

# **Coaching Women in Leadership or Coaching Women Leaders?**

## **Understanding the importance of Gender and Professional Identity Formation in Executive Coaching for Senior Women**

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**Abstract:**

This study considers the factors involved in executive coaching that helped senior women to thrive. In analysis that applied the principles of constructivist grounded theory, the study explored the unique experiences of individual senior women in their executive coaching engagements and supports recent discourse and evidence suggesting a need for a gender perspective in coaching senior women (Leimon, Moscovici and Goodier 2011, Peltier 2010, Vinnecombe and Singh 2003). Participant experiences of executive coaching highlighted the construction of a professional identity as a leader as a central theme. As a result, the study builds on the recent discourse and research linking professional identity construction to leader development (DeRue, Ashford, Cotton 2009, Ibarra, Snook and Ramo 2008, Gardner and Avolio 2005, Lord and Brown 2005). The findings suggest the opportunity to explicitly tailor aspects of executive coaching of senior women to the construction of their professional leadership identity. Based on these observations the study suggests a conceptual framework that positions professional identity construction as a developmental continuum and outlines the contributing factors and derailers for female managers in this process. This developmental framework applies a gender perspective to professional identity formation (Sealy and Singh 2010) and captures the core themes identified by participants. The suggested framework may serve as a potential guide for executive coach practitioners and organisations to assist them in addressing and optimising the development needs of their senior women.

## **Purpose and Relevance to Coaching**

This study aims to contribute to the limited evidence base of executive coaching that is specifically designed for women in organisations (Leimon et al 2011, Benavides 2011). Leaders in executive coaching recognise the need for evidence based findings in order to continue to evolve coaching practice (Stober 2005) and studies have highlighted that the research base is growing (Grant 2009, Spence and Oades 2011). A review of the scholarly papers from the behavioural science literature conducted by Grant (2009) revealed 518 published papers related to executive coaching, of which seven related to executive coaching for women in organisations. The lack of research focused on executive coaching for women may in part be a reflection of the emerging nature of executive coaching and coaching psychology more generally (Kauffman and Coutu 2009, Grant and Cavanagh 2007). In recent years these papers have been complemented by several PhD dissertations (Joy 2008, Galuk 2009, Benavides 2011) and research (Leimon et al 2011) specifically focused on exploring executive coaching for women in organisations which may signal a building of momentum for research in this area.

The current research on women and executive coaching is limited and Maltbia (2005) notes that this may also indicate a gap in executive coaching practice. A gender neutral approach to coaching women leaders is an accepted practice within executive coaching and many other leadership development programs (Stead and Elliott 2009) despite growing discourse that women may benefit from specifically tailored coaching approaches (Peltier 2010, Passmore et al 2009). A rationale for a more tailored approach is highlighted in research conducted by Leimon et al (2011 p1):

“Initially we thought that coaching of women in business had to be gender neutral at the risk of diminishing its focus and its effectiveness. However, the more we coached senior women, the more we realised that the same [gender] specific themes kept coming back”.

This study extends scholarship in this area by exploring ways in which executive coaching can be tailored to meet the needs of women leaders. Through the use of a constructivist ground theory (CGT) approach, this study draws on the unique experiences of the female

participants and reveals that the underlying process of professional identity construction was a core category across their executive coaching experiences. The concept of developing a professional leadership identity applies to men and women in the workplace (Dutton, Roberts and Bednar 2010) however the gender implications for senior women working in predominantly male dominated organisations highlights the potential challenges in achieving a positive leader identity (Ibarra and Petriglieri 2007). Salient themes emerging from the data included:

- i) the importance of role models;
- ii) the self efficacy of participants (their confidence in the leadership domain);
- iii) motivation shifts for participants in senior management;
- iv) the ability of participants to achieve authenticity (being true to their sense of self) in their roles.

The emergence of professional identity as a core category suggests that executive coaches (and organisations) need to explicitly recognise the developmental opportunity of professional identity construction and gender, in order for executive coaching (and other development interventions) to be optimised for senior women. This perspective supports the work of recent researchers (DeRue, Ashford and Cotton 2009, Ibarra, Snook and Ramo 2008) who suggest an identity based approach to leader development and provides further insight into how to assist women to develop or finesse a professional identity that allows them to thrive in their leadership role. Given the under representation of women in senior management and board level positions in Australia (and internationally), such an approach seems worthy of investigation.

## **Literature Review**

### *Background*

In Australia, women occupy an average of 8% of executive management roles in the two hundred largest, Australian Securities Exchange (ASX) listed companies and the power imbalance between men and women in organisations remains prevalent (Equal Opportunity for Women Agency 2010). This is a trend seen in other developed countries including the USA, Canada and United Kingdom however Australia's demographic imbalance is particularly high (EOWA 2010). Over 50% of Australia's largest two hundred companies have no females on their Board of Directors. This compares poorly with countries like the United Kingdom and the United States where 88% and 76% (respectively) of their top companies have women on their Boards (EOWA 2008). This research highlights that senior roles are still largely the domain of men and it is within these demographically skewed (Eagly 2005) organisations that women work.

As a result of a growing awareness into the organisational and economic benefits surrounding advancing more women to senior leadership roles, gender diversity and organisational inclusiveness has become a focus of both public and private institutions in Australia and internationally (McKinsey 2012). Of 235 companies surveyed internationally by McKinsey, improving gender diversity was among the top ten priorities for more than half of these (McKinsey 2012). In Australia this has included the inaugural introduction of mandatory diversity reporting requirements for all publicly listed companies on the Australian Securities Exchange (EOWA 2010). As commentators have noted, for the first time organisations have been asked to report on and justify their gender diversity statistics making this a measure of organisational performance that is transparent to all (Ernst & Young 2011). The uptake of voluntary performance targets (for women in senior roles) has also been adopted by some of Australia's largest companies in line with international trends (Catalyst 2010). One of Australia's largest banks, the Commonwealth Bank, has recently won the global Catalyst award for their gender diversity initiatives which resulted in almost 45% of leadership roles within the bank being held by women (Catalyst 2012).

At the global level, organisations have begun to recognise that providing women with equal access to leadership opportunities and ensuring the effective development of their leadership potential, is critical to this goal of gender diversity being realised (Ely and Rhode 2008).

Initiatives to encourage women and increase gender diversity include: inclusiveness strategies (education seminars, workshops); revised business metrics highlighting comparative gender retention, salary and promotion statistics; specialised workplace training and development; formal networking and mentoring programs; speciality conferences and a range of organisational and industry specific forums (Wittenberg-Cox and Maitland 2008).

Executive coaching is a person-centred approach to developing one's potential at work (Underhill, McAnnally and Koriath 2007), which many organisations have applied predominantly in a leadership development capacity (Elliott 2005). Killberg (2000 p.67) defines executive coaching as:

“a helping relationship formed between a client who has managerial authority and responsibility in an organisation and a consultant who uses a wide variety of behavioural techniques and methods to assist the client to achieve a mutually defined set of goals to improve his or her professional performance and personal satisfaction and consequently to improve the effectiveness of the client's organisation within a formally defined coaching agreement”.

A review of the limited evidence base into the application of executive coaching specifically for women, as mentioned above, highlights a variety of purposes. These include: executive coaching for improving women's political skills (Perrewé and Nelson 2004); for maternity leave to support the ongoing retention of professional women (Joy 2008); executive coaching for women in multinational organisations (Burrus 2009); and executive coaching for women executives managing global roles and cultural barriers (Adler et al 2009, Passmore et al 2009). More generally, studies also highlight the application of executive coaching to enhance a variety of organisational performance indicators of senior women (Benavides 2011, Galuk 2009, Starman 2007). These studies have confirmed and supported the role of executive coaching in helping women with various aspects of their performance, satisfaction and wellbeing in organisations (Leimon et al 2011, Benavides 2011, Galuk 2009, Starman 2007). This limited selection of studies highlight the opportunity to build the knowledge base of executive coaching and women in order to help understand and redress the gender imbalance in many organisations.



### *Career Barriers for Women in Organisations*

The implications for many senior women in organisations remain challenging with the behaviour of the male majority setting organisational norms and women seen as sitting outside of this dominant model (Stout-Rostron 2012). Indeed, the seminal work by Kanter (1977) highlighted this challenge with the theory of tokenism which is defined as the occupational consequences for women being restricted from higher-status, more senior roles due to their numeric rarity in the workplace. According to further research the belief that management roles are characterised by typically male traits – the “think manager think male” phenomenon – has been supported in a range of international studies (Schein, Mueller, Lituchy and Liu 1996). Ely and Rhode (2008) argue that this bias has diminished over time as women’s work achievements have grown however the traditional stereotype still remains.

*The role of stereotypes.* These stereotypes refer to a set of generalised mental models of people and objects (Perry et al 1994) that are gradually acquired by individuals over time and powerfully influence behaviour. Research has shown that gender biases are prevalent in organisations (Piterman 2010). Researchers have also shown the implications of gender stereotypes in preventing women from accessing or succeeding in senior roles (Heilman 2001, Eagly and Karau 2002). Gender is defined as the social differences and relations between men and women which are learned, changeable over time and have wide variations both within and between cultures (International Labour Organisation 2009). These relations are affected by many factors such as culture, race, class as well as the geographical, economic and political environment. It is however the unequal power distribution between men and women which characterises any gender system (ILO 2009). Theories such as Heilman’s (1983) “lack of fit” theory, and Eagly and Karau’s (2002) “role congruity theory”, describe the ways in which expectations for women (based on stereotypically female traits of community and nurturing) are misaligned with leadership roles that are generally construed in male terms (highlighting agentic behaviours such as competition and assertiveness). The approaches highlighted that men’s social roles, the culturally shared set of beliefs about how men should behave, are seen to correspond with the domain of leadership whereas women’s social roles do not (Eagly and Karau 2002). According to both Heilman (1983) and Eagly and Karau (2002) this misalignment leads to the prejudice women can face in accessing leadership roles as well as negative evaluations of their performance in a leadership role (Eagly and Karau 2002). There is now a rich range of data which has examined the barriers senior women can face as a result of the skewed gender demographics in many organisations (Eagly and Karau

2002, Eagly 2005, Heilman 2001, Piterman 2008, 2010, Rhode and Kellerman 2007, Ely and Rhode 2008).

