

Leadership Excellence and Gender in Organizations

Seeing herself as a leader: an examination of gender-leadership Frames in women's leader identity development

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While much literature explores the external environment shaping women's advancement and success as leaders, much less research examines the intra-individual and identity-based dynamics of women's experiences on the leadership path. The present study extends this existing body of work by taking an intrapersonal perspective to study professional women's experiences with coming to see themselves as leaders as they move along the leadership path in organizations. Through an inductive qualitative study in a large, global bank, I introduce the concept of a gender-leadership frame to capture the different ways in which women construct their gender in relation to their leadership. My findings then demonstrate that these different frames are associated with women's leader identity enactment – that is, the way she is coming to see herself as a leader at a particular point in time. This research suggests that different ways of thinking about one's gender in relation to one's leadership may help explain women's different choices, aspirations, and development on the leadership path. Further, coming to see oneself as a leader does not happen in a vacuum, but rather is a complex process in which non-work identities (here, gender) play a role in one's understanding of who she is and can be as a leader. The findings of this research make a series of contributions to scholarship on gender, leadership, and identities, as well as to managerial practice aimed at supporting women leaders.