

CHARACTERISTICS OF HIGH-PERFORMING FEMALE LEADERS

Introduction

In 1986, writers at The Wall Street Journal coined the term “glass ceiling” to refer to the barriers that prevented women from achieving positions of power and influence in organizations. Over the past 25 years, we have certainly observed cracks in the glass. Numerous factors, including the increased presence of women in the workplace, changes in family roles and structure, and employment laws that prevent the blatant exclusion of qualified women from jobs and industries formerly considered exclusive to men have at least encouraged women to begin careers that lead to significant leadership roles. The professions, politics and public services have seen striking gains in the past two decades. Universities that once barred women as students and scholars now award them more advanced degrees than their male counterparts. Still, women in positions of executive power and leadership are sufficiently rare to be noticed and remarked upon. Even now the glass ceiling is not completely shattered.

At PRADCO, we evaluate people at all levels of organizations to help our clients make better selection and promotion decisions. We use objective data, work history, open-ended responses and interview findings to describe individuals and assess their “fit” with a given job and organization. We also do a good deal of coaching to help leaders become more effective in their roles. In spite of the recent recession and companies limiting how much they spend with consultants, we have been asked to devote a good deal of our time to evaluating and developing high-potential people over the last several years. In these types of programs, the female participant is rare. It is this fact that caused us to ask ourselves why more high-potential women are not being identified and developed for executive-level roles.

Of course, there could be many reasons for the lack of female candidates for leadership coaching, and we are in an excellent position to explore the situation by evaluating archival test data and gathering input from successful clients and candidates we know. We also wanted to understand the behaviors that make women successful as leaders. This would allow us to design coaching strategies that would be relevant to the journeys women take to the top.

Our access to years of data on women’s leadership behaviors and success was our most obvious advantage. We were also able to talk with female leaders about the personal and institutional factors that contributed to (or inhibited) their success, and we had numerous opportunities to assess the leadership styles and behaviors of strong, high-potential women who were recommended to us by the top leaders of our client companies. These women would become our first subjects.



We were interested in the following issues:

1. What do successful women have in common?
2. Are there differences at various levels of management?
3. What differentiates men and women in key roles?
4. What would a coaching program designed for high-potential female leaders look like?

Some of these questions will be addressed here; others will be covered later in the Series. [Part II](#) will discuss the development of women leaders from the perspective of some who have made the journey, and [Part III](#) will compare women's leadership styles with those of their male colleagues.

Assessment Tools

PRADCO has developed and validated several assessments to describe work behaviors. The assessment instruments used for the survey were PRADCO's *Competency Index*, *Emotional Intelligence Index* and *Leadership Index*. When a job candidate or employee completes these forced-choice instruments, they provide an accurate picture of their strengths and weaknesses in a number of important areas.

The *Competency Index* (CI) measures the strength of 17 basic work competencies. By endorsing behavioral statements, candidates can generate a profile of strengths and weaknesses in the areas of Motivation, Work Approach, Interpersonal Style and Decision-Making. The CI is designed to tap dimensions of behavior relevant across the employment spectrum. CI dimensions appear in Appendix 1.

The *Emotional Intelligence Index* (EI) measures 16 dimensions of awareness, resilience, personal and interpersonal behavior associated with professional success and influence. It conforms closely to the body of literature on Emotional Intelligence and adds two dimensions measuring resilience. Selected scores on the EI also provide corroboration for LI and CI scores. EI dimensions appear in Appendix 2.

The *Leadership Index* (LI) measures 17 dimensions of leadership and management behavior. Four dimensions tap into decision making approach, seven address styles of influence and impact, and six deal with management practices and the balance between driving results and offering compassion. The LI is a valid and reliable predictor of the capacity to lead through influence or direct authority regardless of a person's experience or position in a hierarchy. LI dimensions appear in Appendix 3.



Using all three indexes provides a picture of an individual's strengths and weaknesses in the three areas separately – work competency, leadership and emotional intelligence – and also offers a composite that reveals contrasts and patterns of behavior associated with effectiveness and fit for given positions. Validation studies have also shown strong interrelationships that illuminate the factors that underlie observed behavior and help us to identify how to increase the presence and strength of desired behaviors in the coaching relationship.