*The “glass labyrinth” for women in leadership.* According to the International Labour Organisation (2009) gender issues are the socially constructed expectations of women and their unique needs in terms of their individual roles, responsibilities, opportunities and constraints in the workplace. The literature suggests a range of gender issues exist for women in organisations including a lack of access to formal and informal networks (Piterman 2008), along with both a sense of psychological isolation and tokenism (Eagly and Karau 2002). Other noted career barriers for women include the difficulty in being promoted (Rhode and Kellerman 2007), the double burden of managing work and home (Piterman 2008, Stephens 2004) and the effect of career breaks on career progression (Hewlett and Luce 2005). Another important factor appears to be the prevalence of sex stereotyped roles, whereby leadership roles are typically construed in masculine, agentic terms and support roles in more communal, feminine terms (Eagly 2005). Indeed, Eagly and Carli (2007) point out a double bind of leadership behaviour exists due to gender stereotypes, showing that women may face negative reactions when they are assertive and take charge and yet may be considered a poor leader if they fulfil the gender stereotype of being kind and gentle. Finally, a lack of role models of women in leadership roles, including support from other women has also been cited as a key barrier (Leimon et al 2011). This has led researchers Eagly and Carli (2007) to refer to the “glass labyrinth” – symbolising the range and variety of hidden difficulties women can face when navigating their careers, leading to the progressive decline in women at every stage in organisations.

### *Self Concept in Leadership*

The role of identity in developing leadership expertise has been the subject of recent research and drawn attention to the importance of a leader’s self concept (DeRue, Ashford and Cotton 2009, Ibarra 2008, Lord and Brown 2004, Avolio and Gardner 2005). This perspective construes the self as a system which organises an individual’s interpretation of the world, through a complex structure of affective-cognitive structures (also called schemas) which provide coherence to an individual’s self relevant experiences (Markus and Nurius 1986). These self-schemas are content-specific organisations of knowledge that continuously process internal and external events and make meaning of individual experience (Markus et al 1986). This may include an individual’s self knowledge regarding their physical characteristics,

social roles, personality traits, values and areas of particular interest and skill. The self is seen as dynamic in that different aspects of the self are elicited in different contexts and each identity or self conception has a particular affect attached to it (Lord and Brown 2005, Markus and Nurius 1986). According to Markus and Nurius (1986), self schemas also compose a projection about the future and one's possible selves – images which act as motivational cues and incentives for future behaviour. In this way the self is seen as consisting of a combination of selves that vary across time and context and an individual's professional identity can be seen as an aspect of this internal self (Dutton et al 2010, Lord and Brown 2005).

*Leadership requires both skills and a mindset.* Professional identity is defined as the “attributes, beliefs, values, motives, and experiences in terms of which people define themselves in a professional role” (Ibarra et al 2008 p.4). Identity approaches to leadership highlight that in order for women (and men) to become leaders and to understand who they are as leaders, their leadership role must become a central part of their sense of self or self concept (Lord and Brown 2005). In essence this perspective states that leadership is about who leaders *are* – not just what they do (Ely and Rhode 2008). As such, the emphasis is less on the skills and behaviours that new leaders can adopt (although these too have an important role) and more on the self concept individuals hold for themselves. In linking leadership development to the self and one's professional identity, leadership becomes a way of being and responding to the daily requirements of work (DeRue et al 2009). The approach highlights that leaders who are unable to firmly ground their self identity in the leadership role may be missing a critical requirement for leadership development and effectiveness (Lord and Brown 2005). Similarly researchers (Dutton et al 2010, Ibarra 1999) argued that having a clear and consistent professional identity is fundamental to career success.

*The formation and development of professional identity.* Building on the concept of possible selves, Ibarra (1999) highlighted that people construct their professional identity by experimenting with trial identities, or “provisional selves,” before fully developing their professional identity. This adaptation approach to identity formation (Dutton et al 2010) is reflected in the leader-follower self concept approach suggested by Lord and Brown (2004) which suggests that effective leadership encompasses understanding the influence leaders can have on their follower's self concept. According to Lord and Brown (2004) the formation of identity occurs via an interaction between one's personal attributes, beliefs and values and how they socially construct, or relate to, the social structures that exist within an

organisational environment. It is the outcome of this interaction (i.e. the individual's identity) that will influence how they think, feel and behave at work.

The importance of developing a professional identity to facilitate one's leadership potential has been reinforced by Hall (2002), who highlighted the importance of two metacompetencies – self knowledge (or identity awareness) and one's ability to adapt. Hall (2002) emphasised the importance of identity awareness as a prerequisite for an individual to adapt and realise their potential. Professional identity is developed by individuals over time through a process of feedback (Dutton et al 2010, Hall 2002). This development may take the form of an exploration of multiple or provisional selves, where individuals are experimenting with different aspects of their working identity (Ibarra, 1999). This development may also take the form of self-awareness processes as individuals actively develop their insight into various aspects of their identities over time through a process of feedback (Dutton et al 2010, Hall, 2002). This process of feedback is implicit in the executive coaching process. The ongoing dialogue and feedback loop that characterises executive coaching reiterates the opportunity for identity development (found in careers research for example, Kram 1985) where individuals actively develop their identities through acquiring the ability to process feedback about the self and achieve self-awareness (Dutton et al 2010, Hall, 2002). The process of individual reflection to improve the capacity to manage the growing complexities of their environment is also relevant to an individual's identity construction (Kegan 1994). In an executive coaching engagement, individuals engage in dialogue which is both individual in nature and situational in context, both of which are key components of identity development (DeRue et al 2009, Lord and Brown 2004).

Professional identity encompasses an array of constructs at the individual and social level (Sealy and Singh 2010). Empirical findings suggest that professional identity construction is an ongoing process that unfolds across an entire career and is not a unique concern for those in the early stages of career development (Dutton et al 2010, Gibson 2004). This is an important acknowledgement for women leaders in organisations, as many of these women are typically at their mid or later career stage (Sealy and Singh 2010). This research suggests that facilitating identity development in coaching requires a balanced approach, exploring and bringing awareness to both the individual's inner self identity and their identities relative to the working environment, the social aspect of their identity. This perspective highlights the need for further empirical research that investigates the connections between executive

coaching and gender identity construction, particularly as it relates to senior women (Ibarra 2003, Dobrow and Higgins 2005, Ely and Rhode 2008).

### **Research Questions:**

This study aims to develop greater insight into the experiences of women in leadership positions in large organisations across Australia, and to understand what role executive coaching plays in managing these. The research sought to answer three key questions:

- 1) What are the perceived barriers for women in leadership roles, from the point of view of women managers?
- 2) In what ways was Executive Coaching useful to address these challenges?
- 3) Based on respondent experiences, how can Executive Coaching be tailored to help women leaders thrive?

The first phase of the study involved investigating the central tenets of various qualitative research paradigms in an endeavour to find an approach which best fit the research questions. It was concluded that the principles of a constructivist grounded theory (CGT) approach (Charmaz 2006), was most appropriate as it would facilitate an in-depth understanding of each participant's personal experience of executive coaching and an individual insight into the effect of this development on their ability to thrive in their role. This was also preferred because the elements of evidence based knowledge (ensuring the research is grounded in the data) and working with a client's subjective reality are combined in CGT (Charmaz 2006).

In adopting this approach the underlying themes of identity formation emerged as the data analysis progressed, which provided an important theme to follow. This theme departed from the research questions which assumed a greater focus on the barriers to women in leadership roles and the impact of these on their future career possibilities. According to Charmaz (2006) the tension between data collection and evaluating "a fit" with early research ideas is unresolved in grounded theory. However the emphasis on researchers using qualitative methods to "enter research participants' worlds" (Charmaz 2006 p19) is a guiding principle which underpinned the approach taken in this study. As a result of focusing on the emergent themes surrounding professional identity construction in the data, the study shifted to explore this concept in greater detail.

## **Methodology**

In applying the principles of CGT, research data was gathered via semi-structured interviews with eleven women who currently held senior management positions within large (corporate) organisations in Australia and who had experienced one to one executive coaching within the preceding two year period. To be included in this study, participants also had to have participated in at least six one-to-one sessions with a dedicated executive coach, across a minimum period of six months. This criterion was set in line with research by Underhill, McAnnally and Koriath (2007) that the typical duration for executive coaching assignments is between six and twelve months.

In keeping with the principles of CGT, the study drew from a range of valuable research literature in psychology, including humanistic, behavioural and social psychology approaches to provide some disciplinary perspectives (Charmaz 2006). The study also drew from a vast body of research specific to women across the economic, organisational, cultural, neuroscience and leadership domains as well as the vast amount of literature on the psychology of women and gender.

