

How a coaching intervention supports the development of female leaders in a global organisation

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Abstract

Executive coaching is increasingly being used to develop leaders in organisations and this study explores how a coaching intervention has been used to develop female leaders in a global organisation. This case study research was undertaken from a social constructionist and interpretivist perspective and used semi-structured interviews and thematic analyses to identify the experiences of the women leaders who participated in coaching. The methodological choices made are identified, and the findings of the experiences are reported. The discussion highlights the theoretical and conceptual underpinnings of the research as well as the implications for practice and further research.

Key Words: coaching, executive coaching, female leaders, case study, global organisation

Introduction

This case study research is situated within GSK, a large (100,000 employee), multinational pharmaceutical organisation and focuses specifically on how coaching can be used to address the issue of gender imbalance at middle and senior leadership levels. More specifically, internal review showed that the percentage of women diminishes at increasing leadership levels. This situation was concerning to the organisation's senior management and Board, led by Sir Philip Hampton who is co-author of the Hampton-Alexander Report (2016) on female representation on Boards and senior management who requested that appropriate steps be taken to address it.

The organisation was keen to address this issue for many reasons, not least of which is that the lack of representation of women in senior positions has been found to have a negative impact at both a financial and organisational level of performance (Desvaux et al., 2008; Vinnicombe et al., 2015). A targeted internal programme was introduced to the organisation with the expressed intention of accelerating the development of female leaders to increase the ratio of female leaders at all levels of leadership. The programme comprised three streams: coaching (both individual and group), sponsorship and dialogues. This research focused on the coaching stream of the programme and looked at the experience of utilising coaching, both individual and group, to develop female leaders. Multiple perspectives were included in the research: those of the female leaders who were coached; the coaches who coached the female leaders and the Steering Group members who led and managed the programme.

Reports such as the Hampton-Alexander Report (2016) draw widespread media attention to the issue of female leader under-representation at the middle levels of organisations, which often become more pronounced at senior and board levels (Ferreira, 2010; Sealy and Vinnicombe, 2013; Vinnicombe et al., 2013). Organisations have been increasingly examining how they can develop their female leaders (Ely et al., 2011; Ibarra et al., 2013; Vinnicombe et al., 2013) to both support female leader progression and to combat the negative impact of the lack of women at senior levels. Recent research has confirmed, and supported, the role of executive coaching in helping women with various aspects of their performance, satisfaction and well-being in organisations (Elston and Boniwell, 2011; Galuk, 2009; Leimon et al., 2011; Skinner, 2014).

Also, in the upper echelons of the organisation, visibility and scrutiny of female leaders can be heightened, therefore designing and implementing an initiative that supported the effective development of female leaders was imperative. Coaching – both individual and group, formed the central pillar of the Accelerating Difference (AD) initiative designed to facilitate the development of female leaders. In the next section key literature is reviewed, after which the methodology is reported, followed by a detailed findings section which identifies the female leaders' experiences of the coaching interventions. Finally, the discussion and conclusions section highlights the theoretical and practical implications of utilising coaching for the development of female leaders, along with suggestions for future research.

Literature Review

Over the last twenty years there has been an exponential growth in the use of coaching in organisations – Pillans in her 2014 report on coaching for the Corporate Research Forum reveals that coaching in organisations has increased by 53% over the previous three years (Pillans, 2014). The International Coach Federation's 2016 Global Coaching Study also reports an increase in fees, hours worked, number of clients and revenues over the past twelve months and predicts this trend will continue (ICF and PWC, 2016). There has been a wealth of studies documenting the experience of leaders receiving individual coaching within organisational settings (Cerni et al., 2010; de Haan and Duckworth, 2013; Feldman and Lankau, 2005; Goldsmith et al., 2012; Passmore and Fillery-Travis, 2011). In their desire to build leadership capability, organisations are increasingly turning to executive coaching as a development mechanism based on the growing body of evidence of its effectiveness (Passmore and Rehman, 2012). Adult learning theory underpins the use of coaching in organisations (Cox et al., 2014) with the most widely used aspect being Kolb's (1984) experiential learning theory (ELT). Executive coaching is also used as an intervention by organisations as it is flexible and individually tailored to meet specific needs, and can thus support leaders with differing styles and requirements (Wasylyshyn et al., 2012).