Participants

Participants for the study were selected in three ways:

We gathered archival data going back as far as five years on 82 women. These women had performed extremely well on their assessments, often well enough to be remembered after several years. Whenever possible, we spoke with their hiring managers to learn that they had also been successful in the leadership positions for which they had been assessed.

We tested 37 women from client companies who were recommended as strong leaders by company executives, general managers and HR directors.

We interviewed 20 high level female leaders and business owners about their own ability to rise to the top of their companies or operate successful ventures. We also sought their opinions about the barriers they perceived and the support their companies provided to encourage female leaders' development.



In all, test data from 119 women were included in the study. Each of the newly-tested participants took PRADCO's *Competency Index*, *Emotional Intelligence Index* and *Leadership Index*. Most of the cases pulled from company archives contained scores for the same indexes, although some data were missing, owing to the more recent publication of the *Emotional Intelligence Index*.

Table 1 displays the average percentile scores for the total group of female leaders; dimensions in bold indicate the areas in which the group scored above average (65th percentile or above).

Table 1. Critical Competencies of Female Leaders

CRITICAL COMPETENCIES OF FEMALE LEADERS OCTOBER, 2010					
Competency Index		Emotional Intelligence Index		Leadership Index	
Dimension	N=113	Dimension	N=108	Dimension	N=119
Service	41	Emotional Awareness	77	Strategic	71
Ambition	65	Interpersonal Awareness	64	Innovative	64
Improvement	47	Organizational Awareness	69	Decisive	65
Loyalty	52	Optimism	58	Participative	62
Results	56	Confidence	52	Presence	65
Initiative	66	Even-Tempered	45	Communicative	58
Quality	55	Building Trust	46	Persuasive	64
Flexibility	77	Proactive	50	Motivating	53
Attitude	72	Goal-Driven	55	Dominant	54
Assertiveness	73	Empathy	76	Cooperative	57
Composure	54	Inspiring Others	63	Versatile	48
Teamwork	50	Influencing People	55	Delegation	68
Communicative	70	Leading Change	54	Structure	50
Versatility	55	Promoting Teamwork	49	Follow-up	39
Integrity	59	Developing Others	67	Coaching	62
Resourceful	73	Relating to Others	52	Driving Results	61
Judgment	74			Compassion	68

Bold Scores=Critical Competencies Demonstrated by High-Performing Leaders (average scores 65th percentile or above)

High scores on PRADCO indexes reflect a participant's tendency to actively endorse certain behaviors. Table 1 displays the averages of these high scores for each index. On the *Competency Index*, successful leaders scored high on the dimensions of Ambition, Initiative and Flexibility, indicating a desire for broader responsibilities and an active, independent approach to achieving career objectives. There are also strong indications of intelligence, effective problem-solving and business judgment, and the communication skills to share ideas and keep others apprised of changes and other information relevant to their jobs.

On the *Emotional Intelligence Index*, leaders scored high on Emotional and Organizational Awareness. These women possess self-insight and an ability to manage their emotional reactions to the frustrations of their jobs and careers. Regardless of how they might feel, they understand that their reactions need to be managed and measured so they are appropriate to the situation and the judgments of the people around them. These women also devote time to developing people and showing empathy when appropriate.

The *Leadership Index* scores on the Strategic and Decisive dimensions indicate a broad perspective to problem-solving and a willingness to quickly resolve difficult issues even if information and certainty are limited. A high Decisive score correlates with the strong showing on Presence, a dimension measuring the ability to lead and garner the attention and credibility to take charge when necessary. High scores on Delegation and Compassion imply a people-oriented approach to getting the work accomplished by supporting direct reports, having good relationships with them and allowing them some latitude in how they get their jobs done.

One of the drawbacks in using forced-choice instruments with large populations (as opposed to with individuals) is the tendency for averages to migrate toward the mean as the sample size grows. Because of this, we explored and experimented with smaller slices of the data. We identified two leadership levels, executive and middle management, 18 industry groups and 11 job functions represented by our participants. Although some of these categories had too few members for a meaningful analysis, several proved fruitful.