This range of data points resulted in rich insights into the experience of women in leadership roles and provided a starting point for understanding the data that was emerging. It also allowed for a range of data triangulation through the comparison of these different data sources (Dallos and Vetere 2005).

### *Research Participants:*

In keeping with the central tenets of qualitative CGT research, a sample size of eleven interviews emerged from the data analysis process and the application of the principle of theoretical saturation, where no additional or new information was forthcoming in the categories that had been identified (Charmaz 2006). Following the CGT process of comparative data analysis, which was begun in the early stages of data collection, theoretical saturation was reached when nine of the eleven in-depth interviews had been conducted and analysed (Charmaz 2006). An additional two interviews were conducted as a means of testing the saturation level and ensuring no new information emerged, which was confirmed. This sample size permitted an in-depth case analysis of each interview (Sandelowski 1995) and it was hoped this would result in new perspectives or a deeper insight into each participant's experience.

Participants were sourced using the CGT principle of theoretical sampling (Charmaz 2006) where a range of organisational contacts and women's networking bodies were engaged to access participants that met the participant criteria. The relatively small sample size meant that it was statistically non-representative. Nevertheless it was informationally representative in that it could stand for other persons with similar experiences (Sandelowski 1995). At the time of the interviews, participants were employed in industries ranging from banking, investment banking, law, pharmaceuticals, hospitality, television and media and the resources sector. The age of the participants varied from the early thirties to mid fifties, the median age was 42.

The selection criteria for participants included the level of seniority within their current organisation. To ensure that participants were operating at a senior management level, the selection criteria was set at a maximum of four levels below the CEO. The frequency of each participant's coaching sessions ranged from fortnightly to monthly over a six month to two year period. One participant reported coaching sessions that were conducted six weekly.

Each participant was contacted via telephone for the initial screening to ensure that they met the research criteria. Following this contact, each was provided with a Participant Information Sheet (Appendix 2) and Consent Form (Appendix 3) via email prior to the interview being scheduled. Ethical considerations were taken into account with each participant signing a confidentiality agreement outlining the confidentiality terms of the interview. These terms ensured all participants would remain anonymous and any use of interviewee quotations would be de-identified so as not to breach these confidentiality terms; similarly confidentiality of specific participant feedback was protected using generic participant descriptions (P1 – P11). Refer Participant Table (Appendix 4).

## **Data Collection and Analyses**

The semi structured interviews were conducted with participants face to face at the participant's work premises. This accounted for ten of the eleven interviews. The remaining interview was conducted over the telephone.

As a result of adopting CGT principles, the structure of the interviews was modified from the original research proposal. In keeping with the approach, participant interviews were less structured (than was originally proposed), and focused on a series of open ended questions which allowed for a level of flexibility to investigate various topics as they emerged. This approach allowed participants to relay their subjective stories and identify the coaching and leadership experiences that were most relevant to them. (Appendix 1)

Interviews were typically 60 minutes to 85 minutes in duration. Each interview was recorded and transcribed verbatim. Transcription pages were an average of twenty five pages in length for each interview. Interviews were accompanied by written notes which were included in the data analysis. Interview data was uploaded into the NVIVO QSR software package where open coding was conducted. Memos were written throughout the data gathering and analysis period in both NVIVO and Microsoft Word.

In keeping with the CGT principles, data analysis commenced in the early stages of the interviewing and throughout the ongoing interview process, moving from data analysis back to data gathering. Analysis of the transcribed interview data commenced after the first two interviews using the method of constant comparison, data to data (Charmaz 2006). Data analysis continued throughout the interview process (data to data and then data to code). This constant comparison method was key to ensure the interview analysis was grounded in the participants experiences (Glaser & Strauss 1967). Ongoing analysis of the interview data proceeded over a number of months following the CGT principles whereby data coding continued, with a gradual refining of the codes through to theoretical concepts. An iterative process of engaging with the interview data, the interview notes taken with each interview, as well as research data from the current literature on coaching psychology, social psychology, clinical psychology, leadership and women in leadership, was undertaken to develop a clearer understanding of the core issues. The data gathering and analysis continued for a period of two years to the final stages of writing up the findings. This process allowed a framework to emerge directly from data that was ultimately tested (grounded) against the real world.



## Results

### *A Language of Resilience*

Participant career experiences were underpinned by a sense of resilience which seemed to dominate their individual narratives. Unlike some research approaches which have focused on the apparent deficits of women leaders and what they may need to do to fix these (Peltier 2010), the data emerging from this study highlighted the strengths and perseverance of participants. This theme was outlined by a participant reflecting on the trajectory of her own career into senior management and the experiences of her peers:

*“I think the trait you need to possess is a lot of tenacity. I think people give up way too early in the process. I think people fall into easy excuses, “Oh I’m never going to get that job”. They fall very easily into an excuse of why they can’t do it. So it’s overcoming that mindset but actually also having the tenacity to follow through.”*  
(P10)

The importance of utilising personal strengths also resonated strongly with participants as another noted: *“I think we’ve got natural strengths and when you play to them as a leader you’re true to yourself and you actually make a bigger difference”.* (P5)

These statements reflect important cognitive dimensions of resilience, which have been extensively researched under the label of cognitive hardiness (Mardi, 2006). According to Maddi (2006), hardiness is composed of three attitudes: commitment, control and challenge, which when well represented within individuals provide them with the courage and motivation to respond adaptively to stressful events (i.e. take hardy action) and cope well. This concept of hardiness is distinct from the oft cited challenge of getting beneath the official “story” of women in organisations whereby women are seen to collude with the dominant culture, become risk averse and avoid showing weakness in the face of any barriers (Piternan 2008). This is highlighted in the following comment of a senior female participant working in a male dominated culture, who was unafraid to speak up and challenge the norms around her: *“We’ve always said I’d rather die speaking about something I feel passionately about and be shown the door than actually not speaking up.”* (P11). The language of participants reiterated this sense of hardiness by describing ways to turn apparent institutional blocks (such as the

lack of women on boards) into opportunities for themselves, as highlighted by the following participant:

*“My take on the mandating of reporting about women on Boards and ratios of men to women is that I would happily accept a token role. I won’t act as one. I’ll tell them I’m not going to act as the token woman; I will participate and prove myself. And I’m comfortable about that. So if it takes a token spot to get me there, I’m not afraid of that”. (P4)*

The aspect of senior women displaying their agency, defined by Eagly and Karau (2002), as their ability to lead and be competitive, including their self confidence and level of ambition, is vital in understanding the functioning of women in organisations (Ely and Rhode 2008). Research has shown that men are considered highly agentic (assertive, competitive) and action oriented, whereas women are perceived to be more caring and relationship oriented (Eagly and Karau 2002). However participants in this study were able to cite many examples of highly agentic behaviour. As one participant highlighted how she and her female peers were working together to change some of the male dynamics in their organisation:

*“I think that’s kind of nice around our organisation, trying to build that network of likeminded women. And we will all comment on the blokey-ness of the culture and occasionally we’ll cheer each other on a bit to practice behaviours that are given to us all the time.”(P11)*

This sense of not being passive in a male environment but rather challenging the norms was reiterated by another participant:

*“I think playing to our strengths makes the difference. I’m pretty passionate about that being the better way to go rather than trying to fit in too much with the traditional male way of doing things. I don’t think you should try and play by the male rules.” (P5)*

An attribute of agency was highlighted in the following comment from a participant working in a male dominated team, who recognised that she could be more involved in the team’s decision making processes from which she had been excluded:

*“They’re all older guys but I observed that I was technically more trained in a lot of areas than some of them. So I felt like I can add value. So I managed to just grit my teeth and go “Right, go and have the conversation”. (P8)*

According to Ely and Rhodes (2008) a fundamental imperative in facilitating the success of women in leadership is an understanding of the specific organisational context in which the women work and not attributing the lack of women in senior roles to their personal deficits. Peltier (2010) reinforces this notion by highlighting that executive coaches need to better understand how women function in organisations, rather than the standard approach of helping them to find ways to fit in. This perspective is reiterated in recent research into women’s experience of executive coaching conducted by Galuk (2009) which suggested that executive coaches needed to be more attuned to the experiences of their female clients in order to optimise their development.

Participants highlighted the ways in which they were clear about the benefits of educating the men around them. They were able to articulate a systemic perspective on this. This was outlined by a participant below who reflected on the possibility of operational change within the executive team that she was working with, in order to support their organisational gender diversity initiatives:

*“Making sure that the men are open to having cultural change at the top table and not just going oh, we’ve ticked the box, that’s great. Actually going, ‘Well, now that we’ve got women, how do we operate more effectively? How do we really benefit from this?’ Being really open to changing the way they operate.” (P6)*

Throughout the interviews participants were able to identify the gender differences within their work and suggest ways in which they could or were influencing this aspect of their organisation. This level of agency and pragmatism was supported by Galuk (2009) who noted that women leaders (in that study) were also willing and able to report on the perceived gender differences at work and report them in a straightforward way as “this was the way it was” (Galuk 2009 p.125).

### *Career Barriers*

Despite the fact that the career experiences of participants were characterised by a sense of resilience and hardiness there was little variation from the research literature in terms of the actual barriers that various participants cited. However unlike previous research recounting these barriers for women as a list of challenges to be tackled independently (Leimon 2011, Broughton and Miller 2008), this study suggested these barriers played a far more important role for participants in terms of their impact on the ability for participants to construct a positive professional identity as a leader. In order for women to thrive in their leadership role, their ability to personally identify with their role is paramount (Ely and Rhode 2008, Ibarra et al 2008). According to DeRue, Ashford, Cotton (2009) leadership identity is granted by others through the validation in a social environment of the individual's leadership claims (for example, exhibiting leader behaviours at work which are accepted as valid by subordinates or peers). According to DeRue et al (2009) this external validation helps the individual to internalise a leader identity as a part of their inner self. However in conditions where this leadership identity is not granted (that is, validated by others) such as encountering career barriers, this may have the effect of calling into question the individual's leader identity (DeRue, Ashford, Cotton 2009).

