

Experiences of Women Leaders in México

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Abstract

This qualitative study sought to understand better the experiences of women leaders in México, a predominantly male-dominated culture. Seven women leaders were interviewed. They shared personal experiences, reflections, feelings, ideas, and actions related to their leadership positions in corporate, political, academic, and non-profit organizations. Phenomenology was used because the objective of the study was to develop a deeper understanding. I conducted a thematic analysis of the transcribed interviews to discover commonalities among the experiences of the participants. Preliminary themes emerged. I made follow-up contacts with the participants to verify the findings, and themes were revised and accepted.

The analysis revealed six themes: preparation, innate characteristics, move under principles and ethical values, the job itself is very important, find a balance between personal and professional time as a goal, and benefits of the leadership position. Five subthemes emerged: academic, have an impact in social responsibility activities, like challenges and being competitive, independence, and recognition.

Key words: México, women, leaders

Introduction

Furst and Reeves (2008) affirmed that management scholars attribute the failure of women to reach the executive suite to a number of causes, such as stereotypical gender roles, organizational level factors, and structural constraints. Despite these factors, there are women leaders whose experiences can help researchers examine the factors associated with their success and the ways they have achieved top leadership positions in México, a predominantly male-dominated culture (Hernandez & Riva, 1995); México is a country where machismo is prevalent (Raphael, 2014).

My Personal Interest in the Topic

I was interested in exploring the experiences of women in top level positions in México for several reasons. First, I am a woman who has experienced gender discrimination. Second, women represent more than half of the population in México and more women are becoming working women. Third, I consider leadership scholars and practitioners should integrate feminist voices to address the contradictions and challenges women face in the workplace (Bierema, Tisdell, Johnson-Bailey, & Gedro, 2002). Finally, according to Fontaine in his interview in *Business Week* (2010), “the best companies in terms of performance will be those that truly embrace diversity [by] hiring, developing, and promoting women to key leadership roles” (p. 8).

Purpose of the Study

The purpose of this study was to gain a better understanding of what is it like to be a woman leader in México, a predominantly male-dominated culture; México a country where machismo is prevalent (Hernández & Riva, 1995; Raphael, 2014).

Literature Review

This section discusses findings from the literature review that occurred before finalizing the topic.

Women Becoming Working Women and Leaders

During the last 50 years, there has been a shift from being a housewife and a mother to being a working woman (Collins, 2009). Some working women have also chosen to be working wives and working mothers. This phenomenon has different causes. Among the internal causes are that more women are pursuing college degrees, more women are supporting their families, and more women want different ways to achieve self-actualization. The most important external cause has been because of the huge economic crisis faced during the last century.

According to Iturbe and Talan (2006), one of the major reasons of the noticeable increase of Mexican women in the job market is due to the migration of Mexican men to the U.S. Iturbe and Talan stressed that women are increasingly the economic support for their homes in most of the big cities in México, whether they are the sole income for their families or shared income responsibilities with their husbands.

However, today we find more commonalities. México and the U.S., such as women comprise more than half of the working force in both countries, but are still under-represented in the top executive positions; there are still differences in the level of salaries that women earn compared to men; and the work/family conflict has not eased for women (Berman & Maerker, 2000; Eagly & Carli, 2007; Vargas, 2007).

Still, there are some circumstances and factors that are not permitting women to be fully treated as equally as men in the workplace, for example, culture. Cultures differ in

how strongly they value traditional gender role distinctions and cultural pressures reinforce traditional gender roles (Stephenson, 2010; Verderber & Verderber, 2007). Reinforcing the importance of culture, Iturbe and Talan (2006) concluded that the most relevant finding in a study they conducted in México is that culture limits the acceptance of the abilities of women to succeed in the workplace due to machismo. Machismo is a behavior that is transmitted in home, schools, and communities, to both males and females; the macho male does not like women to be more successful than men, and deliberately tries to minimize and criticize the contributions of women in the workplace (Hernández & Riva, 1995; Iturbe & Talan, 2006, Raphael, 2014).

On the other hand, the research firm Catalyst conducted a study in the U.S. in 2005 there was a common perception among the male executives surveyed: women take care while male take charge.

García-Retamero and López-Zafra (2006) agreed that the characteristics associated with leadership roles have been related more to men than to women in a cross-cultural comparison they made in German and in Spain. Confirming these characteristics, Furst and Reeves (2008) argued that women have more steady progress in ascending the managerial ranks in American corporations during the last 20-30 years, but they also recognized that women continue to lag behind in advancement to top management. Furst and Reeves credited the stereotypical gender roles men and women adopt to be socially accepted. If we transfer these roles to the work setting, men are expected to be leaders and women are expected to be followers.

