

# Women-dedicated Leadership Programs as One of More Effective Methods of Developing Women Leaders – Current Status and Future Vision in Companies in Poland

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This paper considers the important role of developmental programs designed and run specifically for women, not as the only training offer recommended for them but as an addition to other leadership courses. The author examines first companies engagement in the idea of promoting women leadership and their strategies of achieving tangible effects in this matter. Based on a survey, the author checks whether female employees in Poland are provided with women-dedicated leadership programs and whether the newest scientific findings on the benefits of women-dedicated programs are considered by companies when they plan development paths for women-employees. At the end the author investigates on attractiveness of the idea of women-dedicated leadership programs for female employees in Poland and what kind of benefits they would expect from participating in such programs.

**Keywords:** women and development, women and leadership, leadership programs.

## Introduction

In the recent years, business world has totally restructured and re-engineered itself (Smith, 2005). Political changes, emerging of new rapidly growing economies, huge global competition, new technologies affecting business processes' designing and management – all this creates a very complex picture of the business of nowadays.

The new challenges create a need for a new type of leadership – so called ‘transformational leadership’ (Bass, 1990), which seems to be gender-related (Maher, 1990). Additionally, the more uncertain the business world is, the more diverse you need the management to be, and one of the ways of achieving it is through different genders (Dickey, 2013). What is even more important, according to McKinsey & Co. study there is a strong correlation between the presence of women among executives and the company’s effectiveness – most of the clients surveyed by them said the kind of management they needed in the crisis is the kind generally associated with women (Women Matter, 2008). Moreover, where three or more of the chief officers in the firm were women, the ratings of the company management performance (including its finance) were consistently high (Women Matter, 2010). That means there is evidence that companies with more women in top jobs perform better than those run by men only.

To sum up, it seems to be obvious now that having women in the top positions is not only fair but also reasonable from the perspective of business effectiveness. Unfortunately, among Fortune 500 companies only 3% of the CEO positions are held by women (Psychogios, 2007). And that is also the reason why nowadays an increasing interest in how organizations can cultivate women’s leadership talent can be observed.

## Developing women leadership talent

We rather all agree that increasing the number of women in companies’ top positions requires both organizational and individual change (Hopkins, O’Neil, Passarelli & Bilimoria, 2008). The organizational changes have to happen in companies, states, in the world and they mean a systemic approach strategically run by companies’ board of directors, states’ governments and other global institutions.

The individual change is expected in women themselves and can be supported and facilitated by proper leadership development programs.

This paper considers the important role of developmental programs designed and run specifically for women, not as the only training offer recommended for them but as an addition to other leadership courses.

It looks like a change is needed in the way companies approach leadership development as this process for women seems to be not the same as the development process for men. Men’s development is usually linked to increasing autonomy and separation from others as a means of strengthening identity and empowering themselves. It is only much later in men’s development that men are ready to explore intimacy and accept others as equally important to themselves. Likewise,

it is only much later in women's development that women can tolerate separation and finally see themselves as equal to others (Vinnicombe, 2003). It has a lot of implications on the learning style preferred by women. The learning environment of MBA or other leadership courses is usually suited to the male model. As research illustrates women gain more than men from learning through significant others such as coaches, mentors, peers, buddies and role models (Fitzpatrick, 2012) – which proves women relational learning style as being opposite to the male competitive one. Also, the male/female ratio among participants of the same training group impacts the learning environment significantly – in training groups where women are minority men dominate to such extent that finally women's voice is not heard at all or women themselves disregard their values, points of view, preferences and adjust themselves to the male perspective. This eventually leads to a conclusion that deeper levels of learning may be possible for women in training groups free of gender dynamics (Limerick, Heywood, 1993). These arguments support the thesis that women-dedicated programs can be a more effective way of developing women-leaders as they can be better suited to the women's typical learning style.

Additionally, addressing the issue of internal barriers existing within women themselves seems to be crucial and women-dedicated programs may be more effective way to enable women to clarify their leadership ambitions and better recognize their leadership strengths.

Among many advantages of the women-dedicated development programs, the researchers identify: teaching and learning methods reflect women's more relational learning style, topics specifically important to women are worked out during the course, self-knowledge can be deeper reflected by means of self-assessment tools, exploration of how the gender issue impacts the women's work experience and leadership leads to very practical take-away for them (Hopkins, O'Neil, Passarelli & Bilimoria, 2008).

## Method

### *Is this new approach implemented or implementable in Poland?*

The author's intention was to examine to what extent female employees in Poland are provided with women-dedicated leadership programs and how such programs could be perceived by them.

