

An exploration of the relationship between self-confidence and female leadership: The role of workplace coaching in supporting gender equality

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Abstract

Gender equality in organisational leadership is still poor. Evidence suggests that women may experience lower levels of self-confidence than men and that this may influence the representation of women in senior leadership roles. Addressing this would play a role in the equalisation of gender differences in organisations and coaching can be effective in building self-confidence and the allied concept of self-efficacy. An exploratory qualitative study using semi-structured interviews was conducted with 12 workplace coaches experienced in coaching female leaders. The aim was to explore the effect of self-confidence amongst female leaders and the role that coaching can play in providing support that will encourage leadership progression. Low self-confidence was found to be ubiquitous in coaching conversations with female leaders, and was often a safer, surface level topic that masked much deeper issues. The value of trusted relationships that encourage trial of new behaviours was identified. A reflective coaching process of trial, reflection and adaptation is recommended to overcome low self-confidence and challenge leadership stereotypes. The study provides benefits to workplace coaches to understand the challenges that female leaders bring to coaching and how they may be addressed.

Keywords: female leadership; self-confidence; self-efficacy; gender equality; workplace coaching

Introduction

Despite rising awareness of the importance of diversity within the workplace, women remain under-represented in the boardroom and at senior levels in organisations. The Hampton-Alexander Review (2016) set targets in the UK to improve board representation to 33% by 2021. Improvements have been achieved with 38% of FTSE100 and 35% of FTSE250 UK boards now including female members. However, still only eight FTSE100 CEOs are female (Statista.com, 2022). Differential career progression across genders is evident. In 2017 the Women's Business Council reported that 73% of entry-level roles were occupied by women but they go on to make up only 34% of middle managers, directors, or senior officials. The report predicts that, to achieve an even split of management positions between men and women by 2024, the UK will need an additional 1.5 million female managers. McKinsey (2020) report that in the US for every 100 men promoted to manager, only 86 women are promoted. Further investigation is called for given the demonstrated link between the level of representation of women in senior management and positive organisational performance coupled with the value of female diversity of thinking (Offermann & Foley, 2020; Brahma et al., 2020)

As female leadership adds value to organisations, it is important to understand how gender balance can be achieved at the top of organisations. The study explores one specific barrier to gender balance in leadership; that of self-confidence, which when low, can lead to women under-rating themselves (Herbst 2020). Self-confidence relates to an individual's

assessment of their own capabilities and judgements to be successful at a particular task (Carducci, 2009). Whilst an increasing amount of focus is being placed on the external or structural barriers to female leadership progression, less is understood about this internal psychologically-driven factor. Self-confidence is crucial to effective performance as a leader. Without a strong level of belief in their abilities, a leader will continuously question their performance. Seeing ourselves mirrored in others who are successful can be both motivating and impact self-confidence by validating our worth, something women may not experience in the same way that men do because women do not see as many female role models around them at work (Tulshyan & Burey, 2021). This lack of internal supportive role models makes coaching an effective developmental support for senior women. Coaching can provide a safe mechanism through which women can understand and explore their beliefs about their capabilities and judgements and so build self-confidence as leaders (O'Neil et al., 2015).

The aim of this study is to explore the role that self-confidence plays in female leadership progression and the experience of workplace coaches in helping female executives to improve their self-confidence. The justification for the study is the limited extent of academic work exploring female leadership and coaching (Gray, et al., 2019). The research provides two key contributions. First, it confirms the strong relationship between low self-confidence and the lack of progression of women into leadership positions and identifies the reasons for this; second, it introduces workplace coaches to a coaching process for use with senior female leaders with low self-confidence.

Two research questions guided the study:

1. What is the experience of workplace coaches when helping female leaders to build their self-confidence?
2. What are the elements of the coaching process that workplace coaches have found to be most important in helping female leaders to build their self-confidence?

The study draws on a sample of workplace coaches and explores their experiences of supporting female senior leaders in relation to self-confidence.

Literature review

We now provide a review of literature relevant to the study. First, self-confidence is discussed in relation to other closely aligned psychological concepts. We then explore female leadership styles and how this may vary from those of men. The nature of workplace coaching is discussed and finally, we explore what is known about the effectiveness of coaching for female leaders.