As stated earlier in this paper, identity construction is both an individual and social process whereby the old adage 'we are all products of our environment' takes on powerful significance (Ely and Rhode 2008). According to self-determination theory (SDT; Deci et al 1994), the socio-cultural conditions encountered by an individual can make it very hard to act with a full sense of choice (i.e. autonomously) and often results in behaviour that is influenced by the preferences of one's significant others (e.g. family members, peer groups, work colleagues). As data from this study shows, the social and organisational context in which women aspire to leadership positions seem largely unsupportive of such aspirations and, therefore, (using SDT language) the autonomy of women. Observations from this study suggest that executive coaches would be well served to understand the potential barriers for women in leadership in the context of their ability to construct a positive professional identity as a leader, in order to optimise their development. This aspect is explored further in the Discussion section of this paper.

The following section captures the range of barriers cited by participants, confirming much of the current literature (Ely & Rhode 2008, Piterman 2008, Eagly 2005). Interview data highlighted that participants have a varied exposure to one or a number of the barriers cited. These were across the 4 key domains:

- 1) Navigating male dominated organisational cultures
- 2) Life, family and home issues
- 3) Embedded institutional mindsets
- 4) Self limiting beliefs of women

#### 1) Navigating male dominated organisational cultures

In keeping with previous research (Ely and Rhode 2008, Piterman 2008, McCormick 2003), a key theme cited across the interviews involved various obstacles characteristic of working within male dominated organisational cultures. As one participant stated, this took the form of a lack of access to networking opportunities with her male boss:

*“My boss has never, ever had a one on one lunch with me but he will take the guys in our management team, and it’s the same with our (other) colleague who’s also female. The only time we go is if the whole team goes out for lunch once a quarter or once every 6 months. Whereas the guys, at least weekly will go for a beer and pizza”.*  
(P8)

The participant reflected that this lack of informal communication and access to her boss meant that she (and her female colleague) felt isolated from the rest of the team. Isolation and tokenism were also highlighted by a number of participants who had reached senior levels in their organisation. The following observation made by a participant highlighted the way in which being a minority gender impacted on her feelings within the senior team:

*“To be the only woman in a group of say 50 men at that level is a bit lonely. There was an element of the boy’s club aspect to it and it rocked their boat a little bit to have one woman sitting in on all those senior meetings.”* (P1)

Being overlooked for promotion was cited as another barrier in the interviews and this was highlighted by the incident experienced by one participant who felt she had been overlooked

stating: *“I wanted my boss’s role when my boss left a few years ago and my boss said, “Oh you’re not ready”. It ended up going to a younger male colleague.”* (P7)

The ongoing prevalence of sex stereotyped roles was also cited by a number of participants as a challenge in accessing all areas of their organisation, particularly the client facing, line management roles. In Australia this theme is particularly prevalent as less than 5% of line management roles in Australia’s top two hundred listed companies are held by women (EOWA 2008). One participant reflected on the attitude of the executive team where she worked:

*“They say, ‘Oh there’s lots of women on the senior executive team who report to the managing director.’ Yes, they’re in what they call the pink ghettos – Legal, HR, company secretary. All the line managers, every single one of them, they’re male.”* (P8)

Participants intimated that the underlying conditions placed upon them at work in terms of these gender stereotyped roles seemed to limit what was achievable or available to them. These observations support research conducted by Ibarra and Petriglieri (2007) and the notion of ‘impossible selves’. That is, they highlight the difficulty women face in navigating typically male dominated positions whereby sustaining a career in these roles becomes an (almost) impossible task. The recognition of this difficulty was highlighted by a participant working in an executive support function in a highly male dominated business:

*“May I say I doubt they were ever going to have a female running operations or doing one of those “serious blokey roles”. You will often find senior women are in legal or tax or HR. So to that extent I fitted the model, I wasn’t threatening.”* (P3)

## 2) Life, Family and Home Issues

According to recent research (Kellerman and Rhode 2007, McKinsey 2012) career attitudes among women and men are converging both in terms of the degree of ambition and aspirations. Despite this convergence, the barrier of the double burden of balancing home with the demands of work was highlighted by a number of participants and was considered to be a potential derail from maintaining their leadership role. The perspective of a participant with four school age children captured this challenge:

*“You can keep all the balls in the air and you can keep going and you can keep performing at work and you can keep a happy family but suddenly it just all catches up on you. Probably when you’re in that stage, when it is catching up on you, that’s when you have a real chance of derailing”. (P5)*

Transitioning back into work following parental leave was another obstacle faced by a number of participants, in terms of managing the expectations of their organisation. This was highlighted by a participant, who when being considered for a promotion while pregnant, encountered the following feedback from a senior manager: *“He said “Look the Chairman is so worried, he thinks you’re fantastic but he is so worried that after you have the baby you’re just not going to want to do the job.” (P11)*

Managing the transition back into work following parental leave was also salient for some participants in terms of finding a solution to family and work responsibilities that would suit their unique situation. This challenge was described by the following participant who had recently navigated this transition and observed:

*“Some people feel very guilty about having nannies and some people couldn’t care less, some people are happy to have their husbands stay at home and not work, others don’t like that sort of idea. I think it’s very personal but certainly in terms of things like how to balance long days, how to not feel guilty about leaving a child, these are more practically orientated things you can certainly learn” (P2).*

### 3) Embedded Institutional Mindsets

According to McKinsey (2012) it is the embedded mindsets of individuals within organisations and the cultural norms that are the most insidious barriers for women leaders. This was a core theme across all of the interviews as participants highlighted the culturally embedded beliefs and discrimination (by virtue of being the minority gender in a leadership environment) as a key obstacle. As one participant stated:

*“In Australia you do feel like there is an onus that you have to rebut if you turn up to a meeting as a woman. You have to prove yourself. The onus is on you to prove that you’re not an idiot or a bimbo. So I think it is a very subtle thing but we have all felt it.” (P2)*

Another participant perceived the lack of insight from the male dominated leadership team with which she worked and the impact of the “boys club” on the morale of women in her organisation:

*“They are actually giving themselves big pats on the back about females in the workplace and so it’s probably the worst type. They think they’re making progress and that they’re quite ahead of the curve but they are so far behind it’s not funny.”* (P8).

Struggling with a skewed organisational demographic, and the norms of the male majority, showed up in different ways for participants. In line with research (Welle and Heilman 2005), participants felt that it was up to them to communicate the value of being a voice on the team, as distinct from men who were felt to be operating from a more entitled perspective. This was highlighted by the following participant who reflected on the different of approaches of women and men when working in a male dominated environment:

*“I think women from my observation don’t have a sense of expectation about things. We will quite often go ‘I don’t expect to be asked to that meeting but I really want to go’. Whereas a lot of men just have that expectation, they just walk in; they’re quite unapologetic and almost insulted that they haven’t been included.”* (P8)

In terms of perceived gender discrimination, this study found that participants working in organisations with a broad distribution of women across various levels, reported a low perception regarding perceived discrimination. This was in contrast to participants who stated they worked in highly male dominated organisations and who reported a high perception of discrimination, as one participant stated: *“It became increasingly aggressive. I’m happy to have a fight with people but just day to day there became a lot more apparent discrimination. I got tired of not being able to influence things as much.”* (P3) This study seems to confirm previous findings, which show perceived discrimination is correlated with the prevailing attitude of senior executives (McCormick 2003, Perry, Davis-Blake and Kulik 1994), adding further importance to the need to understand the unique organisational context in which women work and the variety of ways that this unique context may or may not be a barrier.



#### 4) Self limiting beliefs of women

Participant's articulation of their own self-limiting beliefs and behaviours was also a salient theme, despite the differences in their individual traits, histories and organisational cultures. This was highlighted by a participant reflecting on the women in her organisation who commented: *"I think women are their own worst enemy. I think they hold themselves back and I fail at that every now and then, I freely admit it."* (P10). This theme was reiterated by another participant for whom it had not occurred to apply for a leadership role (in which she was currently acting):

*"After the board meeting he came up to me and said 'We've been waiting on your application.' And my jaw hit the ground and I remember thinking 'Oh me?' and he said 'Well yes, we've been really impressed with you in the last few months and where's your application? Why did you not apply?' And I couldn't actually answer the question."* (P11)

This aspect of women unconsciously holding themselves back is central to their ability to construct a professional identity as a leader (Ely and Rhode 2008). The above quote highlights the tendency for women to internalise gender stereotypes and see themselves as less deserving than men for rewards for the same performance, and less qualified for leadership positions (Dobrow and Higgins 2005). According to McCormick (2003) this can mean that women may be less likely to view themselves in a leadership capacity. Research by Piterman (2008) found that women accept the challenge of life in the organisations by internalising the responsibility for their poor cultural fit within male dominated cultures. Heilman's (1983) "lack of fit" approach highlights the self-limiting attitudes of women as a core aspect of the model. According to this view, self-evaluations about gender and their misalignment to leadership role (which is often construed in more stereotypically male terms), result in a negative self evaluation for themselves in their role (Welle and Heilman, 2005). The propensity to internalise this poor fit was highlighted by the following participant who was promoted to the highest level in her organisation and was struggling with the dynamics of the senior (male) leadership team:

*"I thought in probably fairly classic female fashion that the problems I was facing, I didn't think I was doing my job well, I didn't think I could do it, I kept expecting someone to come in and say, 'Yes good run dear but we know it's all a sham,' Which*

*I think a lot of women say. So I was sitting there doing the classic thing and thinking, "Oh, I can't do this, therefore there's something wrong with me." (P3)*

The research literature on self-efficacy is highly relevant for women in leadership and for understanding its impact on identity construction (McCormick 2003). Research in this area has emphasized the importance of self-efficacy as a key factor in determining human agency (Bandura, 1986), and has shown that those with high self-efficacy for a certain task are more likely to pursue and persist in that task (Bandura, 1997). According to Bandura (1986), the construct of self-efficacy (or self-confidence in a specific domain) can be defined as the beliefs a person has about their capabilities to successfully perform a particular behaviour or task. This is particularly relevant for women in leadership roles and their capacity to persevere with their career path. Social cognitive theory posits that levels of self-efficacy are determined by factors such as direct (i.e. one's own success and failure) and vicarious experience (i.e. observing others successes and failures), verbal persuasion (from peers, colleagues, relatives) and affective states (emotional arousal, anxiety) (Dobrow and Higgins 2005). In environments that are skewed towards male dominance and have a higher proportion of men in decision making functions, this can have self-efficacy consequences for women who may not have had the same depth of experience in a leadership capacity and may not have had much vicarious experience of observing other female leaders be successful in their leadership role. Comments which intimated a lower self-efficacy in leadership were made by a majority of participants in this study despite the variability of their organisational contexts. The following statement provides a clear articulation of how the self-limiting beliefs of women can become a challenge to be overcome:

*"I know I have a wavering self-esteem so feeling good about yourself each day in your work, you tend to punch yourself up a lot. I think perhaps a little more than our male counterparts might because they think they're 9 foot tall and bulletproof and I envy that." (P9)*

Avolio and Gardner (2005) highlight that it is important to recognise the ways in which leaders are both shaping and being shaped by their environment. The concept of unconscious bias (Lee 2005, Perry et al 1994) and stereotypes also helps to make sense of how unconscious beliefs can impact how individuals view themselves and their work performance. The tendency for individuals to internalise the belief that men are leaders (Welle and Heilman 2010, Howard 2008, Deci et al 1994) may help to understand how women may struggle to

identify themselves confidently in a leadership role when their environment is skewed towards men being the dominant leadership gender. As one participant explained about her struggle both with managing the expectations of her male peers and her own internal dialogue: *“Why is everything I do going to upset the boys? And I was playing into it mentally as well, I had blocks there.”* (P9). This tendency to internalise the “men as leaders” assumption in male dominated environments is highlighted by another participant who referred to her conversation with a female CEO. She noted that the female CEO would “look over her shoulder” when her team asked for advice from the CEO “forgetting it’s actually her” (P5).

Evidence on gender differences in self-efficacy demonstrate that women are more likely than men to limit their career aspirations and interests (Ibarra and Petriglieri 2007, Knox 2009) and that women are likely to have lower expectations than men for success in a wide range of occupations (Eccles 1994, cited in Dobrow and Higgins 2005). However research has also shown that levels of self-efficacy can be altered under certain conditions and that successful experiences (in the specific domain) have the greatest influence on perceived efficacy (Bandura 1986). This aspect of an increasing sense of confidence was highlighted in the study by participants who had had positive leadership experiences as one participant explained: *“As my role grew within the bank, as I matured, as I developed, as I had more self awareness and when I realised people really valued my input, I did more of it and realised that I enjoyed it and I was good at it.”* (P6) This perceived change in self-efficacy reiterates findings that self-efficacy beliefs are dynamic and can be enhanced through mastery, particularly as a result of an individuals’ capacity to reflect and learn from their experience (Bandura, 1997). This perspective highlights that strategies to build self-efficacy in leadership also help to construct a professional identity of a leader, as an individual’s ability to feel confident in their leadership role is a key aspect of their professional identity (Dutton et al 2010, Ibarra et al 2008). This aspect was highlighted by another participant who commented on the impact that coaching could have both in managing her own confidence and managing the expectations of her colleagues (who may not share her career beliefs or expectations) stating:

*“In terms of growth as a woman, being really confident in yourself, I think coaching can really support that. Because even if you don’t believe there are boundaries, sometimes you can come up against people who do.”* (P4)

## Professional Identity Formation

Participant experiences of executive coaching highlighted the formation of a professional identity as a leader as a core development theme. Professional identity consists of an array of psychological and social factors and its' construction is influenced by the individual's unique personal traits, characteristics and history, as well as the organisational and social context in which women leaders are located (Dutton et al 2010). This category was salient despite the individual differences of the participants and the variability of the organisational environments in which they worked.

The role of executive coaching in assisting participants to construct a professional identity and clarify or refine who they were in their leadership roles, is captured in the reflection of a participant who differentiated between her personal self-knowledge and the aspects of her self at work, her professional identity:

*"I think one of the biggest things has been developing my sense of self. I have a pretty good idea of who I am personally but developing my professional self has been a really interesting exercise" (P4)*

The need to develop a sense of who they were in their professional role, despite an awareness of their personal self is evident in the reflection of another participant: *"The coaching thing for me was where I had the debate: do I have to change my essential self to be successful (in this senior role)?" (P11)*. Another participant queried whether this need to clarify a professional self at work was more applicable to women, given the gender specific barriers that they can face in their careers, as outlined below:

*"I'm wondering whether women need more coaching than men, I don't know. That fascinates me, whether part of our issue is stuff that's really quite deep and we can go to (courses on) how to speak calmly, lower your tone of voice, till the cows come home. But if you're not dealing with that inner stuff, you're definitely walking up hill." (P8)*

The idea that professional identities develop over the course of a person's career and are revised at critical junctions in the adult life cycle has been highlighted by a number of

researchers (Dutton et al 2010, Dobrow and Higgins 2005, Kegan 1994). Indeed, the data strongly indicated that participants felt they were on a developmental path (or continuum) that involved redefining aspects of the self or taking on some aspect of their identity throughout their coaching experience. One participant reflected on this process stating, *“Coaching doesn't change you now and now only. I think it's something to help you evolve in your position. It will change the way I think about things, even after the fact.”* (P9).

Participants seemed to differ in their evolution towards understanding their professional self at work, as though the crafting of their identity was an individual process that each participant was navigating to varying degrees. This developmental approach to professional identity formation is reflected in the work of a number of researchers focusing on the change in an identity over time and through stages or phases (Dutton et al 2010). The variation or progress of participants on this developmental path is reflected in the range of statements from the participants. One participant at the beginning of this process noted an apparent disconnect between her self-perception and the perception others had of her: *“It's funny. I don't see myself as a leader but I know that lots of people look at me as a leader”* (P6). Another participant similarly reflected this sense that leadership was not yet a part of her identity stating: *“I don't see myself as a leader. I see that I am in my role, I am paid to be a leader so I better learn how to do it.”* (P9). These comments appear to reflect the degree to which these participants did not identify themselves as a leader however their recognition of the requirements of their role or the views of their colleagues suggest that a process of leader identity formation may be beginning. These observations can be contrasted with the following statement, which intimates the participant was on a developmental path toward integrating her leadership capacity into her sense of self:

*“I knew I could take on lots of things and I knew I could do things well but I certainly didn't think that I would be persuasive enough to actually have people want to work with me and follow my lead and to abide by the decisions that I made. It's an interesting process of self discovery.”* (P2)

This developmental path (towards achieving an integrated professional identity as a leader) is reflected in another participant's observations that she had made her transition through working with her executive coach. She stated:

*“In terms of feeling like a leader or thinking like a leader, I think it took a coach to make me think and feel like a leader.”* (P11) These comments appear to reflect the role of executive coaching to facilitate various degrees of leadership identity formation for participants. The interviews conveyed a sense that prior to executive coaching, participants were working in their leadership roles applying their skills and knowledge to the tasks at hand but perhaps struggling to connect with the leadership role on a more integrated, personal level as one participant reflected on her gradual self- realisation:

*“Before I did the coaching, leadership was not really something that I would associate with myself, would not be something I would put down if someone asked me to describe myself. But through the coaching and acknowledgement that this is in fact one of the roles that I play, I started to think in terms of having leadership as an aspect of myself.”* (P1)

This process of modifying their sense of self to their role as a leader is also reflected by another participant who found the experience of executive coaching helped her to connect with the leadership aspects of her role on a deeper level:

*“I realised that I really needed help to understand what the job was that I was doing and that the title really didn’t give me much help in doing the job that I needed to do. I think the thing that rings true to me is about women deciding on what they want and deciding they want to be a leader, and that is probably the biggest thing of all.”* (P11)

Crafting a professional identity and being able to communicate this is reiterated by the participant below who reflected that thinking about herself as a leader and communicating this was a new process for her that developed during executive coaching:

*“I needed to be clear about what my role was, and I needed to be able to express that clearly to senior people: “This is me, and this is what I do”. I’d never focused very much on that thought process before.”* (P1)

The sense of identity formation was reflected by a participant who commented on her realisation post her executive coaching: *“You know you do not have to be that tough looking woman to have that position. You can be who you are and you don’t have to modify yourself.”* (P10). These comments suggest that for a number of participants, a shift was taking place

between what Ely and Rhode (2008) describe as “how I behave” (a way of doing) to “who I am” (a way of being). The importance of having a clear sense of their identity at work and being equipped to manage any potential obstacles in organisations is also captured in the following participant statement. This participant commented on the evolution of her own coaching approach since completing her coaching engagement, which she now applied to her own staff. She gave the following example of an interaction with one of her female team members: *“I said, think about this sentence, “I am a senior project manager”. Is that true? “Who specialises in ...” is that true? Is that who you are?”* (P10)

This aspect of identity formation during executive coaching engagements was strongly reflected across all interviews. However, the interview data highlighted that the degree of leadership identity formation varied across participants, with some (but not all) participants indicating that the tasks of leadership were part of who they were in the world – an identifiable part of their identity. This variation in the degree of leader identity formation highlights the developmental aspect (or continuum) of leadership identity formation, which builds on developmental theories whereby identity formation occurs over time (Dutton et al 2010, DeRue 2009).