The method applied here was a survey done between January and April 2014, among women in workforce. This means that women-entrepreneurs, owning their business, were not included into the respondent group. The survey contained eight subject-related questions and two questions related to respondents' data like job

experience, positions, place of work (size of the company). The subject-related questions were as follows:

1. Does your company declare its support for the idea of having more women in managerial positions? – potential answers: YES or NO
2. Does your company have any idea/strategy how to achieve this? – potential answers: YES or NOW.
3. Does your company organize women-only dedicated leadership development programs internally to women in your organization? – potential answers: YES or NO.
4. Does your company buy such programs externally? – potential answers: YES or NO.
5. How big in your opinion is the influence of some internal barriers existing in women (e.g. lack of self-confidence, risk avoidance, fear of being perceived as unfeminine) on the fact that it is difficult for them to reach out for top positions? – potential answers: HUGE, BIG, SMALL, NONE.
6. How seriously is the existence of the barriers taken into account when your company is planning leadership development programs for women in your organization? – potential answers: VERY SERIOUSLY, SERIOUSLY, NOT SO MUCH, NOT AT ALL.
7. If such programs are available in your company, would you participate? – potential answers: YES or NO.
8. Please explain your previous answer.

## Results

The author received responses from 91 women. Table 1 shows the percentage of respondents by the place of their employment.

**Table 1. Place of employment in%**

Small&Medium-sized (employing <250 people)	Large companies (employing >250 people)	International corporations	Other (e.g. a large state-owned enterprise)
13% of respondents	16% of respondents	69% of respondents	2% of respondents

Source: Own study.

Table 2 shows the percentage of respondents by years of their work experience.

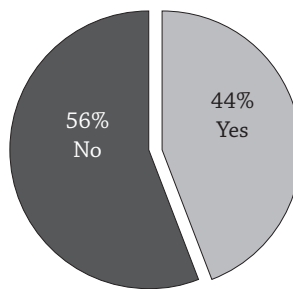
**Table 2. Total years of work experience in%**

<5 years	between 5 and 10 years	between 10 and 15 years	>15 years
22% of respondents	32% of respondents	29% of respondents	17% of respondents

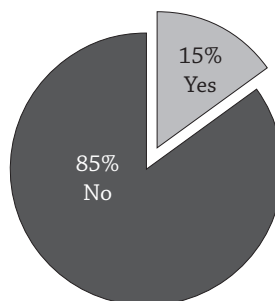
Source: Own study.

67% of the women hold now managerial positions in their companies which means being responsible for people reporting to them, they represent different managerial levels.

The subject-related questions received the following answers.

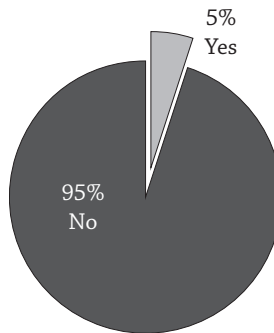
**Chart 1. Question 1 whether the company declares its support for the idea of having more women in managerial positions**

Source: Own study.

**Chart 2. Question 2 whether the company has a strategy to achieve this**

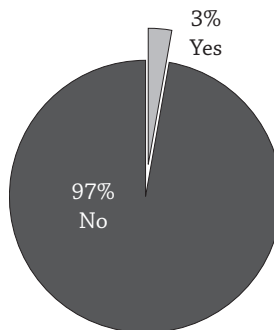
Source: Own study.

**Chart 3. Question 3 whether internal women-dedicated leadership development programs are organized in the company**



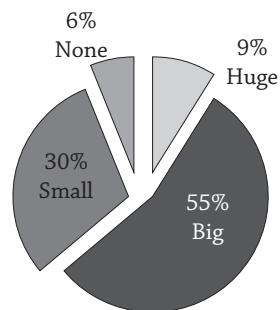
Source: Own study.

**Chart 4. Question 4 whether the company buys such programs externally**



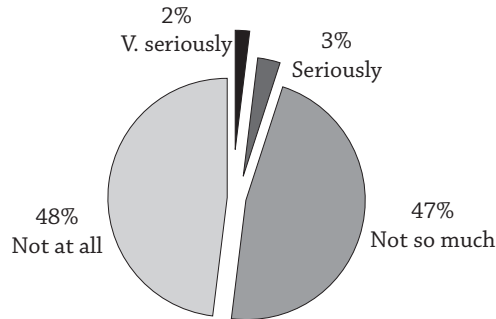
Source: Own study.