There is an increasing body of knowledge being developed regarding the experience and use of executive coaching in organisations. A meta analysis study by Sonesh et al. (2015), showed that coaching had a significant positive effect on coachee behavioural change, suggesting that coaching is effective in improving coachee leadership skills, job performance and skills development. Moreover, coaching significantly improved coachees' personal and work-related attitudes, including 'improvement in coachee self-efficacy, motivation to transfer coached skills to the job, stress reduction and commitment to the organisation' (Sonesh et al., 2015, p. 86). Work-related attitudes such as self-efficacy, commitment to the organisation and satisfaction are strong predictors of improved job performance (Anderson et al., 2008; Bandura, 1997; Grant and Greene, 2004). In a study specifically

focused on transformational leadership, Cerni, Curtis and Colmar (2010) found that coaching appears to be effective since it deeply engages leaders in thinking, reflecting, analysis and practice thereby providing initial evidence that changing information-processing styles can influence leadership style (Cerni et al., 2010). Cognitive outcomes are important in changing the ways coachees approach their work and promote behavioural change and ultimately, contribute to improved job performance (Goleman, 2001; Sy et al., 2006). In their meta-analytic study, Theeboom et al. (2014) found that coaching has significant positive effects on performance and skills, well-being, coping, work attitudes and goal directed self-regulation. They conclude that coaching is an effective tool for improving the functioning of individuals in organisations (Theeboom et al., 2014).

However, it is clear that there has only been a limited number of studies on coaching efficacy as a leadership development initiative specifically for women leaders, as recognised in Grant's (2009) annotated bibliography of workplace, executive and life coaching research between 1937 and 2008. Much of the available research is specific to an organisational context based in the US or Australia (Benavides, 2008; Galuk, 2009; Skinner, 2014). Galuk (2009) utilised a phenomenological study to explore what coaching was like for female executives. Skinner's research (2012) used constructivist grounded theory to explore Australian women's experience of coaching. Some studies incorporating a UK perspective are Leimon et al.'s (2011) mixed methods study which focused on senior UK female leaders and Broughton and Miller's (2009) international study. More recent research by De-Valle (2014) looked at executive women's experiences of coaching and mentoring using interpretive phenomenological analysis and found that coaching has the potential to deliver an organisational legacy and to encourage relational leadership (De-Valle, 2014). Additionally, in a study utilising heuristic methodology, Worth (2012) examines coaching women towards authenticity. However, despite these more recent and illuminating studies, Passmore and Fillery-Travis's (2011) recommendations for further studies looking specifically at coaching and the issue of gender still remain valid.

Methodology

The study adopted an ontological stance that is social constructionist and, as such, considers that there are multiple realities which are constructed through social interaction – there is no one 'reality' (Burr, 2015). The unit of analysis for the study was the coaching stream of the AD programme, comprising multiple perspectives from female leaders being coached, the coaches and members of the Steering Team of the AD initiative.

The epistemological stance for the study was interpretivism – *people* were studied, as opposed to machines, and as such they were interpreting their world (Saunders et al., 2011). Given the need for a methodology that was qualitative, interpretive, social constructionist and context inclusive, a case study (Stake, 1995) was chosen as the methodology and thematic analysis (Gray, 2013) as the analytical method. The choice of case study was also reinforced by the context in which all the participants were situated, one organisation, GSK. The boundaries defined who to interview – the female leaders who were participants, coaches and Steering Team members of the Accelerating Difference (AD) initiative; the cohort to be studied – Cohort One (2013 – 2014); and the organisation, in which 18 of the interviewees were employed and one coach was contracted. The research participants were all studied in their 'real life' contexts as they had all participated in the AD programme, and the inclusion of coaches and Steering Team members in the study served to add depth and weight to the case study and reinforce the instrumental nature of the case study design (Stake, 1995).

Each female leader had received a maximum of 12 individual coaching sessions which were conducted either in person, by Live Meeting via webcams or by telephone. Additionally, they also attended six Group Coaching sessions facilitated by either an Internal and an External Executive Coach or an External Executive Coach and an internal Job Plus Coach (JPC - a leader trained to be a coach). The six group sessions were spread over fourteen months and between five and seven female leaders were assigned to each group based on their geographical location. Each group coaching session was approximately four hours in length and for the majority of participants was conducted face to face, the exception to this occurred where geographical location prohibited travel.

