*no longer be perfect and to look at herself with greater compassion*”, looking after herself and allowing her to ask help from others. She develops the ability to listen to herself, which in turn allows her to feel the

weariness of always being “*forward going*”, of over performing and of never having to show any fragility. AZ recognises that before coaching she found it difficult to integrate into her identity as leader the feminine side, which she felt she had to conceal so as not to endanger her in an organisation in which any emotional issue was considered a “*vulnerability*” in the most negative sense of the word. AZ says that coaching allowed her to be more balanced and has given her the courage to integrate into her leadership style, which was characterised mainly by cognitive features and pragmatism connected to obtaining demanding and challenging results, to reliability and quality of work, even those aspects linked to attention to people and to the quest of finding a good work-life balance. Today she believes to have developed a leadership identity that allows her to integrate fully her own feminine characteristics to those more commonly associated to male leadership.

Case 6 – ASF

The sixth interview has been carried out on a married woman aged forty and with two children aged five and seven. She graduated in Economics and Business. For the last five years she has been the CFO in an insurance company belonging to a leading Italian financial group.

The workforce is equally divided between men and women: women make up fifty per cent of the Board of Directors and there are women in many key positions at middle management level. ASF describes the corporate culture

as equal *"In our company I don't feel different, there is no competition between men and women while at the Headquarter there is an absence of women in managerial positions and there is a male chauvinist corporate culture. During meetings at the Headquarter I am often the only woman and the men speak among themselves using rather vulgar terms which could be offensive to women, I feel like a guest and I perceive that the fact of being a mother must not show through"*. ASF says that in order to fight these stereotypes she plays up her technical skills and her previous experience in international groups. Being of rather petite stature and in order to overcome her feeling of physical inferiority she has started to wear heels *"in order to be at the same height as my interlocutors"*.

Three years ago the company acquired an important competitor and the role of the entire Senior Management Team increased significantly in difficulty. The Managing Director offers his first line the opportunity of coaching in order to facilitate the development of the necessary leadership skills to manage the integration of the two companies successfully.

Before starting the coaching a 360 - degree feedback is carried out and through which arises that ASF collaborators do not feel satisfactorily involved in the decision making process which in turn affects their motivation as they are not able to perceive the value of their contribution in achieving company targets. Helped by the coach, she begins to develop an awareness of her leadership style thanks to which she understands that her tendency to concentrate the burden of responsibility on her shoulders and to be a control freak depends on

her lack of confidence regarding being perceived as a leader by her collaborators who as well as being ex colleagues are also all male. ASF points out that the Managing Director had nominated her CFO despite being three months pregnant, choosing her over her male colleagues for her technical skills even if the latter were older and more senior. According to Italian labour law it is possible for a woman to be absent on maternity leave for up to twelve months, however ASF returned to work after the initial period of obligatory leave and recalls to have worked from home up until the day before the birth. Regardless of her commitment and of the professional esteem her colleagues have of her she realises that she has always thought to “*have to show that she had earned and deserved her place*” for having obtained it “*despite*” being pregnant.

ASF believes that coaching has played an important part in helping her to analyse her areas of improvement and to identify the ways and means needed to support them. This path leading to the development of her leadership skills meant that she was able to build a relationship based on trust and confidence with her collaborators which led to delegation of responsibility and to their empowerment. The subject of building a “working alliance” with the members of her team was central in constructing her *leader identity* and required her to work on her family life. Indeed, through a course of awareness, she understands that the subject of trust has always been central to her immediate family and to how she related this parental model in the company.

Today ASF considers herself to be recognised as an inspirational and ethical leader and thinks that her collaborators regard her as “*having a non-*

aggressive style of leadership, a person you can entrust and trust as she thinks about the common good and not about her own personal advantage or gain”.

ASF believes that the support of her husband in sharing the household chores, of being proud of her professional success, the involvement of her children in her working life in explaining to them “*what mummy does and why it is important to do it*” have all been fundamental in allowing her to reach a harmonious integration between the different roles of mother, wife and leader, even if she is aware that she has had to make sacrifices with regard to fully living the experience of maternity and for this reason still suffers from guilt trips.