Self-confidence

Self-confidence is trust in our own skills and capabilities. It is defined by Sam (2013, p. 273) as “our self-assurance in trusting our abilities, capacities, and judgements”. Self-confidence is affected by feelings or beliefs which may long predate adulthood. Peltier (2010) notes that gender-based differences between men and women are often real and significant. Self-confidence and self-belief are closely allied concepts with self-belief, a necessary component of self-confidence, but not sufficient on its own. Bandura (1977) linked self-confidence to self-efficacy which is our interpretation of our own performance. Moen & Allgood (2009) suggest that self-efficacy is often referred to as task specific self-confidence

or an individual's belief that they can carry out a task in a specific situation based on their abilities. This suggests that self-confidence and its link to self-efficacy can make a significant difference to workplace performance at individual or group level. Low self-confidence is often ascribed to women (Herbst, 2020) and Bandura (1977) proposes that gender is one of the most important factors affecting performance due to social expectations and roles. There is evidence that females are often brought up to believe that they need to be perfect with risk aversion encouraged (Kay & Shipman, 2014). Additionally, it has been found that the absence of women in male dominated work environments can lead to women who work in this context feeling less confident in their relative performance (Born, et al., 2018). Such evidence suggests that low confidence may hold women back. Kay and Shipman (2014) propose that confidence is a mix of nature and nurture, and that brain plasticity makes it possible for people to learn new skills and develop self-confidence through techniques such as mindfulness and cognitive behavioural coaching.

Female leadership style

A significant body of research indicates that gender is an important predictor of leadership style and that it influences the experiences of female leaders in the workplace (Jackson et al., 2014). Stereotypes of male leadership qualities continue to hold women back by affecting perceptions of performance and status. This is because the persistence of male leadership stereotypes creates unequal power relationships. Women can be viewed negatively when they do not conform to the required gender stereotype (Alqahtani, 2019) and those who go against their gender stereotype can be viewed as less effective and less preferred (Rhee & Sigler, 2015). Inevitably such workplace experiences will impact feelings of self-confidence by women leaders.

Several studies have aimed to identify female leadership traits. Early leadership studies were driven by a masculine view of leadership (Offermann et al., 1994) and a masculine prototype of leadership continues (Eagly & Carli, 2007; Burkinshaw & White, 2017). Traits aligned with female leadership include sensitivity (Offermann & Foley, 2020) inclusivity and working co-operatively with others (Eagly & Carli, 2007). Eagly & Carli, (2007) identify communal sharing qualities in women versus an agentic approach in men which tends to be more independent, robust and self-reliant. When aligning women to leadership styles, evidence suggests that female qualities support a transformational style rather than one that is transactional or laissez-faire (Silva & Mendis, 2017). This requires leadership characteristics such as good communication and effectiveness at developing and mentoring others, as well as enthusiasm for change, all of which may relate to female leaders given the status quo they experience around them.

An interesting aspect of female leadership style is lack of willingness to promote themselves. Hartman and Barber (2020) found differences in strategies used for advancement, with men more likely to actively engage in advancement behaviours even when they did not have the knowledge or experience to perform in the new role. Conversely, women seek to feel competent about their ability to perform in a work role prior to applying for it. Hartman and Barber (2020) do not find a marked difference in occupational self-efficacy between men and women, but do note greater career ambition, and willingness to

act, on the part of men. They advocate coaching, mentoring and networking to encourage women to take on larger roles.

Workplace coaching

Workplace coaching specifically focuses on supporting and improving the performance of the individual and organisation (Passmore, et al., 2019) and helps employees to achieve workplace goals (Grant, 2017). It gives an individual time, space, support and guidance to make sense of their situation. Women are more likely to welcome the help of a coach (Peltier, 2010), which provides a valuable role that men may get via informal mentoring. Given the low representation of female leaders, many corporate structures have fewer female role models, and gender-based relationship dynamics can make mentoring by senior men less effective for women than for their male peers (Peltier, 2010).