Themes that emerged from the data and appeared to contribute to the construction of a professional identity as a leader included the importance of relational identity and the impact of role models; shifting motivation in senior management and achieving authenticity in leadership. These are explored further in the next section.

## Contributing Theme 1: Relational Identity & the Importance of Role Models

The importance of role models was a prevalent theme across the interviews and is supported in both the women's literature and the identity formation literature (Ely and Rhode 2008, Kellerman and Rhode 2007, Sealy and Singh 2010). This importance was stated clearly by a participant when reflecting on her thoughts regarding the various support mechanisms for women in organisations:

*"To me the single most important thing to pinpoint is to have a critical mass of female role models. Because we don't have enough role models, that cascades in terms of our inability to retain people or to recruit people so generally I think that role models are extremely important particularly when women are in the minority. I think a good positive role model could do a lot in terms of inspiring other women to want to achieve and want to do well and feel that it's manageable." (P2)*

This emphasis on the importance of role models given by female participants in their mid career can be understood in terms of gender differences in social identity theory (Brewer and Gardner, 1996). This theory highlights that relational and collective aspects of identity are relevant for both males and females. According to Brewer and Gardner (1996) relational identity is based on interpersonal relationships and interdependence with specific others whereas collective identity is based on membership in larger, more impersonal group memberships or social categories. Studies have highlighted gender differences in the relative importance that men and women place on these two aspects of identity (Sealy and Singh 2010, Gibson 2004). Research conducted by Sealy and Singh (2010) highlights the relative importance that women place on the social aspect of their identity – in particular their relational identity (versus men) – and that this gender difference may provide important insight into the critical impact that role models can have on the construction of senior women's professional identity as a leader. Studies have shown that women tend to rate relational identity as more important to their self worth and emphasise the importance of close social relations and interpersonal roles such as being a good mother or wife, whereas men assign greater importance to larger group membership (Lord and Brown 2004). The importance of interpersonal roles is shown by the participant statement below as she explains her rationale for her decisions in pursuing her career and family goals:



*“I’m very clear that for me, the reason I’m wanting to have this full round life where I’m fulfilled, the primary reason is to be a role model for my children. So that they feel that they have a choice to do whatever they want to do.” (P6).*

Gibson (2004) defines a role model as a cognitive construction based on the attributes of people in social roles, which an individual perceives to be similar to themselves and to which they wish to increase this perceived similarity by emulating those qualities. This definition includes a cognitive process whereby individuals actively observe, adapt and discard various aspects of the role model. Sealy and Singh (2010) highlight how gender and organisational demography influence the role modelling process for women by limiting not only the availability of role models (in demographically skewed organisations) but also the perceived suitability of these role models (in terms of their perceived similarity). This role model availability and suitability was reflected strongly across the interviews as one participant noted:

*“My boss is the first woman boss I’ve ever had and she’s such a great role model and I think it’s great, it’s a huge impact for me to have a female role model...if you see a woman who’s achieved something great then you think maybe you can do it too.” (P7)*

A quite different experience, noting the lack of role models, was highlighted by another participant:

*“When I started out, there were very few women in senior roles, so there was really not that role model. I guess that’s part of the expectation, you don’t see commonplace lots of women in senior roles. Even in business class lounges of airports or in business class on a plane you just don’t see many women. And that must influence you subconsciously, when you don’t see it as part of your norm. I remember being at Heathrow airport one morning and I got a ladder in my stocking. I could’ve bought a men’s suit, shoes, cufflinks, ties, all in that terminal, yet I couldn’t buy a pair of stockings. It was all set up for the business traveller being the man but not the woman. It must make some impact subconsciously.” (P1)*

In addition to the availability of role models, their perceived suitability was also identified as a key aspect. As one participant pointed out when she looked at the more senior women in her organisation:

*“I look at them and I think they belong to that generation of women who still think they need to act like men, to think like men in order to do well. So they are highly numerate, they are unemotional, they are un-empathetic and they really don’t feel like they need to give anything back. Disappointingly, I haven’t really experienced or haven’t had the good fortune to be exposed to any female role models.” (P2)*

This sentiment regarding the unsuitability of role models was reflected by another participant working in a demographically imbalanced organisation saying:

*“I think it is important to have role models or senior people that you see that are approachable, or are in a field that you think ‘I could do that’. When I think when I started out, the few senior women I saw around I would think ‘Gosh, I’ll never be like her, she’s really this, or she’s really that which is just not me at all.’ So I didn’t really identify with the female role models that were around.” (P1)*

Unlike career research which suggests that role models play a central role predominantly in early career, studies by Gibson (2004) demonstrate that the tendency to observe role models does not diminish with age but rather the individual changes the emphasis placed on the various qualities (Sealy and Singh 2010). This is particularly relevant for participants in this study, who were typically in their mid or later career stages. Sealy and Singh (2010) highlight that women were more likely to create composite models, identifying specific attributes as well as negative role models which may help confirm their sense of individuality. This is reflected in participant’s acknowledgement of both the positive and negative aspects of their various role models:

*“I have been lucky to work with some incredible managers who have inspired me through their experiences. Sometimes I’ve learnt what not to do from some of them. It works for them but it would not be my style.” (P4)*

Ibarra and Petriglieri (2007) identified gender differences in the strategies employed with role models in the professional identity formation of lawyers transitioning to partner roles. Their research, conducted in a law firm skewed towards males, demonstrated that women lawyers tended to use “true to self” strategies (defined as relying on their own personal style and staying faithful to this in their roles). These strategies were different to the imitation and acquisitive strategies (defined as imitating and practising the behaviours of perceived successful role models) that were used by the male lawyers. The study found women’s true to self strategies, when dealing with a potential role model, hindered their ability to achieve success in their partner role by limiting their capacity to adapt to or try on new behaviours (Ibarra and Petriglieri 2007). The importance of demographics in influencing the strategies for role models is reinforced in research by Gibson (2004) who found that females were more likely to use acquisitive strategies (for example, imitation) with role models of both genders in demographically balanced organisations. However, it was also found that in male-oriented organisations women were less likely to use these acquisitive strategies. The current study provides support for the notion that in balanced organisations, women engage in acquisitive strategies (imitating and acquiring new behaviours) with both genders. The participant below stated that she worked in an organisation where there were a good proportion of women in her senior management team. In keeping with Gibson’s (2004) findings she reflected on the benefits of observing and learning from the management style of her male manager:

*“He’s ex-army, he’s got a lot of different backgrounds. I really like his style you know. I enjoy watching him in full flight when he’s talking to staff, it’s fascinating. I really, really enjoy it. He just comes across very confidently and I appreciate that, I am learning from that.”(P4)*

Research suggests that because women typically have fewer available same sex role models they face “an arduous cognitive task of translating male role model behaviour to behaviour that works for them” (Sealy and Singh 2010, p.290). This additional cognitive load was inferred in a number of the interviews with one participant explaining the potential impact of men in senior roles on a woman’s self concept:

*“If they go and see the executive committee of the bank or go and see most of their people in senior positions, it’ll mostly, if not universally, be men. So that must have an impact as to thinking “Oh, I could be that one day. I’d like to be in that guy’s shoes”. I think men perhaps can say that more easily than women can.” (P1)*

Other participants reflected the degree to which this cognitive translation was a part of their everyday approach as evidenced by this participant's feedback:

*"My role models have been men who have not sacrificed their integrity or their honesty or their credibility or their family life or their personality and have done well and come out with respect." (P2)*

The variability of participant's approaches in translating or not translating male role model behaviours into their own repertoire of skills may represent an important developmental opportunity for senior women.

