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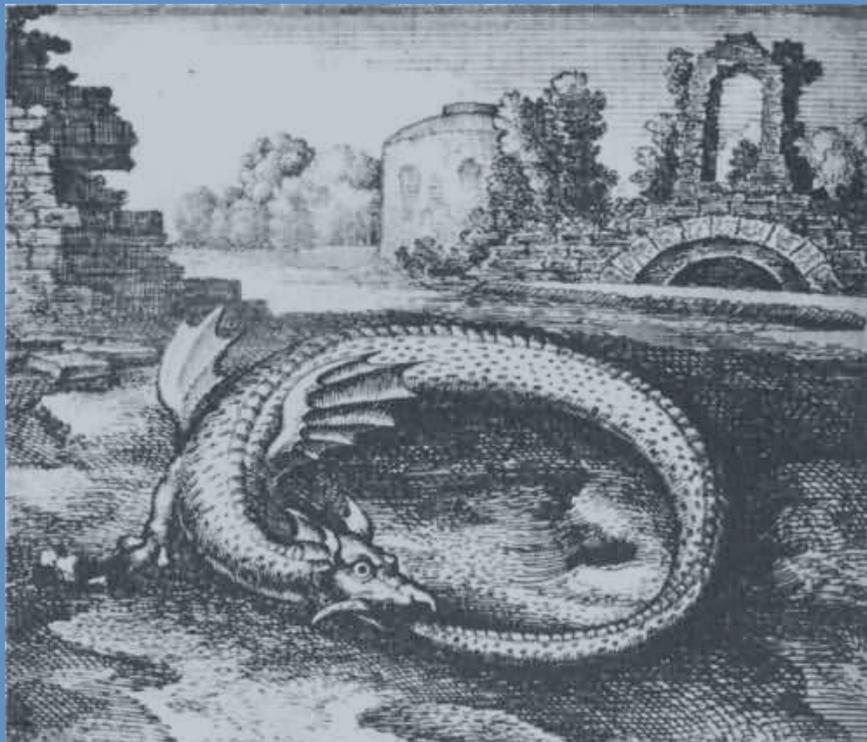
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Volume 1

Journeys through the Organizational Labyrinth

A psychodynamic look at leadership identities and transitions



Editors

Elizabeth Florent-Treacy, Manfred Kets de Vries,
Roger Lehman and Erik Van de Loo

Managing Editor

Alicia Cheak

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Editors

Elizabeth Florent-Treacy, Senior Lecturer and INSEAD Dutch Alumni Fellow
in Leadership, Diversity, and Governance

Manfred Kets de Vries, INSEAD Distinguished Clinical Professor of Leadership
Development and Organizational Change and The Raoul de Vitry d'Avaucourt
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Family Enterprise

Erik van de Loo, INSEAD Affiliate Professor of Organizational Behavior

Managing Editor

Alicia Cheak, INSEAD Research Associate

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Delegation: A Key Enabler for Senior Female Leadership Transitions

Martine Van den Poel

THE STARTING POINT

My objective was to understand the key leadership transitions in which female leaders have to engage to close the gender gap at senior executive levels. Informed by my own coaching of female executives, I focused on the critical role of delegation as the enabler of leadership transitions.

IDEA IN BRIEF

A large number of women form part of the labor force as successful managers and leaders; a much smaller number make the leadership transition from functional manager to general manager, and even fewer reach the executive committee of large organizations. This article explores the ability of women leaders to delegate, and the corresponding opportunity to engage in leadership transitions which allow them to step up to more senior executive positions.

Survey data was collected from 51 senior executive coaches who served as an “expert group.” Additionally, eight in-depth interviews were conducted with senior female leaders who were respectively tested as “high” and “low” delegators. The key findings of the study are:

- Delegation is a challenge for both men and women. However, women have a slightly harder time delegating than men, especially in the transition from a functional specialist role towards a broader, more generalized business or executive role.
- The obstacles to delegation differed strongly between male and female leaders. The top four blocking factors for female leaders were perfectionism, too-high sense of personal responsibility, fear of failure, and feeling overly protective of their team. The top four blocking factors for male leaders were need for control, difficulty letting go of one's expertise, feeling "I can do it faster", and fear of failure.
- Delegation is an enabler for other leadership transitions. It frees up the critical resource of time, which leaders can use to develop other skills for leadership advancement such as acquiring a general management perspective, building horizontal relationships with peers, developing strategic vision and developing an outside network.
- Female leaders should also engage in promotion strategies focused on their aspirations, advancement and accomplishments.