Comparison of Executive and Middle Management Leaders

One set of comparisons investigated the differences between leaders at a middle management level and those with executive positions. Table 2 displays the average scores on the CI, EI and LI for these two groups of female leaders. Particular focus is placed on where a group scored 65 or higher and significantly higher than the comparison group.

Table 2. Critical Competencies of Female Executives and Middle Managers

CRITICAL COMPETENCIES OF FEMALE EXECUTIVES AND MIDDLE MANAGERS OCTOBER, 2010								
Competency Index			Emotional Intelligence Index			Leadership Index		
	EX	MM		EX	MM		EX	MM
Dimension	N=41	N=23	Dimension	N=41	N=21	Dimension	N=43	N=26
Service	41	34	Emotional Awareness	82	72	Strategic	80	71
Ambition	65	65	Interpersonal Awareness	57	49	Innovative	64	64
Improvement	57	47	Organizational Awareness	69	69	Decisive	65	75
Loyalty	52	52	Optimism	65	50	Participative	62	70
Results	56	56	Confidence	52	52	Presence	65	56
Initiative	66	66	Even-Tempered	37	45	Communicative	58	58
Quality	55	55	Building Trust	53	61	Persuasive	55	64
Flexibility	56	84	Proactive	41	66	Motivating	62	43
Attitude	62	72	Goal-Driven	48	69	Dominant	64	54
Assertiveness	73	73	Empathy	71	76	Cooperative	57	65
Composure	64	54	Inspiring Others	71	46	Versatile	48	48
Teamwork	60	50	Influencing People	62	48	Delegation	68	60
Communicative	70	60	Leading Change	54	54	Structure	50	59
Versatility	55	55	Promoting Teamwork	49	57	Follow-up	39	48
Integrity	59	69	Developing Others	67	60	Coaching	74	62
Resourceful	73	73	Relating to Others	52	45	Driving Results	70	61
Judgment	74	74				Compassion	60	68

EX = Female Executives

MM = Female Middle Managers

Green indicates Executive Group scored higher than Middle Management Group

Blue indicates Middle Management scored higher than Executive Group

The CI scores for Executive and Middle Management women are quite similar, as they are both high on the dimensions of Ambition, Initiative, Assertiveness, Resourceful and Judgment. There are a number of subtle differences between the two groups, and the Middle Managers seem to be considerably more flexible than the Executives.

Executive women show EI scores indicating that they draw on their emotions to portray a positive, inspiring style. Middle Management women, on the other hand, show a stronger focus on work-related behaviors like being proactive and working to achieve goals. Both groups do well on most of the awareness dimensions and they also display empathy for others.

The LI suggests that Middle Management women focus more on decision-making than other aspects of the role. They are also quite participative, cooperative and compassionate in relationships with their subordinates. Executives display a more dynamic presence in their leadership roles, and they are highly strategic as a group. Finally, Executive women show more behaviors around driving results and empowering their teams through delegation and coaching for performance improvement.

Overall, there are some meaningful differences between women at different levels of leadership. Middle managers are stronger on individual work qualities, and they score high on measures of collaboration and cooperation. Executives demonstrate more leadership qualities; they get things done through others, coach people and emphasize accountability. Clearly, for women to get to the executive suite, they need to make the switch from being individual contributors and managers to become effective leaders of people.

Female Manufacturing Leaders

Finally, there were sufficiently large numbers of female managers, directors and vice presidents in Manufacturing to identify some areas where these leaders stand out.

Table 3 displays the competencies found in a group of women in manufacturing.