**Chart 5. Question 5 about how big influence women internal barriers have on their career progression**



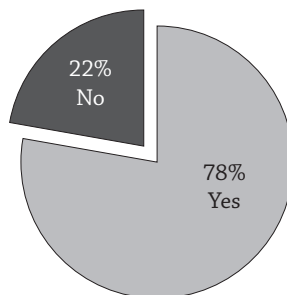
Source: Own study.

**Chart 6. Question 6 about how seriously the companies take into account the internal barriers existing in women when they plan leadership development programs**



Source: Own study.

**Chart 7. Question 7 whether the women would be interested in participating in such programs if they are available in their organizations**



Source: Own study.

## Discussion

*Is the idea of having more women in managerial positions promoted now in companies in Poland?*

That is the first interesting outcome from the survey. Although in the western part of the world, especially in the US, this idea seems to be very well settled, at least it is what companies declare and communicate to their employees, in Poland it seems to be not so obvious. Only 44% of the respondents answered that their companies declare their support for this idea, even though 69% of women who participated in the survey represent international corporations where the promotion

of women leadership seems to be one of company key policies. It is even more surprising when we take into consideration the fact that at the same time companies in Poland identify their nowadays biggest challenges as: a war for talents in recruitment market, lack of leadership competence (Haygroup.com). Promoting the idea of activating women with regard to how they approach their career progression seems to be a potential solution to the two challenges.

Even more important seem to be the responses to the question about a strategy implemented in companies how to increase the number of women in managerial positions. Only 15% of the respondents believe their companies have such strategies. If 85% of women working in business have an impression that there is no strategy how to improve the situation. This may mean that in fact in most of the companies, even there where there is already awareness of the importance of promoting the idea of having more women in leadership positions, nothing is being done and the idea stays only on the declaration level.

The McKinsey report (Women Matter, 2010) concludes that gender diversity is best supported by an ecosystem consisting of three parts: management commitment, women's development programs, a set of enablers (metrics, policies and processes and support mechanisms). It seems, in companies in Poland this approach is not yet present.

### *Are women-dedicated leadership development programs popular in Poland in companies?*

As stated before, the women-dedicated development programs are considered by the author as one of several methods of developing women leaders. It is considered in the same way in the recent scientific research and more and more proved by business (Women Matter, 2010). The author wanted to check to what extent this approach has been already implemented in Poland. Companies may do this in two different ways: first through organizing female employees-dedicated internal programs, with help from internal resources like senior leaders and HR, second – through buying such programs and courses externally from training companies or business universities. The answers to the question number 3 and 4 seem to give evidence that the knowledge and awareness of usefulness of such programs is not present in the companies in Poland yet. Only 5% of the respondents answered that their companies offer internal leadership development programs dedicated to women and only 3% of them answered that the companies buy such programs externally. It means there are very few companies where such training programs take place. There might be a few different reasons for this. The first one relates to lack of knowledge and awareness in companies that such programs can be very helpful. But considering also the answers to the previous questions, number 1 and 2 – whether companies declare



support and have strategy for realizing the idea of increasing the number of women on top positions – we may conclude that in fact still the necessity of promoting the idea of women's leadership is not that clear and present in companies in Poland. It may be that the companies still do not understand and realize enough the women's potential and do not consider them as a pool of talents which may solve their business problems if it is consciously and strategically developed. If this is the state of mind in companies in Poland then popularizing the women-dedicated development programs should be preceded rather by working on changing this state of mind. As one of the survey respondents said: "Women, especially in Poland, have to overcome their internal barriers on their own, barriers like behavioral norms that were implemented into their minds at very young age. Now the woman has much more difficult situation when she becomes a manager and three times more is required from her".

*And what about the women themselves? What do they think about leadership development programs dedicated to them?*

To answer this question, the author decided to ask first whether the women themselves realize there are some internal barriers existing in them that halt and impede their career progression. As examples there were given three barriers in the survey: the first one was lack of self-confidence. Many studies and business cases prove that it is one of the biggest barriers which reveals e.g. in a woman typical reaction to a promotion – this reaction usually is "Oh my God, so now I will have to work hard to show I deserve it", which means in her mind she does not deserve it yet and she is not receiving the promotion as a recognition of her so far successes but rather in anticipation and with expectation of her future achievements. Women tend to rate themselves lower than their male colleagues. This phenomenon very often leads to the so called 'impostor syndrome', when women fear they will be found out as unworthy of the success they have attained or the promotion they have received (Harvey, Katz, 1983). The other barriers mentioned in the survey as examples were: being afraid of taking a risk and being afraid of being perceived as unfeminine. According to the answers, 64% of the respondents believe the internal barriers have huge (9%) or big (55%) influence on women's careers and 36% of them believe the influence is small (30%) or none (6%). This result may suggest that the fact of a small representation of women in top positions is related by some women (36%) more to the external conditions which may be e.g. lack of a good infrastructure helping women to combine their careers with family (e.g. too few kindergartens). Still majority of them (64%) believe the internal barriers play a big role in women's successful career progression.