IDEA IN PRACTICE

Delegation is a key skill for both male and female leaders, especially as they strive for more senior positions. It frees up an important resource – time – but that time has to be reinvested in developing other critical leadership skills and becoming comfortable and confident with their identity as a leader. As a first step, recognizing and understanding the major blocking mechanisms to delegation will help pinpoint areas for development. A simple analysis of the respective time allocated to different relationships (peers, direct reports, superiors, outside stakeholders) can serve as a proxy for transition readiness. For example, if an individual is found to spend substantially more time with direct reports rather than peers and superiors, this suggests they have a problem delegating.

Women leaders should also engage in “promotion” strategies (as opposed to “prevention” strategies) such as developing and communicating a vision,

developing a general management perspective, working on peer and superior relationships, and expanding their network, all of which contribute to making them more “visible” for higher leadership positions. In this way they in turn will create the conditions for female leaders to move upwards and – slowly but surely – close the gender gap.

INTRODUCTION

In today's labour force, a large number of women are successful managers. A much smaller number, however, make the leadership transition from functional manager to general manager; even fewer reach the c-suite. Among the many reasons why women fail to reach these senior executive levels are subtle organizational biases such as not proposing women for senior positions, not providing the 'stretch assignments' to qualify for them for executive positions, or an absence of sponsors to rally support for their cause. Others include a personal choice not to pursue promotion in order to maintain their work/family balance, or a reluctance to engage in "political" games to get to the top.

While all these reasons are valid, this chapter looks at the challenges of the transition into an executive position. Research has shown that the path to senior management is marked by a transition whereby people hone critical skills and thus become comfortable and confident with their identity as a leader.¹ These skills include developing their strategic vision, developing a broad internal horizontal and external network, and developing more of a general manager mindset.²

A key transition that is often assumed to have happened before an individual reaches a senior position is the ability and propensity to delegate, which is often - but not always - learned in early managerial positions.³ Delegating frees up time to develop other leadership skills required for executive positions. In short, if a woman masters the ability to delegate, she frees up precious time and mindspace to engage in the transition to leadership that will allow her to step up to more senior executive positions.

Delegation as a key leadership skill

Delegation is defined as the assignment of authority and responsibility to another person to carry out specific activities. "Delegation may improve the speed and quality of decisions, reduce overload for the manager, enrich the subordinate's job, increase the subordinate's intrinsic motivation, and provide opportunities for subordinate development of leadership skills."⁴

In the clinical approach to leadership dynamics,⁵ micromanagement and the corresponding need for control are seen as major impediments to delegation. Conflict avoidance also constitutes a blocking factor, as the need to please or to avoid 'rocking the boat' inhibit effective delegation. The 'impostor syndrome' is another potential block, casting self-doubt on whether one measures up to others' expectations. Rooted in a fear of failure, it tends to be expressed in perfectionist behaviors.⁶ An inability to let go of one's expertise (comfort zone) may also be a blocking factor in the transition to leadership positions.⁷

From specialist to generalist: key leadership transitions for managing businesses

As they move up, people progress through different leadership tasks: managing self, managers, a function, a business, a group of businesses, and ultimately the enterprise. At each stage they acquire critical leadership skills. The shift from specialist to generalist, corresponding to the fourth stage (managing a business), requires leaders to acquire the following skills:⁸

- Developing and communicating a vision
- Developing a general manager perspective
- Working with peers
- Developing upwards relationships
- Creating outside networks

The move from specialist to generalist is the transition that is most difficult for women leaders to make, as evidenced by the small percentage of women leaders in executive roles.

Gender and leadership transitions

In leadership roles, the dual challenge for women is "to balance the demand for agency required of the leader role and the demand for communion required of the female role".⁹ This double bind is also responsible for the differential image-management strategies men and women engage in.¹⁰ For fear of coming across as too aggressive, women tend to engage in protective self-representation, for example by avoiding disapproval, lying low, and relying on data. Men use more

acquisitive strategies such as actively soliciting approval, assertive attempts to signal their credibility, and relying on experience. In a similar vein, female leaders are more likely to choose “prevention” strategies - avoiding failure - over “promotion” strategies—actively driving for success and focusing on accomplishments.¹¹ An additional impediment to delegation - related to the sense of responsibility - is the often unconscious need to be protective of the team.