Workplace coaching is an individual, customised, learning and development intervention that uses collaboration, reflection and a focus on defined goals to achieve outcomes that are valued by the client (Smither, 2011). It can be used at all levels within an organisation, and at different career stages (Bozer & Jones, 2018). This view of coaching was seen as relevant to this study because there is evidence that women's career development can take a different timescale from men's, bearing in mind childcare and other responsibilities, and therefore key development stages that coaching can support may appear at different times (Allen & Finkelstein, 2014).

Effectiveness of Coaching for Female Leaders

A meta-analysis by Bozer and Jones (2018) identified a number of determinants of coaching effectiveness. These include self-efficacy, coaching motivation, goal orientation, trust, interpersonal attraction, feedback intervention and supervisory support. Evidence was found of the positive effect of coaching and indicated that self-efficacy is both a predictor and an outcome of coaching interventions. Positive effects of executive coaching on self-efficacy and self-confidence in relation to organisational change were found by Grant (2014) and whilst 20% of the sample was female, no specific linkage was discussed in relation to gender.

The extent of research looking at the effectiveness of coaching on the development of female leaders is limited (Gray, et al., 2019). Examples include a qualitative study recording the views of female participants before, during and after a twelve-month programme of individual and group coaching in a global company (Bonnywell, 2017) with increased self-esteem, self-confidence and self-appreciation reported. Various coaching approaches have been found to be effective in supporting women (O'Neil, 2015) which suggests that the specific coaching approach is less important than the fact that women receive dedicated support and an increased understanding of their unique circumstances. O'Neil et al., (2015) created a 'Framework for Women's Leadership Development' which was analysed using three executive coaching interventions. Included in the framework is 'leadership presence' which includes self-confidence and self-efficacy. Each respondent cited lack of confidence as an issue limiting their effectiveness as a female leader and reported a positive impact of the coaching intervention. O'Neil et al. (2015) propose that each coaching engagement is unique, and coaching strategies need to adapt to understand and respond to contextual issues faced by female leaders as they develop their leadership presence. This implies that building a strong

relationship and adopting a flexible approach to coaching interventions is more important than any specific technique.

In summary, the literature provides evidence of a link between low self-confidence and female leadership with causes and consequences explored. However, less is known about how developmental support may address this, and specifically the relevance of workplace coaching. This gap in our knowledge of the value of workplace coaching for female leaders is addressed by this research.

Methodology

Given the exploratory nature of the study, a qualitative method was adopted using a semi-structured interview approach (Rose, et al., 2015; Oades, et al., 2019). The aim was to delve more deeply into the experience of coaches working with female leaders and to understand their view of the link between self-confidence and female leadership, drawing out elements of the coaching process they found to be most powerful in helping women build their self-confidence.

Individual interviews were conducted with 12 experienced workplace coaches with 5+ years of coaching experience and 2+ years of coaching female senior leaders. Senior leadership was defined as holding a position of responsibility with line management; authority to make policy or financial commitments on behalf of the organisation; or budget responsibility in a commercial company or public sector organisation. A purposive sample was recruited via coaching networks (see below).

Table 1: Sample characteristics

Respondent No.	Background/Industry Experience	Years Coaching	Gender and Age	Coaching Level
1	Engineering/recruitment	20+	Female 50+	Senior exec
2	Recruitment/retail	25+	Female 50+	Senior exec
3	Property	10+	Female 50+	Mid exec
4	Communications	5+	Female 50+	Senior exec
5	HR/Training	20+	Female 50+	Senior exec
6	FMCG/training	20+	Female 40+	Senior exec
7	BBC/public sector	10+	Female 40+	Mid-level

8	HR/training	5+	Female 30+	Mid-level
9	Law	5+	Male 40+	Mid/senior exec
10	Financial/City	5+	Female 50+	Mid exec
11	PR/consultancy	25+	Female 50+	Junior/mid exec
12	Psychology	30+	Female 50+	Mid/senior exec

Data was collected online using Zoom video with recording for subsequent transcription. Semi-structured interviews that ranged between 40 to 70 minutes in length were conducted as these allow for richness of data collection within defined boundaries (Oades et al., 2019). Copy of the questions is provided at Appendix A. Recordings were transcribed using Otter.ai software and the researcher who conducted the interviews verified the accuracy of the transcriptions.