Table 3. Comparison of Manufacturing Leaders with Total Group of Female Leaders

COMPARISON OF FEMALE MANUFACTURING LEADERS WITH TOTAL GROUP OF FEMALE LEADERS OCTOBER, 2010								
Competency Index			Emotional Intelligence Index			Leadership Index		
	Mfg	T		Mfg	T		Mfg	T
Dimension	N=40	N=113	Dimension	N=39	N=108	Dimension	N=42	N=119
Service	34	41	Emotional Awareness	66	77	Strategic	71	71
Ambition	73	65	Interpersonal Awareness	57	64	Innovative	94	64
Improvement	36	47	Organizational Awareness	69	69	Decisive	65	65
Loyalty	61	52	Optimism	50	58	Participative	70	62
Results	56	56	Confidence	52	52	Presence	65	65
Initiative	66	66	Even-Tempered	31	45	Communicative	70	58
Quality	55	55	Building Trust	53	46	Persuasive	55	64
Flexibility	77	77	Proactive	50	50	Motivating	53	53
Attitude	62	72	Goal-Driven	62	55	Dominant	54	54
Assertiveness	73	73	Empathy	76	76	Cooperative	57	57
Composure	54	54	Inspiring Others	63	63	Versatile	48	48
Teamwork	50	50	Influencing People	48	55	Delegation	75	68
Communicative	70	70	Leading Change	54	54	Structure	50	50
Versatility	55	55	Promoting Teamwork	57	49	Follow-up	39	39
Integrity	69	59	Developing Others	73	67	Coaching	62	62
Resourceful	62	73	Relating to Others	39	52	Driving Results	61	61
Judgment	74	74				Compassion	60	68

Bold Dimensions = Areas Where Manufacturing Females Scored Higher Than Total Sample (65th Percentile)

Mfg = Female Leaders in Manufacturing

T = Total Group of Female Leaders

These female manufacturing leaders are similar to the total group of female leaders in the basic work competencies they emphasize, although they are more ambitious and their integrity is somewhat higher. There are also few differences in the dimensions of Emotional Intelligence they emphasize. But in their leadership approach, as reflected in their LI results, they achieved high scores in every LI dimension that deals with thinking, problem-solving and decision-making. They see themselves as highly innovative and more open to incorporating other people's suggestions into their solutions. They are also more inclined to communicate and listen attentively when others are speaking. Clearly, a stronger set of leadership behaviors is critical for women to succeed in a manufacturing environment.

Conclusion

Overall, female leaders have a number of strong qualities that contribute to their career success. In successive papers, we will share differences between female leaders in different industrial groupings as well as functional specialties – for example: how are human resources managers different or similar to directors of finance? And it probably won't be too surprising that we elected to evaluate a matched sample of male leaders for the sake of comparison. Over time we will continue to add to all these groups as we identify strong female leaders in the years ahead.

Finally, we come back to the primary issue...that women are often underrepresented in high-potential development programs. The results from this study indicate that there are specific areas that women can be focusing on in their work lives to gain visibility and opportunities for development and advancement. If capable individual contributors and line managers are given the opportunity to do some self-assessment and self-reflection, they can become more effective in their current roles and position themselves for higher-level roles.

Call To Action

If you are an HR or Line Manager responsible for the development of leaders in your company, make an extra effort to identify some women who may have interest in and the potential to advance. Engage them in conversation to see what their aspirations are in terms of career development and advancement. If they have the interest, get them involved in a development program so they can do some self-assessment and determine what they can do to earn opportunities for themselves in the future.

If you are a woman and feel you can do more, take some proactive steps to manage your career. Talk to your boss or your HR leader about getting involved in a development program so you can get some insight into your strengths and weaknesses. Also, make your wishes known and ask for a more visible role or a project to lead. Earning a chance to shine can be achieved by developing your skills and being more vocal about what else you can do for your organization.

Call PRADCO to learn how we can help develop the leaders in your organization.

Appendix 1

THE COMPETENCY INDEX

MOTIVATING FACTORS

SERVICE:	Listening to people and responding to their needs.
AMBITION:	Wanting more responsibility and seeking advancement opportunities.
IMPROVEMENT:	Seeking training and taking steps to develop new skills.
LOYALTY:	Being committed to and supporting the company.

WORK APPROACH

RESULTS:	Meeting commitments and achieving goals.
INITIATIVE:	Being a self-starter and taking action without having to be told.
QUALITY:	Working with precision and accuracy.
FLEXIBILITY:	Adjusting to change and adapting to different circumstances.