METHOD

A qualitative methodology was used, focused on a thematic analysis of survey and interviews, with the following questions: (1) Is delegation seen as a bigger challenge for women than men? (2) Are the blocking factors different for women than for men? (3) How does effective delegation impact senior leadership transitions? (4) How do these leadership transitions help female leaders develop their “leadership identity” and to what extent does gender impact this?

The survey was administered to an expert group of 51 global executive coaches. On average they had 10 years coaching experience and worked with 54 coachees per year. In addition, in-depth semi-structured interviews were conducted with a sample of eight female leaders. The purpose was to further investigate how the two groups (high and low delegators) experienced the practice of delegation, potential blocking factors, the impact of gender on delegation capability, and the link between delegation and other senior leadership transitions.

KEY FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

Based on the surveys and interviews, a number of recurrent themes emerged:

Delegation is a challenge for both male and female leaders, but their blocking factors are different

Survey and interview findings from coaches suggested that both men and women faced challenges with delegation; women had slightly greater difficulty than men. Half the executive coaches thought that men and women have similar challenges with delegation; 40% thought that female leaders have a bigger challenge, 8% that men have a bigger challenge. Factors that hinder delegation were very different for women and men. According to the survey, the blocking factors ranked as follows:

For female leaders

- Too-high sense of personal responsibility
- Perfectionism
- Fear of failure
- Feeling overly protective of the team
- Need for control
- Difficulty letting go of one's expertise
- Feeling "I can do it faster or better myself"
- Risk avoidance
- Conflict avoidance
- Low trust in the team

For male leaders

- Need for control
- Difficulty letting go of one's expertise
- Feeling "I can do it faster or better myself"
- Fear of failure
- Risk avoidance
- Low trust in the team
- Perfectionism

- Conflict avoidance
- Too-high sense of personal responsibility
- Feeling overly protective of team

The interviews confirmed to a high degree the first two blocking factors for female leaders. In particular, the very high sense of personal responsibility stood out as the major blocking factor for the female leaders who were weaker delegators.

Also surprising was that two of the top three blocking factors cited by female leaders - too-high sense of responsibility and feeling protective of the team - were ranked the lowest by male leaders. This would seem to confirm research findings on female leaders' tendency to favour prevention over promotion strategies, focusing on "what one ought to do" rather than on their own aspirations, advancement and accomplishments. Moreover, if women experience conflict between their gender and a leadership role, it would seem to confirm previous research on the motivation to lead: that is, that female leaders experience a leadership role in a normative way (as a duty and responsibility) rather than an affective way (the pleasure of leading).

Delegation is the key enabler for other leadership transitions, notably developing horizontal peer relationships

In both surveys and interviews participants were asked to respond to what extent they agreed that effective delegation constituted a key enabler for other key leadership transitions for women. From the coaches' perspective, effective delegation has the strongest impact on the development of a general manager perspective and the development of horizontal relationships, followed by the development of a strategic vision and the development of an outside network.

When looking at the differential responses between male and female coaches: male coaches assigned a much greater impact to developing strategic vision (95%) than female coaches (73%), signaling that they think the "vision thing" is the most important dimension to invest in. For female coaches, the key leadership skill to invest in was a general manager perspective (97%) and

developing an outside network (74%). Both female and male coaches ranked developing peer relationships as the second most important skill impacted by effective delegation. In addition, delegation was most strongly related to developing horizontal peer relationships and outside networking.

Time constitutes a key resource and time allocation a potential proxy for leadership transition “readiness”

Another recurring theme in both surveys and interviews was time as a critical resource. As one coach noted: “Insufficient delegation holds leaders back from spending time on activities that they should be engaging in to create value. They need to let go of the operational tasks.” In the interviews, time was linked to “mindspace” and “bandwidth”; others saw it as “time to negotiate more” and “time to engage in deeper conversations.” As one female leader noted: “Each time I came back from maternity leave I saw the value of delegating. It released mind space for me and allowed me to become more strategic. It is the key to my progression.” Another said: “The time gained by delegating enabled me to have deeper conversations with my peers. I benefited from those conversations because they had a major strategic and visionary orientation.”

Another way to understand women leaders’ transitioning capability is to look at the working time priorities they set for relationships. To gauge this, I asked each female leader interviewed to estimate what percentage of her total weekly working time she spent respectively with her direct reports, peers, boss, network, and herself. I used the averages as an indicator of readiness for the transition to leadership.

Comparing “high” and “low” delegators, the low delegators spent on average 55% of their time with their direct reports. This compared to an average of 38% for high delegators, which confirmed my idea that time spent with one’s direct reports is a proxy for delegation ability; time spent with other actors (peers, boss, network) is an important leadership transition investment. Time spent on oneself, for reflection and planning, could also signal leadership maturity.