All in all, ASF says that her coaching experience “*has been an emotional, difficult but evolutionary path because it touched my deepest heartstrings*”

DISCUSSION

The purpose of this study was to understand how a coaching programme could support female leaders in building and internalizing their leader identity. While in the current literature there are a number of studies that analyse the link between self-identity and leadership development, there is little research on how women leaders see themselves and how they experience leadership roles (Karelaia&Guillen, 2012). Moreover, “*there is little to no research that directly examines the relationship between gender and executive coaching*” (Ruderman & Ohlott, 2005, pag.6). Last but not least, even if there are hundreds of

publications on coaching practice, as far as I have seen, if we exclude the relatively new coaching approach to leadership development based on the clinical paradigm, they are mainly focused on the traditional approach of improving performance rather than on helping coachees to develop their leader identity. In this respect this study brings a new perspective by integrating three different concepts: leadership development (based on the identity approach to leadership effectiveness), gender stereotyping and coaching practice.

I chose to use the narrative method in an attempt to capture the essence of the *female journey* towards the definition of a leadership identity. The semi-structured interview offered a useful tool to allow the subjects get in touch with themselves, to go deep inside their coaching experience and be emotionally engaged in their story. In the belief that sharing human experience is one of the most powerful ways of learning, I wrote the “narrative summaries” with the aim of giving the reader a more vivid picture of the journey that each woman, with her own characteristics, experienced.

All the female leaders in the sample had followed a coaching programme in order to support advancement in their careers. Nevertheless, from how they voiced their coaching experience, it appears that coaching is more than a process to improve individual performance in order to be more effective in one’s role, it also has a lot to do with creating a *self-reflective space* where an individual can reflect on their own unique *value, identity, emotions, goals and motives*. Each of the women interviewed, within the specificity of her own history, listed among the most important results of coaching increased self-

awareness and enhanced self-esteem, a process that formed the basis of the construction of their self-view as leader.

In the different experiences, there is a common thread that is the search within themselves for a dimension of *authentic leadership*. This requires the ability to develop a self-esteem based on a sense of competence (*self-evaluation*) and a sense of virtue or moral worth (*self-worth*) (cf. Gegas, 1082). The process that unites the various women interviewed in the construction of a competence-based self-esteem is the facing of new challenges with a lifelong learning approach, also demonstrated in an openness to experience coaching. All of them, speaking of their professional history, underlined the importance of feeling competent and prepared for each new area they have had to face during their career. This confirms a study on young professionals that showed that women, in an attempt to remain authentic, prefer to demonstrate their competence through technical knowledge exhibited over time, unlike their male colleagues who prefer to make a good first impression (cf. Ely & Ibarra, & Kolb, 2011). An interesting result is that for some of the women in the sample, coaching was functional in the first instance, by working with the coach to make a careful examination of their professional skills, also through a range of individual assessments and a 360-degree feedback to draft a development plan as the basis for subsequent coaching. This meant dedicating a part of the coaching programme to work on topics related to managerial skills inherent in the new job, such as strategic vision, building networks of relationships, managing cross-functional teams, conflict management and the management of

power. To this end, it is clearly important that the coach has a solid background in the issues related to the management of the business and the organisational dynamics that enable her/him to be a credible interlocutor for the leader. It is important, however, that the coach does not fall into the trap of assuming the role of a strategy/organisational consultant or a trainer and that, where specific needs are identified, helps the coachee to define a structured development plan that involves other professionals or points out the potential advantages for the coachee of undertaking specific training.

The interviews also clearly showed that, for most women, the element of *introspection* done during coaching was crucial in working on their self-worth and in search of their deepest values to enable the construction of an authentic leadership that was not just a reflection of what has been acquired cognitively, compared with the models of leadership in the organisation or on management training, but, rather, the most intimate expression of their own values and beliefs. This is in line with the Lord & Hall model of leadership development in which, as leaders progress from novice to expert, they will be more driven by internal values than by a desire to match their behaviours to implicit theories of effective leadership.