INTERPERSONAL

ATTITUDE:	Having a positive disposition toward superiors.
ASSERTIVENESS:	Speaking up and sharing opinions with others.
COMPOSURE:	Maintaining self-control in all situations.
TEAMWORK:	Being cooperative and supportive when others need help.
COMMUNICATIVE:	Expressing ideas clearly and listening attentively.
VERSATILE:	Adapting to and going along with other people.

DECISION-MAKING

INTEGRITY:	Being forthright, honest and demonstrating ethical standards.
RESOURCEFUL:	Finding solutions and new ways to handle problems.
JUDGMENT:	Analyzing situations effectively and making sound decisions.

Appendix 2

EMOTIONAL INTELLIGENCE INDEX

AWARENESS FACTORS

EMOTIONAL:	Recognizing and understanding one's own feelings.
INTERPERSONAL:	Perceiving needs and feelings of others.
ORGANIZATIONAL:	Identifying interpersonal and group dynamics.

RESILIENCE FACTORS

OPTIMISM:	Having an expectation that things will turn out well.
CONFIDENCE:	Believing one can master life's challenges.

PERSONAL FACTORS

EVEN-TEMPERED:	Maintaining emotions and composure in all situations.
BUILDING TRUST:	Inspiring trust and credibility with others.
PROACTIVE:	Taking appropriate action without being told.
GOAL-DRIVEN:	Setting and achieving challenging goals.

RELATIONSHIP FACTORS

EMPATHY:	Recognizing and responding to emotions in others.
INSPIRING OTHERS:	Demonstrating enthusiasm to improve performance.
INFLUENCING PEOPLE:	Persuading others to agree or take action.
LEADING CHANGE:	Instigating innovative and constructive change.
PROMOTING TEAMWORK:	Encouraging and supporting team efforts.
DEVELOPING OTHERS:	Spending time to help people develop their careers.
RELATING TO OTHERS:	Building and maintaining positive relationships.

Appendix 3

LEADERSHIP INDEX

DECISION-MAKING

STRATEGIC:	Planning and anticipating future implications, thinking broadly.
INNOVATIVE:	Being creative, taking calculated risks, brainstorming.
DECISIVE:	Thinking independently, being proactive and intuitive.
PARTICIPATIVE:	Being consultative and getting input to arrive at consensus.

INFLUENCE

PRESENCE:	Having a dynamic style and a strong impact.
COMMUNICATIVE:	Expressing ideas clearly and listening attentively.
PERSUASIVE:	Influencing people and overcoming objections in a convincing fashion.
MOTIVATING:	Stimulating people to higher levels of performance.
DOMINANT:	Being forceful and assertive when interacting with others.
COOPERATIVE:	Being accommodating and helpful to others.
VERSATILE:	Adapting to and going along with other people.

MANAGEMENT

DELEGATION:	Working through others and sharing responsibility.
STRUCTURE:	Providing guidelines and procedures to enhance consistency.
FOLLOW-UP:	Monitoring activities and keeping track of people's progress.
COACHING:	Giving feedback and helping people do their jobs better.
DRIVING RESULTS:	Achieving business objectives through people.
COMPASSION:	Being supportive and sensitive to the needs of people.

Acknowledgements

PRADCO (Personnel Research and Development Corporation) has delivered visionary, comprehensive methods for evaluating and developing success formulas for HR departments, leadership teams, and executives since 1955. PRADCO is intensely committed to providing the highest quality products and services that will improve organizational and employee performance through research, evaluation and development.

High potential leaders, as well as more seasoned individuals, find themselves faced with challenging performance expectations. They can struggle to balance their own impact with the importance of empowering teams, developing talent and inspiring loyalty. At PRADCO, we focus on the needs of leaders at all levels and reach out to guide and assist those who are ready for more by offering:

- Individual career guidance
- 360° Assessment, Feedback and Coaching
- Assistance assessing team performance and developmental needs
- Identification of candidates who fit best into the organization's culture
- Identification of successors and other internal candidates whose promotion would bring the greatest value to an organization

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