In addition to these preconceived ideas that associate leadership with men, Valenziano (2008) stated that over half of the workplace in the U.S. is comprised of

women, and, despite exceptional gains in pay, promotion, and benefits, there is still a tremendous lack of workforce equality.

Resilient women who reach the top in the U.S. institutions are those women who successfully overcome the barriers and obstacles to break the glass ceiling; and most of the time, women are more competent and higher skilled than men. According to Eagly and Carli (2003), while there are doubts about women's leadership ability, women in leadership positions are generally viewed as more competent than men in the U.S. However, Eagly and Carli concluded that women may also be disadvantaged in those contexts where men are the majority on in male-dominated environments, and women who succeed in climbing to the top are the survivors of discriminatory processes, and therefore, tend to be more competent.

Haslam and Ryan (2008) recognized that women not only are breaking the so-called glass ceiling, but also, when women finally climb to the top of the corporate ladder, they have to survive; and this is not easy. Haslam and Ryan acknowledged that there is a phenomenon that they called the glass cliff because women's leadership positions are relatively risky and precarious as they are more likely to involve management of organizational areas that are in crisis.

Methodology and Methods

Selecting the appropriate research methodology depends on identifying the research question and the purpose of the study (Creswell, 2002). The purpose of the study and the research question I was interested in conducting suggested the use of phenomenology as the methodology; therefore, this study used qualitative methods (Bryman, 1984, Creswell, 2002; Lincoln & Guba, 1985). Merriam (2009) stated that researchers who conduct

qualitative studies “are interested in how people interpret their experiences, how they construct their worlds, what meaning they attribute to their experiences” (p. 14).

Hermeneutic Phenomenology

The interpretive methodology that will be used is hermeneutic phenomenology. Phenomenology becomes hermeneutical when its method is taken to be interpretative rather than purely descriptive (van Manen, 2001). Van Manen stated that words build concepts, insights, and ways of thinking out of lived experiences to bring understanding; therefore, he concluded that every form of human awareness is interpretive.

Hermeneutic phenomenology offers the opportunity to be deep, insightful, aware, sensitive to language, and open to experience. It is a methodology that is both descriptive and interpretative because it claims that phenomena are always interpreted and meaningful (van Manen, 2001). This study used hermeneutic phenomenology to understand the lived experiences of women leaders in México, through interpretation of language in text. The text comprised the transcripts of the interviews with participants. This approach gave me a better understanding of the lived experiences of Mexican women leaders through their words and voices.

I was, as the researcher, the primary instrument of data collection. “The human instrument builds upon his or her tacit knowledge, and uses methods that are appropriate to humanly implemented inquiry: interviews, observations, document analysis, unobtrusive clues, and the like” (Lincoln & Guba, 1985, p. 187).

I conducted the interviews of the participants in person who shared their experiences as leaders. My desire was to hear the leaders’ own voices as they described their journeys and reflected on their own beliefs and interpretations (Madsen, 2008).

Research Participants

I recruited participants based on convenience. Thus, I interviewed Mexican women leaders from different types of organizations, including corporate, non-profit, political, and academic; their ages ranged from 28 to 57, and they are single, married, or divorced. All of them are from middle and middle-high socioeconomic status. All of them attended private elementary, middle, and high school, and six of them at least attended three years at an all-girls Catholic school. Five of the interviewees attended private universities, and the other two attended the largest public university in México.

Interviews

To conduct my research, I used in-depth face-to-face interviews. Interviews are a method that is consistent with hermeneutic phenomenology. I recorded each interview with the participants' permission and personally transcribed them verbatim later. I took field notes, where applicable, both during and after each interview, focusing primarily on non-verbal behavior (Gibson, 2008).

Hermeneutic phenomenology uses only unstructured interviews to ensure that responses are not influenced by the researcher's biases and preconceptions that might arise in structured interviews through the choice of questions. Thus, I posed only one question: Could you please share your experience of being a woman leader in México a predominantly male dominated culture?

Creating and Verifying Transcripts

Six interviews were recorded, with permission; one was not recorded, upon request of the interviewee, resulting in the need for detailed handwritten notes. I transcribed the tapes verbatim into written documents, doing the same, so far as possible, with the

handwritten notes. I asked each participant to review the transcription of her interview by e-mail, and I asked her to make any additions or changes if she wanted to, in order to assure the accuracy of the interview. All of the participants agreed with the transcripts.

Analyzing Transcripts

The interviews were then subjected to hermeneutical phenomenological reflection to allow themes to emerge. I read the texts of the transcripts twice completely. I was looking for the material that was at the center of the experience (Tesch, 1987). I shared those tentative themes with the participants via e-mail. All of them agreed on the six themes that emerged, four of them with sub-themes.