It is not surprising, considering answers to the previous questions, that asked about how much the companies take into account the existence of internal barriers

when they plan development programs for women, only 5% of the respondents answered that the barriers are taken into account very seriously (2%) or seriously (3%). Majority (95%) of the women participating in the survey respond that the companies do not take the internal barriers into account so much seriously (47%) or at all (48%) which means that in most of the companies development offer proposed to female employees is not suited to their preferred learning style and does not cover any women specific development topics.

And now the crucial question – would such women-dedicated development offer be attractive to women themselves? Majority of the respondents (78%) answered they would like to participate in women-dedicated leadership programs if they are available to them. What is interesting, this is more than the percentage (64%) of women who believe that internal barriers have huge or big influence on their careers. This may mean that even women who do not identify any internal barriers in themselves, consider such programs as be useful for them.

### ***Why women say NO?***

There are still 22% of women who answered 'no' to the question whether they would like to participate in women-dedicated leadership programs. The explanations given by them can be grouped into three categories: the first category suggesting that such training could create even bigger barriers like 'this would show men that women are really weaker and need special treatment to achieve something', 'this would be like stigmatizing and in fact another form of discriminating women'; the second category relates more to personal reasons like 'I don't want to become a manager', 'I don't feel such a need', 'for me personally it is easier to be successful when you are a woman'; the third category is based on conviction that gender doesn't impact learning and/or leadership like 'it doesn't make sense, people develop the best in a diverse environment', 'competencies required from a female manager are the same as required from a male manager', 'in my opinion leadership doesn't have a gender'. These responses correspond with feminist arguments against women-dedicated programs which basically say that such programs assume a woman's deficiencies model (Cala's, Smircich, 1995). There is one difference between the survey respondents and the feminists – 50% of the respondents who said they would not like to participate in women-dedicated leadership programs evaluated the internal barriers as having huge or big influence on stopping women's careers, 30% of them evaluated the internal barriers as having small influence and only 20% of women in the group believe the internal barriers have no influence on women's careers. That could mean the majority of the respondents identify the deficiencies in women, unlike the feminists' opinion, but they believe that participating in women-dedicated programs would make the women's

situation even poorer as it would be like publically showing your weaknesses and asking for special treatment because of that.

In fact the idea of providing women with dedicated development programs is not about making development process for them easier because they have deficiencies. It is about minimizing all these learning aspects that make women's development harder when the learning takes place in conditions that were created and suited to male development model.

There was one more very interesting explanation why the respondent would not participate in the program which in fact does not fall into any of these categories described above and which basically suggested that 'men rather should take special training in order to learn how to fight their prejudices against women'. The author believes this is an extremely valuable point and an idea that could be explored further and promoted.

### ***Why women say YES?***

Majority (78%) of the women responded that they would like to participate in women-dedicated leadership programs if they are available in their companies. Again reasons given by them have been grouped by the author into a few categories. The first category could be named as 'Neutral attitude'. Here the reasons given by the respondents were: 'because I want to develop my qualifications', 'I am open to any program that can develop me', 'this could develop my competences and would look good in my CV', 'it is always good to develop yourself and this program could show me what I should improve or concentrate on'. The second category can be named 'For curiosity' and this is exactly what the women were giving as explanation: 'I'm curious how such program would look like', 'I think this can be an interesting way of supporting women', 'I wonder what kind of tools would be presented during the program to develop women leadership'. In the third category, 'Overcoming difficulties', the explanations given by the respondents were: 'already at the start women have a more difficult situation and more is required from them', 'such program could help with women's internal barriers but also the external ones related to stereotypes and lack of social awareness in both genders', 'to work out the gender topic as a barrier in business and management', 'because women have different expectations with regards to their careers', 'it's more effective to work in a training group which has the same needs and its participants are aware of their limitations and difficulties, and in such group women specific topics can be properly addressed', 'because I believe women have natural leadership talent but they don't develop it because of many different barriers and because very often they are not aware of them', 'because women have different leadership problems', 'I would like to learn how to combine professional and parental duties', 'I think the

