

AUTHENTIC

EXECUTIVE WOMEN LEADERSHIP



Why Women Leaders
Can and Should be
Authentic

EXECUTIVE WOMEN LEADERSHIP

Through the efforts of research teams and advocacy groups, a significant body of literature seeks to define and explain the collective state of women in executive leadership. The data examined is largely observable – the statistics of women at different levels, their accomplishments and challenges, and positive and negative features of the environments in which they work. The findings help us understand trends and norms among executive women leaders.

As psychologists, however, we are interested in both the group norms and what makes the path and experience unique for each executive woman. Thus, we turned our interest inward with executive women, to the “unobservable” data. We explored the internal psychological processes and resources of women leaders – “their inside,” and how that interacts with “the outside” to create the experience of being a woman leader. Using 65 in-depth interviews of female executives -- from Vice President to CEO level -- and 35 interviews of stakeholders in U.S. companies, we gathered qualitative observations. In the course of examining individual stories and experiences we discovered an essential, shared feature among senior executive women who are at their best and most impactful: Authenticity.

When a woman is operating at her most authentic self, she simultaneously feels and is viewed as a more effective leader. She is a catalyst for meaningful and positive change; she is a high-performing, confident individual; and she is a critical player in the organization’s overall success. Among our study group of highly successful women, authenticity made the greatest positive difference in catalyzing, accelerating and cascading the success of the female leader and her organization.

This finding, along with the other results of the study, were used to formulate The Authentic Leader Model -- a female leadership tool that shows how the dimensions of an individual woman leader’s psychology and her professional and personal environment can work together to create leadership excellence. The model is designed to describe the experience of a woman leader from her point of view so that Boards and CEOs can better leverage and retain this critical talent pool. The model is a framework that highlights the strategic levers that both the individual woman leader and the organization can deploy to bring more diverse and effective leadership into the C-Suite.

Why Women Leaders Can and Should be Authentic

Simply being authentic doesn't create leadership greatness. The foundation of leadership and business success is built on the usual combination of vision, intellect, guts, performance, hard work, and influence. However, for women, authenticity is the catalyst that leverages all of the positive leadership attributes and brings them to bear more quickly and effectively on the organization. Authenticity is the accelerator.

"When I stopped caring what they thought—whether I was meeting their expectations and whether they liked my style—I became so much clearer and more powerful. I stopped wasting my energy and bandwidth on these worries, and focused that energy on how to meet our goals," said one executive vice president in the study.

This finding about authenticity, although striking by itself, takes on even more significance when we consider the challenges to authenticity women face. Because of the disparity between typically masculine leadership norms and women's authentic selves, women have less reinforcement and more difficulty operating authentically at work. The competing influences of female strengths and attributes, masculine styles of work and the internal drive of executive women all combine to create a complex set of personal and organizational hurdles to forming an authentic work identity that is both female and successful.

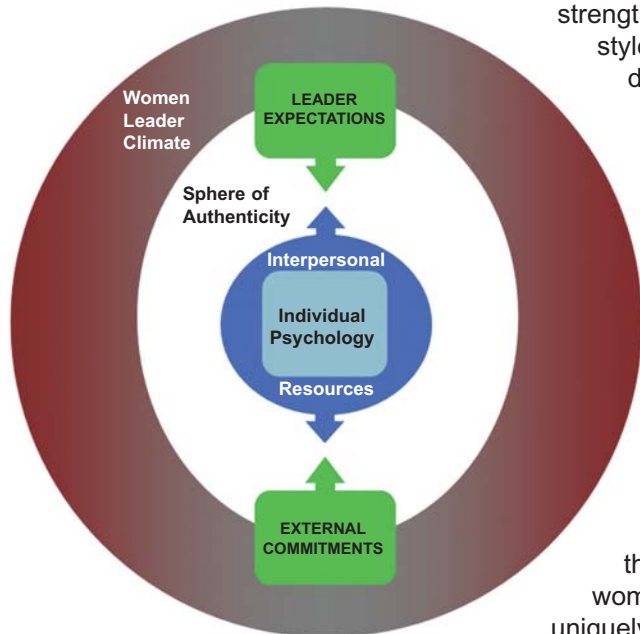


FIGURE 1: Authentic Leader Model

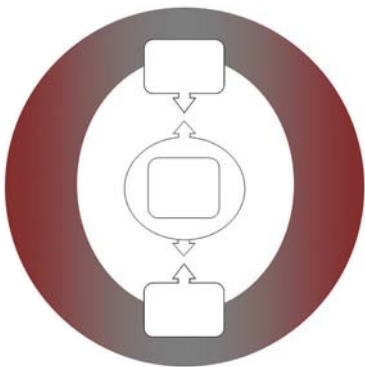
RHR's Authentic Leader Model was developed to articulate and clarify the intersections between the woman as an individual, and her uniquely experienced environmental and organizational influences. The model