Thematic analysis (Oades et al., 2019) was applied to the data using a six-step process as described by Braun & Clarke (2006) and applied as shown at Table 2. The study was conducted with ethical approval from the University of Reading in line with approved ethical guidelines. All data was anonymised at the point of transcription and analysis.

Table 2: Thematic analysis procedure

Steps in the thematic analysis as proposed by Braun & Clarke (2006)	Thematic analysis procedure of the study
1. Familiarize yourself with the data	The researcher who undertook the interviews transcribed the Zoom recordings into written text using Otter.ai software. She then read through all transcripts to familiarise herself with the data and verify the accuracy of the transcripts. Notes and reflections made by the researcher during interviews were also reviewed as a reminder of tone and emphasis that may not be evident in the written script.
2. Assign preliminary codes to your data in order to describe the content	Each transcript was reviewed and initially a total of 57 codes were identified to describe the content within the data. A second data reduction review was conducted and

	a smaller number of 22 codes emerged due to overlapping and similarity in the data.
3. Search for patterns or themes in your codes across the different interviews	The data relating to the 22 codes was then reviewed by looking for recurring patterns by which the data could be related together and categorised under higher level themes. 4 such themes were identified.
4. Review themes	The themes were reviewed by the second researcher and discussed with the original researcher.
5. Define and name themes	The 4 themes were defined and named in the context of the original aim and research questions of the study.
6. Produce your report	A detailed reporting of the themes was produced and verified by each researcher.

Four overarching themes emerged and are discussed: 1. Experiences of coaching self-confidence; 2. Intrinsic factors and self-confidence; 3. Extrinsic factors and self-confidence; and, 4. The coaching process. The first three themes inform us about self-confidence and female leadership and the fourth theme adds to our understanding of how coaching can support this.

1. Experiences of coaching self-confidence

When coaches were asked to describe working with female leaders to improve self-confidence, they spontaneously responded with a variety of descriptions of their clients' level of self-esteem at the outset of coaching. Self-esteem has been defined as "an individual's subjective evaluation of her or his worth as a person" (Trzesniewski et al., 2013). Our research identified the overlapping nature of these two concepts in the minds of our coaches. For some coaches, confidence was raised by women at the outset of coaching and for others this emerged during the sessions. Where confidence was mentioned in the initial contracting stage, during the coaching, deeper, underlying emotions often became evident as a "*blind spot*" surfaced (R2). It was felt that confidence may for some women be an acceptable and safe surface level concept that they are willing to discuss, beneath which stronger emotions are held.

"confidence is one of the things most people are quite willing to say..they don't talk about deeper things like being fearful and frozen, or overwhelmed. (R12).

Coaches identified that there were often other initial reasons that had triggered the need for coaching, for example improving presentation skills, or the need for effective working with new stakeholders, but a broader lack of confidence often emerged as the underlying issue

during the course of the coaching. The term ‘imposter syndrome’ was often mentioned spontaneously by coaches interchangeably with low self-confidence.

For some coaches confidence was mentioned in every coaching session “ *it's the thing that more women clients ask about than anything else by quite some margin.*”(R4) and it was felt to be an easy subject for women to talk about. This suggests that self-confidence is front of mind for women. The point was also made that confidence issues affect men too, “*this is a people thing, not a women thing. But it manifests differently*” (R4) but men were perceived to be better at managing or hiding their concerns. It was suggested that one explanation for confidence being raised as an issue by women more often than men, is due to the differences in how genders relate to themselves and others. The view was expressed that men tend to be more concerned with inter-personal relationships, whilst women are concerned with intra-personal relationships. As a result, men are, in general, better at externalising their feelings rather than internalising them or as is often referred to in women as ‘taking things personally’.