other women's points of view would help me to deal with my situation', 'women are supportive and this would be motivating for me', 'women still earn less than men and I would like to know why', 'because in a mixed (male&female) training group women very often don't get the voice'. The fourth category relates to overcoming difficulties but specifically in women themselves and it appeared in many responses so it is presented here as a separate one and named as 'For self-confidence'. And the explanations given by the respondents were: 'it would help me to more brave express myself and be more self-confident', 'I would like to learn what stops me', 'in order to become more brave to apply for higher positions', 'in my company there are a lot of fantastic women-managers but top positions still belong to men because women lack self-confidence', 'because women underestimate their competences', 'somewhere deep I feel I have a leadership talent but I need support to enhance this feeling in me', 'we are competent, experienced, driven but we still need some enhancement to get to the top', 'to get more self-confident as a working mother', 'to get encouragement to take challenges', 'to help me concentrate on my strengths'. Last but not least, there were a few explanations given by the respondents which can be categorized as 'Women leadership style' and which basically say that women feel they would like a more 'female' leadership style to be present in companies. The respondents said: 'I'd like to enhance these of my good characteristics which men don't possess', 'I'd like to learn how to make a better use of my feminine strengths', 'I would like to learn an effective, feminine leadership style', 'women can guarantee a healthy balance in the business world', one respondent even expressed some concern that women who achieve top positions start to behave like men and this is not what is needed in the business world now. This respondent's opinion corresponds to, what is called in literature, the abrogation of their female-self syndrome. It happens when women managers are in the minority – and as we know being surrounded by male managers is in fact the most common situation of a female manager – they disregard their differences, values, preferences in order to become like their male peers (Tanton, 1992). It also correlates with some researchers' findings which say that the current approach to leadership development results in fact in reproducing of male leaders – men and women – similar to those of the previous generation (Maher, 1997). And the need in the contemporary world seems to be more towards feminine, relation-oriented leadership style which includes the following leadership competencies: create a team atmosphere, define expectations clearly, reward achievement, and act as role models. And these are the competences which women are better at than men (Dickey, 2013).

## Conclusions

As stated earlier, for the majority of companies in Poland, actually giving women a bigger presence in top management still is not dealt with as a strategic priority. The fact that many women do not develop to their full potential and that this is a serious waste in the war for talent, does not seem to be a concern for companies. Given this, it cannot be surprising that only few percent of companies provide their female employees with women-dedicated leadership development programs.

This is the presence and the future depends a lot on what women need and want. Majority of women, respondents to the survey, expressed strong interest in participating in such programs. The explanations presented by them give some directions how such programs could look like in order to attract the women and be perceived by them as useful. The most relevant topics suggested by the respondents seem to correspond to research findings which recommend the following objectives to be worked with by women during such programs: helping themselves to become more proactive in managing their careers, discussing specific management issues they face as women, examining their management styles in order to be able to build on their personal strengths at work, clarifying their attitudes and feelings about themselves in relation to their work roles and personal roles, studying the concepts of power and politics to enable themselves to apply these concepts effectively; and last but not least, working on the objectives in a safe environment where they can test their own experience against experience of other women – training group peers and other women role models – will be crucial to their learning (Vinnicombe, Singh 2003).

What are then the implications of the research for the Human Resources policies and practices? The HR professionals in Poland can find a lot of valuable information in the paper for their human resources development practice.

The HR professionals' role should be first to ensure that the CEO and members of the senior leadership team understand the business advantages that can be gained by having women represented in the top leadership team on an ongoing basis. It is a clear outcome from the survey that women feel like a huge but unused potential that may solve a lot of crucial business problems and that only waits for some encouragement, as one respondent said: 'I feel that if I only got a small enhancement I would become much braver to take big challenges', and this feeling repeats in many of the respondents' answers.

HR should provide access for women to targeted development opportunities. As one of the respondent said: 'such program would show that our company really cares about women and not only talks about it'. It looks like providing the

customized development programs would influence motivation of this pool of talent and could be a solution for its retention.

The HR professionals can also benefit from knowing how to better develop and leverage women's talent within their organizations. The explanations given by women to the question why they would like to participate in such programs prove that women know what they need in order to grow.

Some researchers suggest the future of managing organizations around the globe tends to be a lot more female (York, 1996). The old (Taylorist) style of management which required a more autocratic style of leadership is over. Nowadays the most effective management style seems to be one in which the manager shares authority and power with his/her subordinates in order to increase employees' job satisfaction, motivation and creativity. Some scientists point out that women have innate attributes that can be seen as great advantage in the age of this new human oriented management. These features include intuition, sensitivity, observation and willingness to engage with feelings (Arroba, James, 1998). In other words, in the new era of humanistic leadership female managers are keener to delegate power than men (Psychogios, 2007). Supporting women in their development as leaders should result in strengthening this kind of leadership in business as a whole also among men and this is which seems to be needed in the world.

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