



NORTHERN
**POWER
WOMEN**

PILOT RESEARCH SUMMARY

**The Psychological drivers that propel
and sustain women and men into
leadership positions.**

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OVERVIEW

Despite the benefits of a strong, diverse talent pipeline, a vast array of research illustrates that a woman's path to leadership is paved with many barriers. Even when these barriers are removed significant numbers of women at all levels of seniority still choose to terminate their employment at surprising rates.

A considerable amount of research exists examining those factors that prevent women reaching senior management. This research pilot on behalf of Northern Power Women examined the psychological drivers that have propelled and sustained a sample of 34 women and 14 men into senior leadership positions in the UK and globally. Interviewees were largely directors and senior managers from the North of England, or living within the Northern Powerhouse region. Given the gender imbalance in the sample any temptation to draw direct comparisons should be treated with caution.

Five themes emerged from the analysis.

1 Narrative Identity:

This is the process of how women and men come to see themselves as leaders. For the majority of women the journey into leadership is a marathon and not a sprint and did not conform to the stereotypical journey of the young executive. Key components in their leadership trajectories were a) finding a 'killer mentor'; b) comparing themselves realistically to those who are seen to be 'successful' and realising they could offer at least the same or more; c) finding the strength to step outside of their typical behaviour and 'just go for it' on important occasions. The male sample on the other hand seemed to take more deterministic and linear career paths. Qualifications were taken with a particular trajectory in mind and promotion followed as a matter of course. The majority of men had 'killer mentors' and talked about them (even many years later) as being very impressive in terms of their status and influence. It was apparent from our conversations that these mentors had been massive sources of inspiration commanding huge admiration and respect from their mentees.

2 Find out who you are and step into yourself:

A desire for self-awareness was identified amongst interviewees as an essential component of their leadership journey. It is key for women leaders to separate out societal conditioning and expectations of how to behave from their internal motivations and values. Importantly, self-awareness is also the precursor for self-acceptance and authentic leadership. For the male sample, there was less emphasis on self-awareness as being a transformative component in their leadership journey. Where self awareness was mentioned it seemed to come along later on in their career as an additional skillset. The majority of the sample identified as being 'Northern' (North of England) and therefore 'Northerness' and associated valued behaviours such as directness, 'crack on' and straightforwardness, are strong components of their leadership signature. For the male sample, Northerness did not feature as a key value in their leadership signature. It may be that the typical 'Northern' behaviours as identified by the women can be seen as traditionally male and so there is no conscious difference for the men.

3

Get out of your own way:

Learning to overcome self-defeating behaviours is vital for the women in this leadership cohort. For example, accepting that effort and frustration are inevitable parts of life means that unrealistic expectations are not held onto and a pragmatic, matter of fact approach to business is valued. Other valued behaviours include: fully grasping a problem and reframing it in simple, everyday language; dealing with issues as they arise; planning ahead to foresee unexpected problems; exuding calmness; facing up to situations without delay; allocating sufficient time to priorities; not engaging in self-blame and criticism; effectively discerning the limits of their own control or responsibility; meeting challenges with fortitude and resilience; letting go of the tensions of the day. While this concept of 'getting out of your own way' did arise in some instances, for the majority of the men it was not a conscious aspect of their leadership trajectory. However the list of behaviours mentioned above were highlighted in other contexts within the interviews, specifically when commenting on the gender differences of their colleagues, attributing these as more male behaviours. The fact that this concept was identified as significant for the women but not in the same way for the men may be due to the fact that women are maybe overly analytical of their own performance.

4

Drive and Achievement:

A drive for achievement means a willingness to endure long hours, significant travel and time away from home. It values pragmatism, simplicity and 'wanting to get the job done'. It provides the mental and physical energy required to sustain a senior leadership lifestyle. There was no gender difference on this dimension.