Self-efficacy was not mentioned spontaneously by coaches, although once a definition was given by the researcher, there was general agreement on the distinction between this and self-confidence. Self-efficacy was recognised as the client’s belief in their ability to succeed in a task, whilst self-confidence was described as a more general sense of being and described as “*more related to who you actually are, rather than who you think you are*” (R2) Some coaches felt that when coaching very senior executives, “*their self-efficacy of believing that they can succeed at a task is very high*”, because “*they've be working 20 years already*” (R1). issues of self-efficacy were less likely to be raised, as the individual had already demonstrated technical competence. The challenges that senior women face are “*behavioural challenges...and the social challenges they've got to succeed, as opposed to the technical...ability challenges*”(R9).

2. Intrinsic factors and female leaders

Coaches’ had various views of the causes of low self-confidence. It may stem back to childhood, and a parent, often the mother, who was critical, leading the child to think nothing they do was ever good enough, a feeling that continued on into adulthood and may present as perfectionism. In this situation, unearthing the root cause of unhelpful behaviour was reported as the starting point for developing strategies to help the individual address issues in the workplace:

“Once she became afraid, she held her breath, and she froze. Once she knew that, and then she had the back story as well, which is often useful. Then we need strategies. So, first stage is awareness. Second, is strategies.” (Respondent 12).

The use of neuro linguistic programming (NLP) techniques to help the client develop imagery to contain the unhelpful emotions was one example of the work undertaken with clients. Other coaches felt that delving into a client’s past was not the job of a coach. The way that some women have been brought up, with very traditional expectations, may undermine confidence, leading to a more cautious approach and a lack of commercial ambition. Another coach recalled a client describing life as a “*battle*” (R2), *She had told herself from a very young age, that she had to fight for everything; she had to battle for everything*” (R2). They talked about the challenges that women had in feeling comfortable in leadership roles, and the sheer difficulty of being heard in a room full of men which can affect self-confidence.

The question led female coaches to remember their own experiences of hostile working environments in executive roles. Coaches recognised the risk of their own

experiences seeping into their coaching as unconscious bias, and this having an influence on which topics were raised and explored in client sessions.

“I’ve questioned myself, I have thought to myself how come the confidence piece comes out with every single coachee, male or female? I think it’s fascinating. And I’ve asked Is that to do with me? Or is that actually what everybody experiences? I’m not sure; I’m certainly very conscious of it, I have struggled with it at times as well in my career. So, whether because of that I just naturally end up in that area. As a coach, of course, we don’t ask leading questions, but I think sometimes subconsciously, maybe we do follow certain trails a little bit more.” (Respondent 9).

3. Extrinsic factors and female leaders

A number of environmental factors were discussed in relation to supporting self-confidence and female leadership. Coaches felt that the presence of positive role models, mentors and sponsors was valuable. A distinction was made between mentors and sponsors, recognising the potential of a sponsor to “stick up their head and say, I’m going to promote this woman” (R1) and be willing to take a risk by appointing her into a big role or a stretch project. There were some comments that women were less likely to ask for a mentor, because “if I’m looking for someone to look after me, I should be able to do it by myself” (R 7). Others noted that women were less likely to have the network that exposes them to suitable mentors. Coaches encouraged their female clients to think about managing stakeholders which included physically making sure they could be heard, and “communicate with others, they asked for feedback, they ask for input, and they are much more open” (R1).

The environment was viewed as a key factor in determining a woman’s opportunity to succeed rather than their technical ability to do the job. This was particularly so in traditional businesses where men are still predominant, especially at senior levels. A hostile working environment created by a critical boss, had a fundamental impact on one female client’s confidence levels. The situation was held to be responsible for the lack of self-confidence that she faced, because once she moved to a new role, the confidence issues disappeared. In this sort of environment, it was suggested that women need to adapt their style to be effective and may need to adopt techniques such as building relationships outside the board room. The legitimate role of politics in business was raised, along with the need for women to embrace this to truly be effective, and gain confidence in their roles:

“It’s absolutely necessary to step on the political field of play with some confidence and some awareness and with a very clear sense that you don’t have to sacrifice your integrity. That you may need to be shrewd. But most women, they don’t like to play.” (R12).

There was a recognition that organisational cultures are changing which may be a positive advantage for women.

“women coming through the start-up world, the tech worlds, with new ways of working, are supported much more by men and equal to men. Whereas in the corporate world, even the women who’ve got to the top have only got to the top because they’ve had to sacrifice something else.” (R10).