The construction of a leader identity on the basis of one's own personal values and characteristics is also the basis of a "*motivation to lead*". This is in line with the "narrative summaries" where women voice their desire to create "*a working environments in which people do not feel oppressed but are happy to come to work*" and "*femininity is perceived as an asset*". In the interviews the

women clearly express their willingness to adopt a leadership style based on empowerment and respect for the contributions of individuals and their need to build an organisation based on the values of transparency, reliability, integrity.

This result are in line with a recent study that performed a meta-analysis on three research paradigms demonstrating that “ *leadership now, more than in the past, appears to incorporate more feminine relational qualities, such as sensitivity, warmth and understanding, thus adding them to masculine dominance and strength qualities traditionally associated with leadership*” (Koenig, Eagly, Mitchell, & Ristikari, 2011, pag. 634)

The definition and internalisation of one’s own leadership definition required the women to go back to their family roots for a better understanding of the internalized parental model in order to free themselves from it. In fact, coaching was able to help them to connect the family experience with their corporate experience, revealing how an idealized paternal role or vision of the self as the “underdog” might be limiting with regard to the possibility of creating an identity as a leader.

Most of the coachees interviewed describe the process of building a leader identity starting by distancing themselves from the role models endorsed by the organisational culture to enhance their personal dimensions by establishing an appropriate balance between the agentic and the communal characteristics. This confirms what is shown in the literature review that links the development of leadership skills to an intra-personal cognitive process that allows the construction of one’s own definition of leadership, free of the implicit

theories of leadership validate by the organisation. This is particularly important for women who, in the absence of “female role models”, risk appropriating a male model and stifling their feminine characteristics. In this process coaches have played a key role in encouraging their clients to experiment new behaviours in order to build on experiences that foster themselves as leaders. In some of the stories it is clear that the coach has been able to create a transitional space in which the coachee was able to manage her own anxiety about implementing a model of leadership different from that already present in the organisation and encouraging her to be the agent of a cultural change.

This second coaching approach, much more intimate than that concerning the improvement of managerial skills, engages the coachee at a deep emotional level, and requires that the coach has a preparation that enable him/her to “*understand the hidden dynamics associated with individual perception, motivation, leadership, interpersonal relationships, team behaviour, collusive situations, social defences, corporate culture, and the extent to which individuals can be prisoners of their past.*” (Kets de Vries & Florent-Korotov & Tracy, 2007, pag.xlv). However, it is important that the coach respects the boundaries of the intervention by not drifting into the field of psychotherapy.

All the women felt very strongly the importance of not having abandoned their gender-specific assets, seen as a plus compared with the traditional model of the leader proposed by the stereotype “think manager-think male”. The women in the sample also shared an ability to overcome the psychological barrier of having to “act like a man” in order to be respected as a leader by their

followers. However, through coaching, they have also worked on more agentic characteristics, such as assertiveness and self-esteem, without feeling “masculinized.”

With this study, I also set myself the task of examining how coaching could help women to integrate their different social roles, allowing them to achieve more harmony in their lives by ensuring a satisfactory life-work balance. What emerges from the results is that all of the respondents recognise the importance of being able to fully enjoy their feminine side while occupying a top position. Being a woman was identified by all of them as the possibility of not having to hide their femininity in the masculine-cut clothes and aggressive behaviour so reminiscent of the films of the 90s, such as Sigourney Weaver in “Working Girl”, but “*to be credible*” by choosing the look that they feel best represents them and engaging in behaviours more in line with their common characteristics. For some of the women interviewed, coaching offered a safe space in which to confront their fears and their demons regarding a possible exclusion or rejection by the organisation if they did not agree to align themselves with the styles of leadership in the company.

With regard to the role of wife, particularly important in the process of building their identity as leaders was the opportunity to share a life plan with their spouse that would leave room for both to pursue realization in their professional lives. As far as I could detect from the interviews, coaching does not seem to have made a contribution in this area, as “complicity” between the spouses already existed. Also the role of being a mother was not covered in

coaching, though what emerged from the research was the importance of an organisation of the family where there are other trusted figures, from grandparents to baby-sitters, who can take charge of at least part of childcare. Also husbands were indicated as essential in taking care of some children's activities traditionally dominated almost exclusively by mothers.