describes how women use their individual resources to navigate the forces in and outside of work, and how authenticity amplifies success for female executives. In order to understand how these forces create or detract from a woman's leadership success, let's explore each independently.

Authenticity
Matters Most

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Women Leader Climate



Every female executive operates within the Women Leader Climate. This “climate” is the dominant culture and receptivity of the organization to women in leadership. What are the norms and culture of the organization and how do beliefs about women align with these norms? How are women viewed by the organization regardless of role? It is the “backdrop” against which all of the dimensions of their individual, professional and personal attributes play out.

For example, several women we interviewed reported that they shied away from the limelight while working in environments that are not overtly friendly to female leaders. They hesitated to be the first to define what it meant to be a female leader in the organization. They reported a lower tolerance for mistakes made by female leaders.

“I feel like a rock star, everything I do is watched,” said one female general counsel.

A lukewarm climate for female leadership can also inhibit supportive and mentoring behavior of men working with women. *For example, some men are reluctant to give feedback to women that would help them succeed. The range of reasons as perceived by both women and men in our study included: men are afraid that providing honest feedback will hurt women’s feelings, they don’t know how women will take the feedback, and they even fear creating an “HR issue.”*

What is one to do about the climate? First, women leaders need to acknowledge and be aware of the climate in order to navigate it, progress within it, and ultimately shape it. Sophisticated organizations understand that it is a business imperative to positively impact the Women Leader Climate in order to fully access and grow the scarce pool of exceptional leaders, including the full pool of women leaders. Women’s programs are one such lever for change, provided that these programs are championed from the top of the organization, made relevant to both men and women, and guard against the unintended outcome of alienating male colleagues.

Ultimately, there is no cookie cutter solution that will enhance every organization and help advance every woman leader. Therefore, we advocate approaches that create *systematic culture change* to increase the presence and impact of women at the top. A critical component of such results-oriented, women-advancing culture change is a tailored approach that aims to understand and advance the woman as an individual and as a leader.

Why Women Leaders Can and Should be Authentic

For executive women, Individual Psychological Resources are typically the most developed and the most powerful resources that she has at her disposal. These resources are her emotional, cognitive and motivational traits, as well as the skills, knowledge and experience that she brings to bear on the position. However, they may also include female attributes, such as emotional intelligence, an ability to be highly collaborative, and the strengths derived from managing complex, co-existing identities of executive, partner, mother, daughter.

Highly successful women leverage all of these assets to bring excellence to their positions and organizations. *Take the example of one interviewee – Barbara – who held a senior marketing position at a large corporation. She started her career in an agency and was very successful. Then, Barbara decided to leave to start her own firm before becoming too restricted in her role. Eventually, she came back into a large corporation as an SVP.*

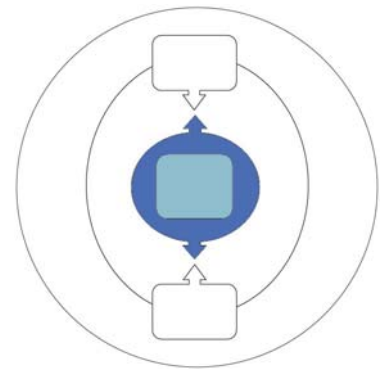
“A lot of women tend to be more tentative about who they are at work and end up acting a little out of character,” she said. “I was lucky enough to be in an environment where I was given the license to be who I was and so I used it. For example, I can be as direct as the best of them, but I am also able to quickly get a sense of the person I’m dealing with. I listen actively and get into their space quickly, and I think that is because of my gender.”

Among her individual resources, a successful woman leader also has a complex set of systems support created by both her and the organization – her Interpersonal Resources. These are important relationships that she brings to the position: champions, mentors, informal networks, women networks, and supportive partners and husbands. For some women, it can be a single champion or mentor that helps to accelerate her leadership success.

One interviewee illustrates this point effectively.