5

Support Network:

This is about valuing human connection for emotional, moral, psychological and practical reinforcement. The women interviewees surround themselves with people who believe in their capability and support their work choices, which in turn affects their psychological wellbeing, practical, day to day functioning. Ultimately, these connections contribute significantly to their ability to maintain their high profile leadership roles. Similarly for the men they talked about strong parental/family connections but did not talk about or appear to harness their wider connections in the same way women did.

RECOMMENDATIONS

As in many aspects of our life and work environments, attitudes towards gender differences are often surrounded by biases, myths and misconceptions. The findings from this research pilot challenges some of those misrepresentations by highlighting how some of our most successful women leaders from across the North of England have behaved in reality. By utilising this kind of behavioural modelling we can influence interventions to support our future talent. The findings (and subsequent recommendations) from this pilot study need to be tested further, and should be subjected to rigorous research. Any future studies should seek to identify and understand if there are significant gender differences in leadership profiles and trajectories.

Recommendations for more in-depth exploration include:

1 Examining more subtle but impactful dimensions of the unconscious narratives that guide women's (and men's) lives. For example, leadership for this sample of women was a marathon not a sprint. Promoting a pathway for women in their 30's and beyond should be encouraged along with the promotion and celebration of viable role models. Related to this is the fact that many of the current executive profiling systems may exclude women as potential leaders because they do not fit the predictive model of a stereotypical executive. Therefore profiling should be treated with caution, or indeed modified to be more sensitive to characteristics such as those highlighted in this study.

2 In addition, the selection profile for leadership is often based on the flawed reasoning that determines that the average man appears to be more suited to leadership than the average woman. The result is a system that rewards men for their male traits and those women who typically display a similar maleness in their behaviours. Selection processes should be re-examined to take into account this potential gender bias, resulting in a more holistic appreciation of the value that typically female as well as male traits bring to successful leadership.

3 It would be helpful to understand the value in leadership of those behaviours perceived by the women in the sample as typically 'Northern'; for example, directness certainly saves time by getting to the point more quickly and 'down-to-earthness' certainly promotes warmth and relationships. 'Northernness' is possibly a unique skill-set which is different from the 'professional executive' profile. It would certainly be interesting to understand if these perceived 'Northern' traits have any wider recognition and impact within the UK or globally. A caveat to consider here is that men did not highlight 'Northernness' in the same way as the women. They did recognise the idea of a 'Northern woman' but they did not instinctively apply a 'Northernness' description to themselves. For the men, it may be difficult or impossible to distinguish between 'Northern' characteristics and what could be described as typical male traits.

4 This is by no means the first study to recognise the importance of interventions to promote self-awareness. However, it appears to be vital for women in leadership. It helps women to employ their talents based on an understanding of who they are and their abilities rather than being defined by societal norms and expectations.

5 By fostering an attitude/culture of self-acceptance women are more able to deal with the inevitable frustrations and challenges that are part of a leaders everyday life. It also means that when challenges do arrive, their mindset enables them to remain calm and focus on meaningful actions and points of interaction.

6 Educational attainment across genders is not uniformly predictive of leadership success and yet it remains for many organisations their 'high potential leadership recruitment methodology'. Promoting awareness of how achievement orientation, including levels of energy and focus, can change throughout a lifecycle and may not be predictive of leadership success is essential. While this has long been known, it is still the case that predictive methodologies at recruitment are largely based on university outcomes or ability tests that are culturally biased. Recruiters ignore variations such as the fact that a woman may change the focus of her drive throughout her lifecycle. Additionally, in the interest of creating gender balance in leadership, perhaps men could be given

7

Establishing and encouraging support networks is essential for the future for working women. Having supportive connections and stable relationships has been shown to have a significant positive impact for this cohort of women in leadership roles. Being surrounded by close relationships is integral in the ability to perform successfully as a leader, not least because of the practical benefits of being able to ask for help, but also because of the psychological support strong connection brings.

8

A 'killer mentor' was instrumental in the career trajectory for the majority of women and men in this sample. Many had mentors that were very senior to them and outside of their immediate department or organisation. Organisations can benefit from genuine collaboration on cross sector mentoring programmes.



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