Semi-structured interviews, were used for data collection vehicle (Seidman, 2013) as this approach allowed the questions to be delivered through a conversational and relatively informal approach (Eriksson and Kovalainen, 2008). Thematic analysis enabled the identification and analysis of patterns and themes across the data set (Braun and Clarke, 2006). The female leaders' first interviews were transcribed and coded and so that the initial themes could start to emerge and allowed the second interview protocol to be developed. The second interviews were then conducted with the female leaders, concurrently with the Steering Team member and Coaches' interviews and were then transcribed and coded. All codes were reviewed repeatedly, looking across and between the codes, combining apparent themes in order to identify themes. Gradually themes could be constructed that represented the essence of the data that on reading, and considerable re-reading, seemed to reflect appropriately, the experience of the participants. The decision was made in the analysis process not to make a distinction between the data from the first interviews and the second interviews as the first interviews allowed for cathartic down-load, and the second were more focused and targeted on areas identified in first interviews. Taking a less linear or chronological approach was more consistent in a social constructionist approach because the whole engagement with the data was a meaning making process, a form of 'hermeneutic circle' whereby meaning is constructed, interpreted and reconstructed as interaction continues (Gadamer, 1989).

Findings

The three key thematic strands that emerged highlighted how the female leaders had experienced the coaching as causing: 1. change in relation to aspects of self, 2. in relationship to others, and 3. collective impact.

Change in Relation to Self

Self Awareness

The majority of female leaders raised self-awareness as something that had changed for them during AD. Overall, 12 participants reported experiencing an increase in their self-awareness which they ascribed to the coaching and their comments were quite broad in nature, ranging from being more conscious of what they were thinking about on a day-to-day level, to questioning their purpose in life. Self knowledge was considered as akin to self-awareness by participants and was mentioned as simply "*getting to know myself more*" (Phoebe) and "*the other big thing is self-awareness, I know myself better than when I started*" (Paula). Patience reported "*having done AD it opened my awareness, it unlocked it, I rediscovered myself*". For most of the participants, the concept of self-awareness was reported as the deepening of their understanding of themselves, who they are, their self concept and their awareness of their impact on others.

Self-confidence

Eleven of the female leaders reported that increasing their self-confidence was one of their coaching objectives. The general term of self-confidence appeared to be used interchangeably with the term self-esteem, in that distinction between the outward shows of confidence was not distinguished from the inner perspective of esteem. As Patricia proclaims, *“definitely self-confidence is a huge outcome coming from this programme, I had a lot of self limiting thoughts about myself”* (Patricia). The references to self-confidence were consistently positive in tone, and were regarded by all participants who raised it as being an invaluable outcome, as Paula stated: *“Self-confidence – another big achievement, knowing that I can do whatever I want to do – the key thing is to know what I really want, that part is key.”* The concepts of self-awareness and self-confidence are reported often interchangeably rather than being considered distinct and separate.

Identity

For some participants, the inward reflection appeared to progress to a deeper level than awareness and self knowledge and concerned identity, i.e. who they were in the world and how they conceive of themselves within the world (Butcher, 2012). These constructs underpinning a sense of identity were discussed by many participants – even though the term identity itself may have been rejected, as Prunella states: *“We discussed purpose in life, not so much identity per se, but I think that becomes apparent as you go through it even if you don’t deliberately discuss it so you can’t avoid it”*.

Self-leadership

As the self-awareness, self knowledge and confidence and sometimes identity grew, some participants and coaches observed that what they saw happening was a growing sense of self-leadership: *“There is something about self-leadership and realising actually they have a more significant part in how they are viewed and seen and how they represent themselves in the system”* (Chris, coach). This was expressed in different ways – as one participant stated *“it helped me to understand me, 100%”* (Pauline). Participants recognised that as their self knowledge deepened they recognised the unrealistic expectations that they had placed upon themselves. Their ability to manage their approach to their expectations appeared to be ongoing work and handled with acceptance and compassion, as cited by Pam:

We had briefly touched on procrastination and through the coaching we identified that I hold very high expectations for myself and how to address that and how to be realistic about that, how to show some self compassion as well.

Change in relationship to others

Leadership style

From the analyses it was clear that their interpretation of the impact of having coaching was directly concerned with how they were thinking and behaving as leaders. Some participants reported becoming more conscious and aware of their leadership style and were able to make choices about how they approached tasks or goals as a result. The depth and extent to which this happened varied – including the quite pragmatic *“being thoughtful about the team I was building”* (Peta) to others that perceived the impact at a greater level. This was echoed by Peggy: *“I think for me, I grew in confidence, I was able to manage them better I could reflect on how I interacted with them and how I wanted to interact with them so they saw a better manager”* (Peggy).