Coaches emphasised the need for women to be adaptable to their environment in order to succeed, with an emphasis on influencing from within the organisation, with a “need to work on changing it”, rather than simply saying “it has to be the way I like it” (R1). There was also recognition that choosing a role and an organisation wisely, with an emphasis on fit

with culture and values is important to giving a woman the best chance of success and fulfilment in a role.

4. The coaching process

Coaches emphasised the importance of creating strong relationships with the women they coached *“people have really cherished the ability to be in a safe place, and just say what they really think and what they feel”* (R9). Some coaching relationships went on for several years, although there was recognition of the danger of long-term relationships that created dependency. This was distinguished from relationships that developed into a series of distinct coaching assignments, with specific goals for each. Respondents emphasised the importance of setting clear and stretching goals. Coaches also said they explicitly contracted to allow for challenge and the presence of absolute trust between coach and client made that possible:

“Because people know that you're on their side, they know that you're giving them difficult feedback, and you're being challenging, because you're doing it with the absolute best of intention to help them get the best out of a situation, even if it's something they really don't want to hear. Because you've got that trust, you can work on those things.” (R11).

Others cited the need for the coach to be brave, and not step back at pivotal moments:

“You have to be very direct.....As a coach, if you chicken in that moment, you're not doing your client a favour at all. You're not doing your job. When something really either jars or really rings very true, you sometimes point that out too. Did you hear what you just said? That was brilliant. So those are pivotal moments and you feel them in your entire body.” (R1).

It was recognised that clients may be fragile and coaches need to tread gently and with sensitivity given the fragile nature of confidence itself. Allied to trust is the willingness of clients to go deeper, where they may choose to discuss elements of their personal life and background on the basis that the more that is shared, and the client is aware of, the stronger the overall outcome. Those who mentioned imposter syndrome were quick to normalise it, *“so common, they wrote a book about it”* (R4). and to demonstrate an empathetic, non-judgmental approach.

Coaches mentioned using approaches familiar to positive psychology coaching such as positive reinforcement; visioning to help clients remember what had been done well and to build confidence to set new stretch goals; NLP; the GROW model; and describing the change process by reference to change curves. Coachees were encouraged to experiment with new approaches in the workplace and reflect on these experiences at the next coaching session with a view to adaptation. It was noted that as women began to get positive feedback on the development work they were doing, that became self-reinforcing:

“she'll come back to the next session saying, I tried this, this and this. Wow, what an amazing difference it made. She was getting feedback all the time. She could see that the things that she was learning, were working for her.” (R11).

Finally, coaches described a changing role for them between coach, mentor, consultant and advisor, as *“whether we're having a coaching session or an advisory session”* (R10). This was felt to be legitimate as long as both parties were absolutely clear about the changing nature of the relationship during each engagement. There was a spectrum of views

from concern about ongoing relationships creating dependency, to valuing deep relationships that build trust and encourage challenging work.

Discussion

The purpose of this study was to explore the experiences of workplace coaches in relation to self-confidence when supporting female leaders. We now discuss these findings according to the two original research questions.

1. What is the experience of workplace coaches when helping female leaders to build their self-confidence?

The research identifies that self-confidence is a central topic when supporting female leaders but suggests that it could be a surface level entry to much deeper issues. It suggests a mixed understanding amongst workplace coaches of the overlapping concepts of self-confidence, self-esteem and self-efficacy. These three concepts closely align, although self-efficacy is clearly perceived to relate to performance. Searches of academic literature on self-confidence similarly tend to incorporate ideas of self-efficacy. There is some debate about whether self-efficacy is always situation-specific (Betz & Hackett, 2006), or can be more general. In this research study, coaches cited instances in which clients lacked what they described as self-confidence, although this was often about a specific situation or set of circumstances, and so could be said to fall within Bandura's (1977) definition of self-efficacy. In other examples, a more general state of confidence was described, which seems to fit the academic definition of self-confidence, which is that an individual has an appropriate level of confidence in their own abilities (Peltier, 2010).