Further research findings have demonstrated the importance of having a range and diversity of role models to career success (Dobrow and Higgins 2005). This research showed that a variety of role models were associated with increased career-related cognitive flexibility (Higgins 2001a cited in Dobrow and Higgins 2005). This is in keeping with research by Ibarra (1999) that suggested a variety of role models provided a greater opportunity for individuals to engage in adaptation strategies (and exploration of different aspects of their selves) that contributed to positive professional identity construction. The ability of participants to learn from a variety of role models and adapt their repertoire of skills was highlighted by one participant's reflection on the range of role models she had experienced across her career:

*"I've had several people I've learned from along the way that I look up to and respect and in all different facets to add to my leadership." (P10)* Another participant reflected on the value of various role models across the span of her career to date:

*"Some role models are people that you go "oh, I'd love to be like them" but sometimes it's just there's something about them, their personality, their belief in you right at that point in time and that's what you need." (P6).*

The relative importance that women place on the relational aspects of their identity also helps to understand the important function of sponsors to their success in their leadership roles. This was highlighted as an important aspect of participant career experiences. One participant referred to her relationship with her manager whom she saw as a sponsor for her within the organisation:

*"I had a manager, he and I connected really well. You know how sometimes in life you get the right person in your life at the right time and he was so good at encouraging me to believe in myself and to really trust myself and give it a go."*(P6)

Another participant who referred to the importance of her manager as a sponsor who would actively promote her within her organisation: *"The other thing is having a manager who's an advocate, a boss who's supportive. So they've sort of encouraged me or promoted me more broadly."* (P8)

The importance that women place on the relational aspects of their identity helps to make sense of the often stated requirement for role models in the literature (Leimon 2011, Ely and Rhode 2008). This study suggested that it is a combination of role model availability, perceived suitability, range of role model types (Sealy and Singh 2010) as well as the imitation or adaptation strategies employed with role models (Ibarra et al 2007) that will help women leaders maximise this resource and which can contribute to constructing a positive professional identity.

The utility of the executive coach as a role model or guiding figure for women's profession identity construction is another aspect of role models that could warrant further research (Ibarra, Snook and Ramo 2008). The function of an executive coach as a role model was evident in participant reflections on their coaching experiences. One participant recounted her admiration for the executive presence that her coach displayed and the ways in which observing this had contributed to her own development: *"she has an instant style, you know, you pick her visually, communication, everything about her is her. And so, (I am) developing my own style around what works."* (P4) The coach as a role model was highlighted by another participant who commented on the respect and admiration she had for her executive coach and the influence that her coach's approach had on her own discipline:

*"I'd got to like her so much and appreciate what she was giving me so much it was like being back in school with that great teacher, going, "I'm going to study because I don't want to let this teacher down. I can't stand the idea of her giving me that disappointed look."* (P9)

A participant reflected on a conversation she had had recently with her coach (from an engagement that had been completed) where she commented (to her coach): *“you still sit on my shoulder to this day. I talk to you far more often than you probably realise”*. (P11)

The importance of the relational aspect of women leaders' identity construction was recognised by participants, including the impact of other women in their organisation, with one participant pointing out that: *“There's been a lot written about how women can help other women and I think there's a huge opportunity for that to happen more and more.”* (P6). Researchers have highlighted that people who are uncertain about their beliefs are more likely to seek support for them from others, which is particularly relevant for women navigating the leadership domain (Kets de Vries and Korotov 2007). Researchers have highlighted that successful self changes are often instigated, motivated or supported by others because the self-concept change depends on enlisting other people to lend social reality or to validate the desired changes (Dutton et al 2010, DeRue et al 2009, Baumeister 1998). This study suggests that this social and gender aspect of professional identity construction can be facilitated by role models for senior women, such as organisational sponsors and executive coaches. This supports research findings that the more social resources available to individuals, the more likely they will endure difficult situations or take on greater challenges (Dutton et al 2010).

#### Contributing Theme 2: Shifting Motivation

A common theme throughout the retelling of participant career experiences was the positive experience of early career roles, which were characterised by a sense that their needs were being met by their organisation. This was highlighted by a participant who reflected on the enjoyment she experienced in her early career due to the personal and career support that she received from her company:

*“At the time they had a really good system. They were very good at looking at both your technical skills and your attributes and finding roles that would help you develop them. It was very, very well done”*. (P3)

This early organisational satisfaction is contrasted with a number of less satisfying views on the experience of leadership. The same participant (i.e. P3) highlighted the degree to which

her transition into leadership seemed to be characterised more by tension and disengagement due to the change in her environment working at a more senior level of the organisation:

*“When I think about it, I was getting more senior. So it was probably becoming more apparent to me that the organisation had a very deeply embedded arrogance, it was racist, sexist, it just wasn’t an organisation I was fantastically happy with anymore.”*

(P3)

This statement highlights the importance of social and organisational context to an individual’s optimal functioning (Ely and Rhode 2008). As mentioned earlier, self-determination theory (SDT) provides a useful lens for understanding the experiences of the interview participants in their leadership roles and their ability to construct a positive professional identity (Gagne and Deci 2005). SDT states that optimal motivation relies on the satisfaction of three basic, innate psychological needs: the need for autonomy (i.e. experiencing a sense of choice and psychological freedom in the initiation, maintenance and regulation of one’s behaviour); competence (i.e. an individual feeling effective with their interactions with their environment, a concept which is related to self efficacy); and relatedness (i.e. feeling supported, cared for, having positive and significant relationships with others) (Deci et al 1994). According to SDT, when these basic needs are met a person is more likely to be autonomously motivated, or more able to own and regulate their own behaviour by choosing behaviours that align with their developing interests or core values (Spence and Oades 2010). According to La Guardia (2009), social and cultural support of these basic needs is important for an individual’s engagement in identity activities, for informing their self-concept and for their ongoing identity development and identity-related behaviours (La Guardia 2009). As such, SDT reinforces the important role that environment plays in human development and growth (Gagne and Deci 2005), and can be helpful for clarifying what senior women require to help manage their motivation. Participant interviews conveyed a sense that the organisation context (of being in a senior role) had a disruptive impact on their motivation or performance in their roles. This is revealed in comments made by participants who experienced a lack of relatedness and competence (key motivational needs according to self determination theory) by virtue of being a minority gender in overwhelmingly male ranks:

*“We are in the minority and when you are in the majority, I think there is a majority way of doing things and when you are in the minority you’re not always across what*

*the majority are doing and you are intimidated by the majority and so you don't even dare try your way of doing things because you will get rejected or knocked back or hurt."* (P2)

A lack of a sense of relatedness (by being a female in a male dominated team) and autonomy (by not feeling the freedom to use her capacities to the full) on her performance was revealed by another participant in her senior role:

*"Even when you have a good idea, you're afraid to say anything because you don't want to get it wrong. So men are a lot more prepared to just blurt out something and maybe it's going to be wrong but they don't really care."* (P7)

A lack of relatedness in her senior role was reiterated by another participant in managing the male dominated senior ranks of her organisation as follows:

*"One of the key takeouts is that women often go up the ladder, get to a certain level and don't like the look of what's at the top. And I can understand that and I kind of often feel that too. But I think that often why you don't see as many women at the top is not that they haven't got the capability but they don't like the look of the environment up there."* (P11)

According to SDT the preferences and values actions of external reference groups (e.g. work teams, leaders, peer groups) are naturally absorbed by people via a process of internalisation. However, research has repeatedly shown that the more a social context is not supportive of basic needs, the more individuals will tend to not identify with the activity or value (Deci et al 1994). When this happens people will have internalised, but not fully integrated (i.e. owned), the externally valued behaviours, resulting in poorer quality *introjected* motivation that is usually associated with pressure and tension (Deci et al 1994). This process of introjection helps to understand the tensions that were relayed by participants in managing the various obstacles of being a female leader. A lack of autonomy and competence (not having the freedom to display or utilise the full range of her skills) was relayed by a participant who stated: *"I learned with them just to become a small target, not to disagree with them in public because they don't like being shown to be wrong by a woman."* (P3)



A lack of autonomy (freedom to choose) was stated by a participant who referred to the difficulty in being promoted as a working mother and having to work against prevailing stereotypes regarding her perceived ability to commit to the role. She stated:

*“I think there was a big disconnect for them with the whole four kids. They make such fleeting judgements of you and they make up their mind about you whether you’re going to fit that space or not.” (P5)*

The role of the executive coach in providing support and helping to mediate the influence of a less supportive senior environment was highlighted by various participants. The following participant highlighted the pivotal role that her coach played in sustaining her:

*“I don’t think I could have done the job I did for the company without that support. It really gave me a lot of resilience and support and also good ideas and also gave me feedback when I had done things well. It was a bit of a cheerleader on the side.” (P11)*

In addition to the support role that executive coaches can provide in supporting the basic psychological needs of clients (as suggested by Spence and Oades, 2010), this study also suggested that a gender perspective on SDT may provide a useful framework for understanding the impact of the various socio-contextual factors on the women’s psychological needs of autonomy, competence and relatedness. These needs were particularly salient for participants working in leadership roles in demographically skewed organisations, which affected their motivation and ability to be sustained in their roles, an aspect which executive coaching appeared to address.