Relationship to line manager

The relationship under examination here is that of direct report to manager, as distinct from line manager as coach. The nature of the existing coachee and line manager relationship was brought under the spotlight during AD and some people identified less than ideal relationships, others were very satisfied with their relationships and for some, the relationships changed as a result of the AD initiative. Some female leaders expressed joy and delight in receiving support and acknowledgement from their line managers as they grew and progressed during AD: *“When you are changing, your relationship changes - he was also playing back to me he was seeing I was clearly stronger and more self-confident. Which was brilliant!”* (Patricia)

The findings highlighted that the calibre and quality of the relationship between line manager and coachee had a significant impact on creating the micro-climate in which the female leaders operated. This micro-climate ranged from being fully supportive to highly dismissive and significantly influenced the reported quality of the coaching experience and the career outcomes perceived by the female leaders.

Relationship to conflict

Their relationship to conflict was expressed by many female leaders as an area of interest with some reporting feeling comfortable with conflict, others reporting it as an area of concern and learning. There was also recognition from a number of participants that conflict was something that they had been avoiding – that they held beliefs about conflict being negative and hence it needed to be avoided: *“I was trying to avoid it. I would wait for things – I avoided giving feedback when it was small things, I would wait until it was bigger until it was a big thing and call it a conflict.”* (Pam)

However, through the session and subsequent reflections, existing beliefs around conflict were challenged and changed, and they identified adapting their behaviour as well, which they attributed to the peer interactions during the group coaching.

Relationship to power

For some female leaders there was a rejection of the concept of power – they reported that they had an almost a visceral reaction to the use of the term power, as Pam describes: *“For some reason I took it negatively that I didn’t want the power, just the word itself why would I want that the word itself, why would I want that this?”* This reaction was shared initially by Patricia, however she reports a shift in her perspective of what power means to her following the coaching sessions:

Power over or power through someone, that was quite a big insight for me, power is not a female word and I would not, before this, like to be perceived as powerful, while now I understand power is about strength, confidence, convictions, visions and working through people.

This move towards accepting power as a positive force, that it was constructive and was important was an insight derived from the coaching. For Patricia, there was a realisation that she had perhaps been giving away her power and that she did have a choice about how she could use her power, if she chose to do so. She shifted in her thinking to reveal a self-determination about her power in relation to her situation: *“I realised I can use my power - he offered me a job at a senior level and I said no, I used my power in that way.”*

Relationship to personal life

The participants described how the experience of coaching as part of AD had made them reflect on the overall balance in their lives regarding work and life outside of work, particularly in relation to their responsibilities regarding family. Some started with work issues, before going broader as Paloma described: *“First of all it was all about work and then we linked it to things outside of work – it wasn’t just on work, it went outside those boundaries.”* Pauline talked more holistically about her life acknowledging the integrated nature of her coaching conversations stating: *“We talked a lot about home and children and other challenges that affect your balance and energy and I was having quite a few tough things happening – they are not separate”* (Pauline).

Collective impact

A key aspect of the interviews was the references made to the concept of collective impact as a result of AD. The participants talked about subjects and issues in a way that described the collective impact, in addition to the individual or personal impact of the initiative.

‘Feeling I am not alone’

This code was raised by over half of the participants as a key insight that being part of AD gave them the realisation of ‘feeling that I am not alone’. Many spoke about this realisation in relation to their feelings and thoughts as a female leader: *“it was not just me, I realised I was not alone”* (Paula). This feeling of connectedness with others was far broader than the feeling of connectedness to the group – it was reported as feeling connected to others – specifically others with a similar way of looking at the world. Another aspect of this realisation of not being alone was the connection it brought with other women. As Phoebe remarked: *“I took away I am not alone, some of the challenge you may face as being a woman , parents, kids and family I am not alone there are women out there who are going through the same thing.”*

This feeling of communal understanding and appreciation of what life is like for the female leaders was often repeated: *“It made me feel I wasn’t alone, the stories being told other people had been in similar situations, you sometimes think this is just me that this happens to”* (Paloma). For Pam it was the act of being able to share with other women her situation and in so doing and hearing other women tell their stories, she recognised the collective nature of their experience. This was beneficial as, in her eyes, it normalised her experience and made it more manageable: *“Some things that you thought no one else was facing and then you talk to ten people and you see everyone has faced it at sometime in your life so it makes it feel much more manageable.”* (Pam)