Finally, as regards the organisation, an interesting finding emerged: when a woman manages to strengthen her internal image and is strongly motivated to build an identity as a leader, organisational factors seem to take on a less important role in terms of reinforcing, both positively and negatively, the construction of the leader identity compared with the contribution of individual personal characteristics and values. In this sense coaching can play a key role in helping women on their path towards greater self-awareness, discovering their individual qualities and strengthening their self-esteem so as to create a virtuous system of self-motivation.

LIMITATIONS AND FUTURE RESEARCH

As with all research methods, the limits of a project of narrative inquiry are both a practical and epistemological nature (den Outer, 2010). Regarding the former, the researcher needs to collect detailed information about the participant, not only by interviewing her several times, but also collecting

documents such as memos or official correspondence and/or interviewing other people who have been interacted with the subject.

For reasons related to the availability of time, I was able to conduct a single interview of two hours with each participant and subsequently send a narrative summary of each with a request for comments and feedback. I did not collect documents or correspondence. Furthermore, ideally I would have liked to interview family members and colleagues of the coachee to have their views with regarding the changes they observed in the participant during and after coaching. From a systemic perspective, it would have been interesting to understand what impact the changes had on the coachee's organisation. This was not possible, not only because it would have been very time consuming, but also for reasons of confidentiality. In fact, the respondents "revealed" themselves in addressing the difficulties encountered in the construction of their leader identity and asking them to share this introspective process with third parties would have been delicate and have required significant preparation time. Future research could benefit by allocating more time for the collection of data, also of different kinds and from a greater number of exogenous and endogenous sources, as well as additional interviews with the participant to better understand how all the different elements interacted in the construction of the leadership identity.

From an epistemological point of view, the limits of a narrative inquiry are inherent in the possible manipulation of the process of data collection in an interview. For this reason, despite having designed a guide for a semi-

structured interview, it was decided to leave the interviewee some freedom to tell her story in order not to interrupt the emotional flow that could offer important access to “*under the surface*” information. Indeed, the purpose of the interview was to go beyond the purely cognitive construction of a leader identity, allowing the participant, through the narration, to access the deeper aspects of her experience. This meant that a reading of the communalities between the different stories was not always easy.

Another limitation of the study is that, given the small number of participants, it was not possible to verify how different models of coaching might produce different processes in the construction of a leader identity. In fact, half of the sample are coaches that I followed personally, applying a coaching model based on the clinical paradigm, while for the other three cases, I have decided not to investigate the coaching model used given that, in order to have reliable data, I would have had to interview the coach directly, who may well have proved to be not readily available. Future research could look into the possible differential role of different models of coaching (for example, from the most action-oriented Growth Model to that based on a clinical approach). In addition, all the coachees are Italian and work in Italy, even if some of them work for foreign multinationals. This could constitute a cultural bias that would be interesting to investigate, comparing women from different countries.

Another possible field of inquiry that emerged from the interviews, even if not directly investigated, is the role of the family in a broader sense, in other words, the husband or partner, but also grandparents, or, more generally

caregivers, who provide support in the care of the home and the children, thereby lowering the stress resulting from filling various roles as a working woman. Even in the absence of children, the role of the partner is important to allow a woman to feel less conflict between being a leader and being a wife. Obviously, the sample is both too small and Italian to confirm these hypotheses, even if many international publications refer to the imbalance between the time spent on the family by men and women (in Italy the imbalance is one of the most marked compared with other European countries) as one of the blocks to career development. Future research could investigate the extent to which a “supportive” family situation can help women build an identity as a leader.

CONCLUSIONS

This work makes a contribution to what has previously been reported in the literature on the importance of coaching as a tool for the development of leadership skills. However, it also adds a dimension that has hitherto been little explored: the construction, by a woman, of an identity as a leader through a coaching programme.

From the different cases analysed, it is clear that coaching played a key role in helping the coachees to strengthen their self-esteem through a process of developing a level of self-awareness that allowed them to get in touch with

their personal resources and their values in order to build their own image as a leader.