As a highly successful managing director in an investment bank, Tonya decided to move from marketing to institutional sales. This was a risky move for her, because she was established and doing very well in her current position. But she reasoned that sales was where the power and dollars were, and if she could produce the dollars for the firm, she would be objectively compensated for it.

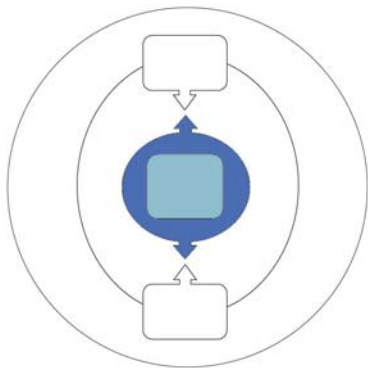
Individual Psychology and Interpersonal Resources



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Individual Psychology and Interpersonal Resources

(Continued)



Tonya turned to her boss who became a pivotal mentor; he gave her the tactics on how to be a great salesperson, advocated for her, and set her up for success by pairing her with the most experienced trader on the floor. Tonya's drive and willingness to take this risk combined with her boss's coaching and his – and by extension her – Interpersonal Resources accelerated her leadership success in the organization.

The executive woman's Individual Psychology and her Interpersonal Resources are at the core of the Authentic Leader Model. They are the reservoir of capabilities she accesses to interact with her environment and from which authenticity can grow. This model is differentiated from others because of the attention to the unique Individual Psychology of each woman executive and how the interaction of that psychology with the environment affects her success. It is only through understanding her unique reaction to, influence on and relationship to her working environment, that she, her manager and her organization take steps to increase her ability to be authentic, and thus, increase her impact.

Why Women Leaders Can and Should be Authentic

Leader Expectations are one of the two forces acting upon the female executive that affect her ability to bring her personal resources and authenticity to her position. Leader Expectations are the organization's ideas – explicit or otherwise – of what the person in a specific leadership position should look like. It is a composite of the leadership style, experience, skills and even personal appearance. Depending on the industry, company or culture, and function, the Leader Expectations may not even include someone who is female. One interviewee demonstrates how Leader Expectations can interact with authenticity to create a surprising, powerfully positive leadership experience for one woman.

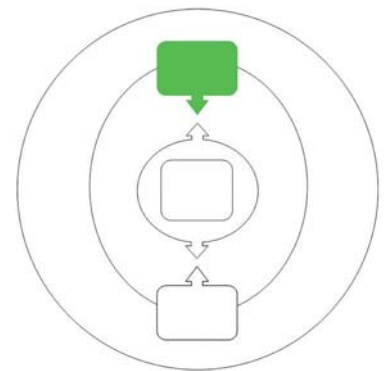
Allison was looking for a new opportunity in her largely male-dominated manufacturing company when her boss approached her with a request. A well-loved male executive in one of the most industrial, male-dominated units of the business had recently died from a terminal illness. Could Allison take his place?

After giving the opportunity consideration and talking it over with her boss and mentor at length, she decided that she would take this promotion. She learned the business quickly and spent a large amount of time “on the line” with her male subordinates. She helped the business unit recover from the loss of its former leader and brought new innovations to the line.

After her successes in this role she was promoted. While she was proud of her business accomplishments, one of the most meaningful events in this part of her career was a farewell-note from one of her male subordinates: “When you got here, I didn’t think you could do the job. And I never thought I would like you. But you changed my mind on both counts and did it better than a man could.” It turned out that he had changed his mind and had written the note to thank her for her years of service as she moved back to the corporate headquarters to join the other C-level executives.

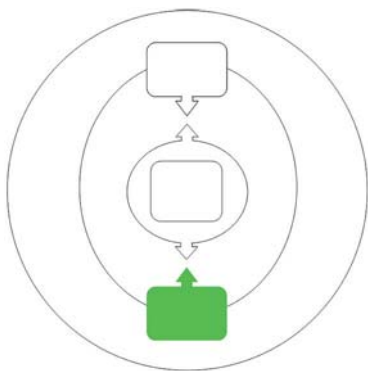
This example is rich in lessons about Authentic Leadership. First, Allison embraced this opportunity from the authentic part of herself. This was recognized by both her boss initially and then by her subordinates. This helped to accelerate her success in the position. But, in addition, she also changed the Leader Expectations within that business unit. In the future, it is unlikely that an employee in that department will question whether a woman is right for the job.