Feeling connected to the group

Some leaders felt that they had been able to develop a connection to their colleagues with whom they had group coaching which they deemed to be positive and helpful: ‘the connection with the individuals that were similar to me and different, the connections and the learnings were valuable.’ (Priscilla). They reported that the relationships they had built through the group coaching sessions had then transferred into their ways of relating to each other outside of the AD context, back in their day jobs:

The network that we have now, the relationship is completely different it doesn’t mean we will not be tough one to another – one of the girls is in quality and even the discussion is at a different level, this is my position but I will listen to your positions.(Paula)

However, not all participants felt that they connected with their groups – one leader, Patience, felt she connected with her individual coach and group coach but not with the group or the broader AD group: “*I connected with my coach and my group coach, but I didn’t get the chemistry within my group or the broader AD team*”. This negative case may have been replicated more broadly through AD, and the female leaders who felt they were not getting a lot out of the group coaching may have opted out by simply not showing up for the coaching sessions, and therefore excluding themselves from the study.

Giving back

One of the surprising consequences that participants reported was a desire to ‘give back’ to others in some form following their involvement in AD. For some it manifested in them embarking on training to develop their coaching capabilities – and for others it was more externally focused. As Peta states, she decided to become a Job Plus Coach (JPC) within GSK: “*the first thing I did was register on JPC to be trained as a coach – so I have coached some people the skills I got there, I use them with my team, my peers, my friends, my sister.*” Many women also reported taking elements of the initiative that they had experienced and running development sessions for women in the site where they work.

Discussion and Conclusion

The overall finding is that the experience of coaching was reported as supporting the development of female leaders in many and varied ways, including enabling the development of skills and capabilities as well as progression in their roles. This clearly reinforces and builds upon the extant research on general executive coaching (Bachkirova and Cox, 2007; Grant, 2014; Kampa-Kokesch and Anderson, 2001). Additionally, the female leaders also emphasised that the coaching supported them with self and personal identity development, relational ability and transformational learning. This research adds an additional dimension to the limited extant literature regarding coaching as a developmental support to female leaders from a coachee perspective (Broughton and Miller, 2009; De-Valle, 2014; Leimon et al., 2011; Worth, 2012). The combined group and individual coaching experience of the women resulted specifically in reports of increased self-esteem, confidence and self appreciation and supports findings from De-Valle (2014), Worth (2012), Skinner (2014), Benavides (2008) and Galuk (2009).

The findings reinforced previous research that has identified the importance of high self-esteem in underpinning career success (Keller et al., 2015). If women need high self-esteem to obtain high quality jobs to a greater degree than men (Keller et al., 2015) then supporting the development of their self-esteem becomes a priority for organisations wishing to encourage and enable female leaders to progress up the organisational hierarchy. The combined coaching effect supports the development of self-esteem in women which enables increased self-belief. In turn, having this positive self-belief enables confidence to apply for, and gain, high quality jobs which in turn lead to progression within the organisation.

As the women progressed through the initiative their increased sense of confidence and identity allowed some women to challenge the concept of gender binary – they felt that they should stop worrying about being women, should value themselves for being women and stop apologising for being women. As such, their increased sense of identity as women allowed them to stand up and resist

becoming 'one of the boys' and adopting male traits. There was acceptance that for these women many of the environments in which they work are dominated by masculine behaviours and expectations of leaders – this became more pronounced as they rose through the hierarchy. However, the findings from this research supported the concept of deploying the behaviours that are most likely to be effective and influential within the predominant context (Mavin et al., 2014). The women reported developing their own sense of identity as a leader, also experienced increased efficacy in their leadership capability and frequently positioned themselves as gender neutral leaders. It appeared that their increased sense of self, as a leader and as a woman, allowed them to let go of the need to be known as a female leader, and instead be viewed as a leader. This was not about distancing themselves from the traditional stereotypes of feminine behaviours associated with leadership, e.g. kind, helpful, warm and supportive (Case and Oetama-Paul, 2013), but more about owning and allowing these aspects of themselves to be a part of how they lead. Their experience suggests that in order to challenge effectively in the existing context, they needed to be able to adopt behaviours demonstrating competition and ambition, more typically associated with masculine traits (Mavin and Grandy, 2012). Within the group coaching, the women reported developing a shared sense of identity, of connection and belonging which gave them the power and will to assert their difference and allow themselves to choose to 'do gender well and differently' (Mavin and Grandy, 2012). The group coaching created a safe environment whereby the women could share their experiences, both positive and negative, of choosing to do gender, when to bring forth their difference and when not to as they associated themselves more with management and positions of leadership.