Moreover, coaching created a transitional space that provided the women with the opportunity to confront their own difficulties while trying out new styles of leadership different from the traditional dominant male model of leadership in their companies. For some women coaching facilitated the expression of their femininity and reduced the perception of a possible incongruence between being a woman and being a leader.

These findings offer some valuable practical implications:

- Academic institutions and practitioners who design education leadership training programmes should include coaching to help prepare women for their leadership journey;
- Organisations that are committed to developing and retaining women should consider the introduction of coaching programmes in order to support women in building their leadership identity;
- Coaches should consider developing specific knowledge and skills in how gender issues impact on leadership development;
- Women could consider pro-actively engaging in coaching to help themselves to reflect on specific issues concerning the integration of different roles.

As a final conclusion, we can say that the more women are helped on their journey of leadership development the much easier it will become for them to

occupy, and function in a satisfactory manner, the top positions that are or will be open following the full introduction of European laws on gender equality.

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ANNEX : Interview Guide

Thank you for having accepted this meeting that will last approximately two hours. The issue at hand is how your coaching experience contributed to the development and internalization of your leader identity as well as to the reconciliation of the different roles (work/social/family) that a woman must face over the course of her life. To conclude I would also be interested to know whether your organisation supported you or not in developing your leadership identity.

SECTION 1: Personal details and employment history

Let's begin with some general questions in order to get to know each other.

1. How old are you?
2. Could you give me some of your family details? (marital status, members of your family etc.)
3. Could you give me a brief description of your educational background?
4. Prior to holding your current position what did your previous work experience involve? What other work experience do you have?
5. How long have you worked within your current company?
6. Could you tell me a little about the different career steps you undertook before getting your current position?
7. Could you briefly outline your role and its responsibilities?

SECTION 2: Information about the company

Now some questions related to your company. Some specific examples:

8. How many employees are there?
9. What percentage of managers are male? And female?
10. What percentage of middle managers are male? And female?
11. What percentage of senior managers are male? And female?
12. What percentage of women are members of the Board?
13. If it is not considered confidential information, what is the turnover of the company?

SECTION 3: The coaching experience

a) Life pre-coaching

Now we will proceed in the following way: please concentrate on how you were before the coaching took place.

14. How old were you and what was your role when you started your coaching experience?
15. How did the need for coaching come about?
16. Did anyone direct you towards this path?
17. Was the coaching experience connected to an imminent or potential promotion or career development?
18. What adjectives come to mind if you had to describe yourself at that time?
19. What did you like the most and the least about yourself?

20. How do you think people saw you? If we had asked a colleague to describe you what would she/he have said?
21. Being a woman you know how difficult it is to combine the different roles which society expects from us. How did you experience this condition and were the different parts in harmony with each other?
22. Did you know of any different models of leadership through reading managerial material/books etc.? If yes, what models?
23. What was your definition of leadership?
24. What model of leadership could be found in your company?
25. Were you inspired or influenced by any particular leadership figure? If so who?
26. What did you envisage the coaching experience to be like?
27. What objectives did you want to reach through coaching?

b) Experience of coaching

Please focus on the period in which you carried out the coaching experience.

28. Did you have any fears, hesitations or even opposition to coaching?
29. What objectives did you want to reach through coaching?
30. During the coaching experience did your objectives change?
31. What changes did you feel inside as a leader during the coaching experience?
32. Could you tell me about the changes you felt as a woman during the coaching experience?

33. Who were the points of reference during the experience?
34. Did you feel that during your coaching experience the company supported you, hindered you or was uninterested?
35. If you had to briefly describe your coaching experience what would you say?

c) Post coaching

Please focus on the period following the coaching experience.

36. Do you think to have reached your previously set out objectives?
37. What adjectives would you use to describe yourself today?
38. How do you think people see you? If we asked a colleague to describe you what do you think she would say?
39. Considering the afore-mentioned difficulties which women find in balancing work/family and community/social life do you think to have found a better harmony and balance after your coaching experience?
40. Have the difficulties that you have to face changed? Have they increased or decreased? Are they different?
41. How would you define leadership after your coaching experience?
42. Do you think that the relationship with the company has changed?

Thank you for your time and openness. If you would like to receive a copy of the thesis once finished I will be more than happy to send you one.