The next phase in working with the interviews was the process of working with the transcripts. As referenced by van Manen (1990), a major part of the analysis of phenomenological research is in the writing and rewriting.

RESULTS: SIX THEMES

Preparation

Preparation is critical for all of the participants. All of the women interviewed are college educated, speak at least two languages (Spanish and English), and two are fluent in a third language (French or Italian). Four of the participants have a master's degree and the other three have studied at least one certificate in the field in which they work. All continued studying while working and three have taught in prestigious private universities in México. Five studied overseas or traveled for business around the world. The women in this study and the literature reported that preparation is crucial in becoming leaders (Madsen, 2008, Mendez-Morse, 2004).

Academic.

These seven women were privileged; they comprised the 7% of Mexican women who are college educated, and the 0.5% who have a post-graduate education. All attended private schools in elementary, middle, and high school. Five attended private universities, and the other two attended the largest public university in México. Two completed their master's degrees overseas; one has two masters' degrees, one from the U.S. and the other from Scotland.

Four graduated cum laude from college, and six were honor roll students during their elementary and secondary studies.

Innate Characteristics

The seven women are self-aware about who they are and what they want. They are sure of themselves and particularly self-reflective. All stated that discipline, dedication, and hard work were key factors in preparing for their leadership roles. These women are also aware of their intelligence, capabilities, and skills (Mendez-Morse, 2004).

Two realized that their physical appearance has helped them to have a specific social weight wherever they performed (Flanz, 2011). Finally, all of these women are self-confident.

Move under Principles and Ethical Values

All of the participants highlighted their commitment to ethical values and principles, and described themselves as responsible, honest, respectful, and uncorrupted women.

Desire to Impact through Social Responsibility Activities.

The participants were aware of the needs of the Mexican society and the impact they

can have on it through their positions. The seven women leaders were sensitive to the needs of the population (Ortiz-Ortega, 2009).

The Job Itself Is Very Important

Supporting Sherman and Rivers-Wrushen (2009), the seven participants “all spoke with passion and enthusiasm about their work as leaders and described themselves as lifelong learners” (p. 183).

They Like Challenges and Being Competitive

Some of these leaders realized that they were competitive from a very early age. Even though their competitiveness came from different venues, one developed specific skills to defeat her older brother; another had an inner impulse that told her that she had to excel always, and another worked hard to meet her family’s expectations. Four leaders realized that they had to work twice as much to demonstrate that they were capable of performing in a successful way.

To Find a Balance between Personal and Professional Time as a Goal

Regardless of their marital status, all agreed in the importance of living a balanced life. All recognized that their jobs were very demanding, with lots of responsibility, but they needed to keep a healthy balance between their jobs and their personal life.

Benefits that the Leadership Position Give to Them

All of the women, in one way or another, believed that being a leader has let them enjoy different benefits, such as being heard, meeting important people, traveling to different places, performing in different social settings, having social mobility, or having the opportunity to help others. But the greatest benefits, they acknowledged, were independence and recognition.

Reflections

I have been a higher education professor for 30 years; I have also witnessed the changes in Mexican women's conditions in the last 40 years and the ways women have gained access and excelled in different areas in México (Ortiz-Ortega, 2009).

It was fascinating to conduct this study, I realized that the participants were willing to share their stories, and, particularly for two of them, it represented a reflective exercise.

It meant a great deal to me to hear how decisively these women talked about moving under principles and ethical values, and to confirm this by seeing how these women were involved and committed to different social responsibility activities.

These women were motivated by the job itself, but for some of them the job represented all of their lives.

Two of the women decided to quit their successful corporate leadership jobs for motherhood but did not quit working; both found self-employment to be an answer (Frohlich & Peters, 2007; van Auken & Werbel, 2006) to their need of achieving both career and maternal goals (Warner, Winter, & Breshears, 2005). Only two of the participants openly talked about the great satisfactions that their high income has given them. Others talked about serving people.

I never imagined that independence was such an important matter for these women leaders, and the need for recognition was preeminent for at least four of them (Mendez-Morse, 2004).

My final personal reflection is that I wanted to conduct this study in the hope that the words of these Mexican women leaders who participated in it might create space and inspire others in tracing their paths to becoming leaders. I realized that I belong to the

generation that paved the path for the future generations of women that want to become leaders in México. However, the young women leaders that participated in this study perceived that their professional development has been easier because of the effort that women leaders in my generation made and they do not struggle as much as I did.

For this study, I interviewed seven Mexican women who have broken the glass ceiling and who have become leaders in these arenas, with the hopes of understanding their experiences, of knowing their challenges and the threats that they had to face, and of knowing the important decisions that they had to make, not only professionally, but also in their personal lives, in order to motivate and inspire future generations of Mexican women

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