The participants' approach to power and organisational politics was also reported as being enhanced by the combination of individual and group coaching. Being able to talk through what power meant to them, and to hear the various alternative views put forward by their colleagues operating in the same environment, was reported to be of huge benefit. They solicited advice and feedback during the group coaching sessions and found the responses ranged from behavioural suggestions, such as 'seizing the moment', to moving out of their comfort zone to gain experience and being prepared to stand alone when necessary. These findings support the notion that 'bravery counts' as identified by Mavin (2014) and includes being assertive, speaking out and 'being prepared to sing their own praises' (Mavin et al., 2014, p. 11).

The group coaching supported the women's development particularly in the areas concerning their relationship to others and the balance they have between their roles as leaders and their roles within their families. The finding that the women were relieved to discover the feeling 'that I am not alone' is a profound reflection of the value of connection and sense of belonging that the group coaching gave them. This finding builds on that of Vinnicombe et al. (2013) where they state that a frequent comment from participants is 'It is refreshing to know that I am not alone' (Vinnicombe et al., 2013, p. 416).

The support the women received in understanding the complexities that each participant faces and the multiplicity of ways of handling their own work and family balance dilemmas supports the findings by Mavin et al. (2014). The concept that 'family matters' identifies more contradictions for female leaders when identifying issues and concerns surfaced in group coaching. The study identified that the group coaching allowed the women to feel more in control of the balance in their lives between work and family. This is a feeling of shared belonging and understanding among the women and the findings support the intense formation of this concept within several of the groups. This collective perspective and sense of belonging brought about specifically through the process of coaching is

relatively new to the research on coaching and mentoring female executives (Broughton and Miller, 2009; De-Valle, 2014; Leimon et al., 2011; Skinner, 2014; Worth, 2012).

The finding that many women chose to give back by becoming coaches themselves, by taking on more junior mentees and operating as mentors and by running development sessions for other women at their sites suggests that there is a ripple effect from their experience of coaching. Social exchange theory serves to explain some of the motivation behind the concept of giving back (Kim and Kuo, 2015; Rutti et al., 2013) and the resulting behaviour. In combination with social exchange theory, social capital theory was also in evidence in interpreting the findings of the study. In essence, the group coaching can be seen to provide the setting and context for the development of inter-personal relationships which in turn enabled stronger connections within social networks to be built by the female leaders. The group coaching sessions created environments that promoted trust, rapport and goodwill leading to reported positive experiences, indicative of the development of social capital (Adler and Kwon, 2002; Ellinger et al., 2012).

When viewed together, it appears that the two theories of social exchange and social capital underpin the mutually reinforcing and synergistic relationships. The female leaders feel a form of goodwill, positive feelings of trust and reciprocity towards their coaches, and in some cases, their line managers and the organisation for their participation in the AD initiative. This is combined with the experience of building social capital with each other through the group coaching sessions, as well as extending beyond the formal sessions to broader networks and reputational benefit across the organisation. As such, the coaching appears to be efficacious in that building the interior capability of the female leaders provides the required solid foundation on which to build other leadership capabilities required in today's organisations such as impact, presence and the ability to influence across boundaries. This is particularly important as social capital is frequently cited as being particularly challenging for female or other minority leaders to develop and has therefore been identified as a potential barrier to career advancement (Mavin et al., 2014).

Limitations of the research

The limitations of the research relate to the nature of qualitative research in general, the approach taken and the limitations inherent in case study methodology where the research findings are contextually focused. Given the nature of the sampling in terms of size, composition and the specific organisational context within which the study was carried out, the research findings cannot be generalised to the wider population. The interpretivist perspective from which this study is conducted also inherently limits the broader application of the findings as sense making limitations and vagaries may also apply, given the multiplicity of views and complexities of different stakeholders' perspectives.

Future Research

In the area of female leader development through coaching, a future study of value would be to look at the experience of having only group coaching, rather than combined coaching. In this way, it would be possible to identify the extent of the synergistic effect of combined coaching and to determine the potential positive effect of just having group coaching. Another area to study would be to include men as well as women in having both individual and group coaching. In this way, the context or real world of the organisation is more accurately reflected in the participant makeup, however potentially different issues would crop up. Whilst it could be argued that this would significantly change the focus

of the study, it would demonstrate that the topic of female leader progression within organisations is one that is not a 'women only' issue, but is one that impacts the whole organisation (Mavin et al., 2014).

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