The need to devote more time to relationships other than direct reports was confirmed in the interviews, with one leader noting: “How I spend my time at work was probably the single most important realization for me. I used to

spend 70% of my time with my direct reports. Now, I consciously try to reduce that while increasing the amount of external contact, networking and participating in industry forums, peer networks and the odd conference.”

Leadership transitions are intertwined with identity work

The interviews also revealed how leadership transitions were intertwined with leadership identity work. One female leader reflected on how identity work ran in parallel with the transition to leadership: “Twenty years ago I realized that I could do a lot more through people than by myself, and that’s what drew me to leadership roles. But it was a transition: from working with just small groups of people or informal relationships, to now being head of large sub-groups in the organization.”

Another shared how an executive development program triggered a change in the way she saw herself in her leadership role: “The course I followed was another tipping point for me because it created a transition space; it allowed me to stand back and see things differently. The phrase ‘What got you here won’t get you there’ forced me to think about what needed to be different. I am much more conscious now. I’m not sure if I’m better at delegating, but I’m much more conscious about the need to do it. I changed my image of how I should act in my role.”

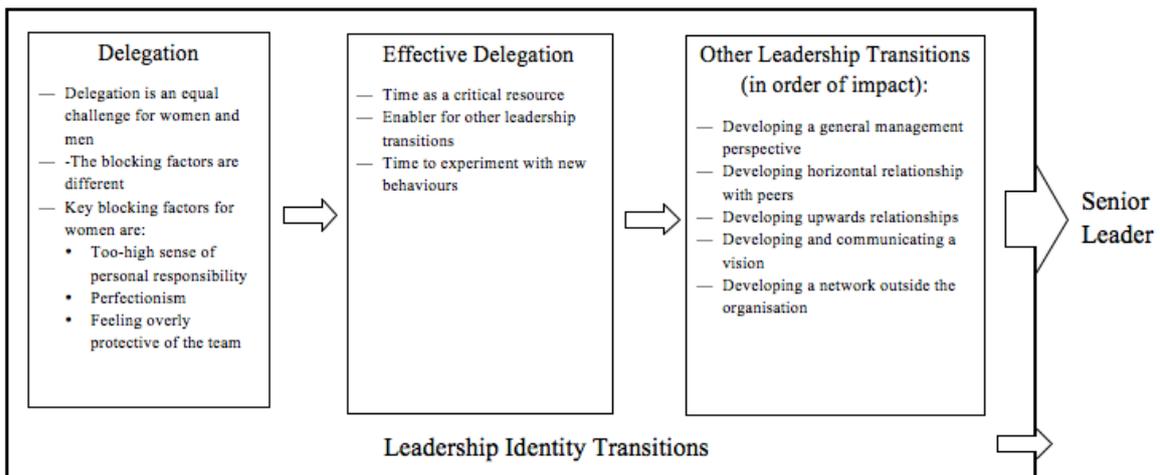


Figure 1. Framework for delegation as a key enabler for leadership transitions

PRACTICAL IMPLICATIONS

The findings from the study suggest that delegation is a key enabler of leadership transitions, especially to higher echelons in the organization. The time freed up (by delegating) can be directed to the development of other leadership skills needed for executive leadership. In practical terms, this means that women leaders should engage in *promotion* strategies rather than *prevention* strategies. Effective delegation opens the way to engage in more promotion strategies, such as developing and communicating a vision, developing a general management perspective, working on peer and superior relationships, and expanding their network outside, which all contribute to making them more “visible”.

Leaders and coaches should be aware of the challenges of delegation for individuals facing leadership transitions. The framework proposed and the blocking mechanisms described here can help coaches and individuals to pinpoint the barriers to effective delegation, and work on overcoming them.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Martine Van den Poel is a Leadership Development Practice Director and Executive Coach at the INSEAD Global Leadership Center since 2003. Prior to this she was a member of INSEAD's Executive Committee and Associate Dean for External Relations until 2002, and in charge of INSEAD's executive education department from 1995 to 2000. Her coaching practice concentrates on leadership transitions, emotional intelligence development and team dynamics. The development and advancement of senior female leaders in organizations constitutes a special interest. She holds an Executive Masters in Consulting and Coaching for Change from INSEAD, an MPA from Harvard Kennedy School of Government, and a MS in Political Science from the Catholic University of Louvain.

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