The term 'Imposter Syndrome' (IS) is well recognised and, not unsurprisingly, appears in the experiences of our coaches. IS (also called imposter phenomenon) was first defined by Clance & Imes (1978) who observed the incidence of high achieving women feeling that their success was due to luck or fooling others. We can speculate whether IS is a determinant or outcome of low self-confidence. The transient nature of IS (Sakulku & Alexander, 2011) suggests it is a characteristic of low self-confidence rather than a cause. Our coaches seemed to be handling the situation intuitively in their coaching, as they talked about normalising their clients' feelings. Tulshyan and Burey (2021) note that much written about imposter syndrome emphasises 'fixing' the woman, rather than addressing the workplace systems that create a toxic environment for anyone who feels they do not fit in a white, male-dominated workplace. They suggest that as men become more successful, they become more confident, in part because they see plenty of role models who are just like them. The opposite happens to women, and even more so to women of colour. Tulshyan and Burey, (2021) advocate creating workplace cultures that are more accepting of different leadership styles. In this research study, whilst coaches encouraged women to find their own authentic style, there was a recognition that women need to participate in the workforce in order to influence from within and force change over time.

2. What are the elements of the coaching process that workplace coaches have found to be most important in helping female leaders to build their self-confidence?

The study confirms the need for coaches to build trusting relationships, consistent with O'Neil et al., (2015), in order that female leaders become willing to take risks to try new ways of working. The courage of the coach to be brave at pivotal moments, call out what they

hear, and reflect this back to the client is important, perhaps more so than specific coaching tools. From our study, we propose a coaching process of *trial, reflection and adaptation* in which the coach sits alongside the client to help them build awareness of their workplace situation. Creating awareness is the first stage of coaching and a precursor to any reflection. Via iterations of reflection and adaptation in leadership behaviour in between sessions, coaching can support women to adapt and grow their own leadership style relevant to their organisational context. Building trusting relationships and using a coaching process that encourages active participation by women to make changes in their workplace behaviour is recommended.

Conclusion

This research contributes to literature on workplace coaching for female leadership which is important given the recognised lack of studies (Gray et al., 2019). First, it supports the current trend to achieve gender equality by understanding the experiences of women in the workplace particularly in relation to confidence (Alqahtani, 2019; Herbst, 2020). Second, it provides support to existing theories of female leadership (Eagly, 2007; Eagly & Carli, 2007, and Gray et al., 2019) which identify the effect of gendered stereotypes in masculine environments and the importance of workplace role models for women in building self-confidence. Our study reinforces that female self-confidence is impacted by assumed masculine characteristics in leadership and that women face the challenge of influencing change in corporate cultures. Third, it confirms the value of coaching for women and specifically the effects of using reflection to address issues of self-confidence and to encourage internal organisational change. This is consistent with the work of Gray et al., (2019, p. 665), which refers to female executive coaching working with other internal interventions as a “transformative agenda” that is “dependent on building individual’s critical gender insight, enabling individuals to act as change agents that disrupt and change workplace practices”. In summary, this research helps improve gender equality in leadership by furthering our understanding of how workplace coaching can support change for female leaders.

Limitations and recommendations for future research

Certain limitations exist in this research. The sample comprised 12 workplace coaches but did not include female leaders themselves. The clients that these coaches worked with came from a variety of business environments and varying levels of seniority, but were not necessarily comprehensive or fully representative of all women experiencing the challenges of senior leadership. Whilst the sample was composed of experienced coaches with a spread of different backgrounds, it was a purposive sample and did not have a gender balance.

Future research could explore the effectiveness of different coaching interventions for women at different stages of their career and across industries. Research amongst a younger sample would provide an understanding of the role of early career coaching. Given the attention focused on imposter syndrome, more research to explore the relationship between this concept and that of low self-confidence is called for. Whilst this research study focuses on confidence amongst women, coaches were keen to emphasise that men face many of the same issues but tend to be better at hiding them. There could be merit in a future study to investigate the experience of men and women in relation to the ‘inter’ versus ‘intra’ nature of their relationships at work. This could help inform decisions on whether developmental activities need to be designed specifically along gender lines.

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