Leader Expectations



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External Commitments



External Commitments – the second external force influencing the female executive in our model -- are the impact of outside activities on a woman's leadership abilities and her ability to contribute to the organization. External Commitments can influence her positively or negatively. The woman executive can experience individual gains or losses from involvement in activities or responsibilities outside of work—sometimes both from the same commitments. Some examples of External Commitments: caring for children or elders, involvement in charitable organizations or social groups, and membership on boards. External Commitments are important forces on the experience of the executive woman because these responsibilities tend to be more expected of and/or more cherished by women than men.

When examining the influence of External Commitments on the woman's leadership capabilities, it is essential to consciously throw away assumptions. Many women interviewed for this study provided contrary evidence for many of the normal stereotypes. Let's look at an example of one now.

Erica was a young, ambitious female employee who started working at a software company shortly after graduating from college. She married and had children early in her career. Unfortunately, she also divorced her husband early in her career and was left to provide for two young lives on her own salary. Instead of reducing her responsibilities at work, she increased them and looked for opportunities to take on more challenges and assume a larger leadership role in her organization. At the age of 42, with her two children now in high school, she is a senior vice president at a multi-national firm.

Erica's experience demonstrates that more responsibilities outside of work don't always lead to a desire for fewer responsibilities within the professional sphere. Many women interviewed expressed similar ideas saying that as their personal lives and External Commitments became more robust, so did their professional responsibilities. Many of these forces played off one another in a positive and fruitful way for their organization and their careers.

Although these External Commitments are often seen by organizations as competing with a woman's attention or intellectual and emotional energy, they can be used strategically to strengthen her leadership abilities. Opportunities to develop leadership skills outside of the woman's position as an executive leader may arise more quickly through charitable work or professional associations. Giving time to women to participate in these activities, as well as being respectful of more personal responsibilities, builds loyalty to the organization, leadership skills and strongly reinforces leadership authenticity. Furthermore, when a woman is able to integrate her professional and her personal world, she benefits from the increased authenticity.

Why Women Leaders Can and Should be Authentic

Any woman who has made it into the ranks of CEO and the senior team has gotten there for many of the same reasons men do: talent, performance, skill sets and some amount of luck. However, the women executives and stakeholders we interviewed identified a powerful accelerant, a catalyst for amplifying success. Being authentic; the act of courageously being oneself and bringing the full force of one's capabilities to the table was essential for reaching the top and optimizing a woman's impact as a senior executive. The larger this Sphere of Authenticity – meaning the more broadly that it grows from her Individual Psychological and Interpersonal Resources and spreads across the Leadership Expectations and External Commitments, the greater the potential for leadership impact.

This is the turn-key that leads from success to true leadership and high levels of job satisfaction. The woman must both perceive herself as being authentic, as well as being perceived by her peers as being authentic. The organization must believe that the female leader is being genuine; that she is trustworthy, credible and even real.

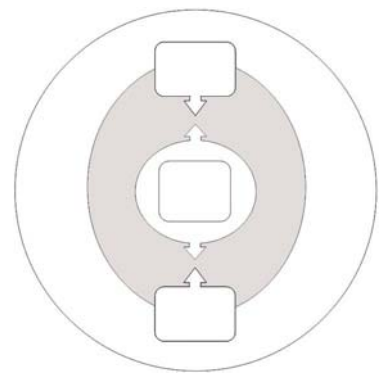
To enable Leadership Authenticity in the woman executive, her Individual Psychological Resources and Interpersonal Resources successfully interact with and meet the demands of the two other forces – Leader Expectations and External Commitments. A hospitable Women Leader Climate enhances the potential for a positive interaction between these individual resources and the external forces.

The key to gaining better alignment between the forces and the individual resources of the woman leader is to address the *internal* experience of the executive woman—experiences created by the confluence of environmental forces and the attributes of the individual. *The example of Suzanne – one of the few women ever to become a two-star admiral in the U.S. Navy – demonstrates the power of authenticity once fully embraced.*

During a period in her career, Suzanne became the Dean of the Naval Academy. At this time, hazing was a common practice for first-year cadets. To Suzanne, this demeaning behavior was contrary to her strong value of respect for others. She believed that if these budding officers engaged in and were subjected to this belittling behavior, they would fail to become successful leaders, themselves.

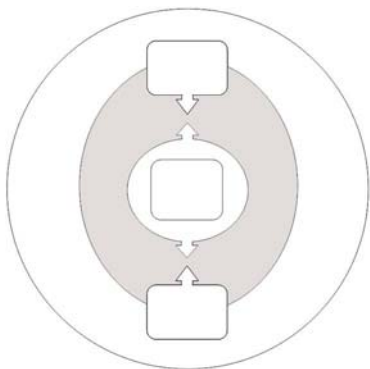
Instead of rushing to change this long-held tradition as soon as she took office, Suzanne observed, collected data, prepared a brief and ran it by several trusted advisors before proposing the eradication of this practice. Ultimately, she pushed through this very unpopular change and made a fundamental, positive, cultural impact on the Academy.

The Sphere of Authenticity



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The Sphere of Authenticity (Continued)



The successful interaction of Suzanne’s individual resources (i.e., courage, perceptiveness to organizational norms, influencing capabilities, mentor influences) with the Leader Expectations (i.e., hierarchical, male, aggressive) enabled her to create a policy change. In addition, the power of the change was amplified by her genuine, authentic leadership of the change, resulting in a powerful, system-changing cultural impact.

In the short run, it is easier, quicker, cheaper and more immediately gratifying to the organization if the woman adapts or if there is a “quick fix.” But in the long run, it is forward thinking, transformational and cascades benefit to the enterprise if both the woman and the organization assess and adapt to the complexity involved in promoting executive women leadership.

Why Women Leaders Can and Should be Authentic

A successful executive woman authentically leads big, bold change, pushing the envelope of organizational norms with influence and credibility. These women not only change the organization to allow more women to follow in their footsteps, but successful female leaders also broaden the strength and capability of the organization itself by creating a diversity of leadership and bringing new thinking to the table. When the Sphere of Authenticity is lopsided or imbalanced, these opportunities are not created. Let's examine a few versions of a less-than-ideal model.

In the example shown here, the woman is more authentic in her External Commitments and the Sphere of Authenticity is therefore skewed to the bottom of the picture. This woman is most likely over-adapting at work and specifically around the Leader Expectations.

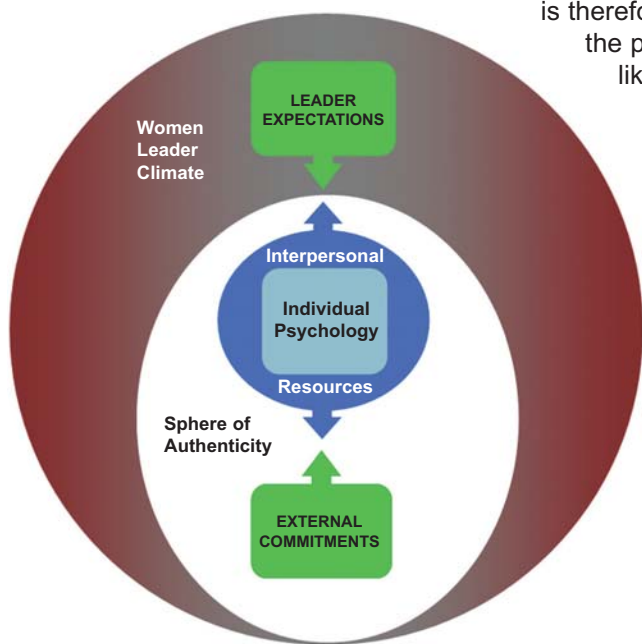


FIGURE 2: Example: Authentic in External Commitments but not in leader role

Catalyst for
Change:
Finding
Authenticity

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In a similar, but alternative example, the Sphere of Authenticity might be skewed to the top portion of the model illustrating the characteristics of a leader who is authentic at work, but not in her home or other personal relationships. This woman is likely to not be experiencing a full sense of well-being.

In addition, the Sphere of Authenticity can be underdeveloped for personal or professional reasons. A negative Women Leader Climate can also cause the Sphere of Authenticity to become compressed.

The Authentic Leader Model is a new framework for understanding the Individual Psychological and Interpersonal Resources, and organizational and environmental factors that influence a woman's success. This simple framework captures the complexity and can open non-judgmental dialogue that was previously taboo for the female executive, her mentor, her boss or even her organization. Mapping a woman's experience to the Authentic Leader Model can open doors to personal and organization success, and accelerate growth of the individual woman, as well as tap vital underutilized human assets throughout your organization.

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