### Contributing Theme 3: Achieving Authenticity in Leadership

Participant narratives highlighted that a core theme in their coaching experience was to find ways to work that reflected their personal sense of self and allowed them to be authentic (i.e. display their true self) in their roles. This aspect appeared to be central to their ability to thrive in their leadership role. According to one participant, her executive coaching helped her to reframe her leadership experience revealing her growing awareness for a more personally attuned leadership style, describing her realisation that *“the more you’re in line with who you are and it’s very real and very authentic and you’re not putting anything on, then it’s quite easy to do and it’s fun.”* (P9)

Research conducted by Eagly and Karau (2002) in their theory of role incongruity highlights the inconsistency that women may encounter in their leadership roles that are construed generically in masculine terms and their sense of their own female gender role (Eagly 2005). This inconsistency was reflected in a participant’s reflection of her own internal dialogue in coming to terms with both the male and female aspects of herself and her role:

*“I quite often have these battles. I do definitely have a very determined streak, a very focused side to myself, that quite often has an internal battle with the more shy, reluctant scared little girl side of me.”* (P8)

However, participants highlighted that their executive coaching experience had helped them to realise and articulate their own approach to their leadership role, as supported in recent research (Galuk, 2009). One participant realised in her coaching experience that her career goals were *“changing a bit as a result of my coaching.”* Through her dialogue with her coach she had realised that *“I want to follow my interests, I want to have ever more interesting jobs, ever broader networks, for me its intellectual curiosity. I know I can do good for people while I’m going up the ladder as well.”* (P7)

Another participant highlighted the value of her executive coach in having insight into the organisation in which she worked and at the same time helping her to balance this with her own sense of self stating:

*“She (the coach) knew the approach that they would be taking and she brought tremendous insight in terms of finding a way through without compromising my own*

*style and personality but getting myself heard and noticed.” (P2)*

Research conducted by Piterman (2008) found that women’s ability to work authentically was undermined by compromises they had to make in the workplace and that participating in traditionally male defined leadership roles was often too high a price to pay. However participant reflections highlighted the ways in which their coaching experience had mediated this tension and had helped them to be clear and confident about any compromises they were making. As one participant highlighted:

*“My only advice to women is that women are quite conscious that you trade something to get to where you go. You give something up. Most women are really conscious about what they’ve given up and it’s often exercise, time for themselves, time for the children...all of that’s okay as long as you are conscious about it. I think personally the trick is to trade consciously and be very conscious that okay, I choose to do this.” (P11)*

This emphasis on finding ways to be authentic in a leadership role is reflected in a growing body of research literature that emphasises the merits of an emerging authentic leadership model (Avolio and Gardner, 2005). Central to this model is the professional identity of the individuals in leader roles whereby authentic leaders are defined as having a deep sense of self; are clear about their values and beliefs and as a result are able to sustain themselves their leadership roles over time (Avolio and Gardner 2005). This desire to maintain a sense of self and authenticity was reflected throughout the interviews. One participant noted that her increased self-awareness in coaching led her to be clear that staying true to herself did not mean *“climbing a corporate ladder whilst walking over someone else’s back”* and resulted in a reprioritisation of her career: *“I don’t aspire to the corner office. For me it’s about the quality of work and the people you work with.” (P9)*

Becoming clear about her professional identity and being true to herself (after having a child) was a process that another participant reflected on as part of her coaching experience. She noted:

*“I had to self reflect and work out that it was actually me who wanted to work and that I wasn’t just doing it so that my nanny had job continuity. That sounds straight forward but that actually took me months”. (P5)*

One participant reflected on this aspect of her executive coaching experience, saying: *“I think coaching was teaching me how to be myself (at work) and not trying to be anything that I wasn’t. It was very much about a blossoming.” (P9)*. Similarly having a clearer sense of who they were specific to their role was articulated by another participant as a result of her executive coaching experience: *“There’s a greater sense of what actually is important to me and drives my passion when it comes to work.” (P10)*.

These participant experiences highlighted the pivotal role that executive coaching can have in mediating the tension women leaders may experience between the expectations of their roles and their sense of self. In line with discourse on leadership identity development by DeRue et al (2009) individuals are thought to integrate a leadership identity through an interpersonal and iterative process involving both the individual’s own identity beliefs (or schema regarding their internal knowledge of what leadership looks like and whether this corresponds to their sense of self) as well as the social environment in which they work (whether they are claiming and being granted - by others - the leadership role in external interactions). In this way the interactive and interpersonal aspects of executive coaching can be seen to assist women to explore the aspects of their professional leadership identity, which will allow them to have an authentic approach to their leadership (a sense of leadership becoming a part of inner their self) and to thrive in their role through the acting and being given this identity in their social interactions.

## Tailoring of Executive Coaching for Women

The majority of participants suggested that a tailored approach to executive coaching for senior women was warranted in terms of the focus areas that could be addressed. Participants' thoughts were based on a reflection of their own experiences, aligned to some of the challenges that they had navigated in their career or that they had witnessed their colleagues encounter. In line with research (Leimon 2011, Galuk 2009, Broughton and Miller, 2004) the key focus areas nominated by participants included confidence building, communication, self promotion and networking skills, navigating a path toward promotion and managing career transitions. However, this position was not held uniformly by all participants, with a small number noting that the specific needs of women were also experienced by men and as a result, a gender neutral approach was appropriate. These differing views seemed to indicate the ways in which gender specific development approaches can represent a personally sensitive area for some participants. As highlighted by Peltier (2010) the topic of executive coaching for women is still an area fraught with tension as individuals attribute their own beliefs, biases and experiences to the area.

The commonality of themes and the prevalence of professional identity construction as a developmental opportunity across participant interviews suggested that a gender sensitive approach to coaching senior women is meaningful. An explanation of the suggested framework, which emerged from the interview data and an understanding of the relevant literature, is outlined in the following section.

## **Discussion**

### **Professional Identity Formation**

In analysing the emergent themes across participant interviews, this study suggests the ongoing identity formation of participants as leaders within their roles is a core developmental process within their executive coaching engagements. This approach emphasises the notion that leadership development programs (such as executive coaching) that focus on developing the skills and abilities of participants, but not identity development and gender, may be ineffective in achieving the anticipated results (Ibarra, Snook and Ramo 2008). The data presented in this report suggests the importance of recognising the identity aspects of each participant as an underlying theme in coaching engagements, being able to provide participants with an opportunity to explore and clarify questions such as: “Who am I in this senior role at work? And what do I need to do to succeed?” (Sealy and Singh, 2010, p.292).

This study suggests that the dynamic of participants engaging in their leadership role, combined with the explicit reflection of these experiences with their executive coach, can provide fertile ground for professional identity construction in an executive coaching engagement. This concept of identity formation through dialogue and reflection supports a range of theories of professional identity formation (Dutton et al 2010, DeRue 2009) which emphasise the complexity of identity construction as a result of an ongoing negotiation and reflection of the personal, social, past, future and current aspect of an individual’s life experiences.

This study also suggests that participants had progressed on a continuum or developmental path of professional identity construction in their coaching engagements and that, for some, they had achieved a well developed, leader self-concept. This conceptualisation builds on a developmental perspective of identity formation that focuses on the change in an individual’s identity over time (Dutton et al 2010, Hall 2002). In understanding the developmental impact of social resources such as role models or working with an executive coach, the study also suggested an adaptive process of identity development that is not dissimilar to the observations made by Ibarra (2007, 1999).

## Understanding Key Factors in Professional Identity Formation for Senior Women

Figure 1 captures these various aspects of professional identity formation for senior women that emerged from the participant interviews. The factors outlined capture one aspect of each participant's life experience – in this case the construction of a professional identity for senior women in their work. In keeping with the identity formation literature (Dutton et al 2010) it is important to recognise the multidimensional aspect of identity and the fact that a professional identity represents just one aspect of an individual's self definition. As a result, these factors, which emerged from participant career and coaching experiences, are a reflection of this aspect of participant's identities and Figure 1 does not attempt to reflect the multidimensional, varied identities of the participants in other settings, contexts or domains.

**Figure 1:** Factors Exploring Professional Identity Formation For Senior Women

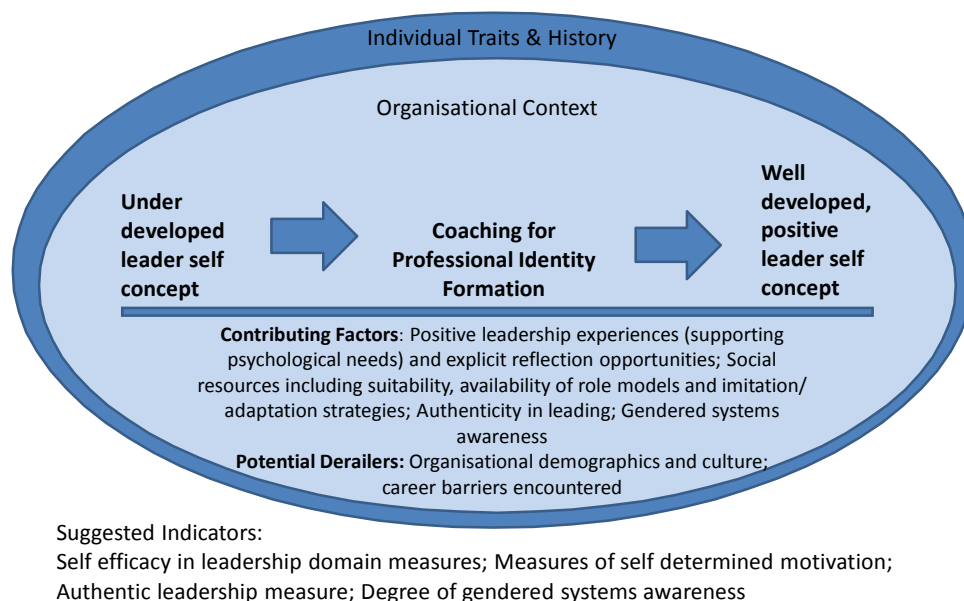


Figure 1 highlights the importance of recognising the individual complexity that participants bring to an executive coaching process. The role of executive coaching in helping clients to navigate both the external leadership environment and their own professional identity as a leader acknowledges the dialectic of recognising this individual complexity that each participant brings to the identity construction process and the impact of the unique organisational context in which they work. This perspective also suggests the gender differences in professional identity formation – particularly the impact of imbalanced

organisational demographics and the importance of relational identity aspects or social resources to the construction process of a woman's professional identity.

*Developmental path of professional identity formation.* A key aspect of the study is the developmental path or continuum of the participant's identity formation process. Participant comments indicated that they varied in their stage or phase of their professional identity process from an under developed leader self concept to a more fully formed leader identity, (highlighted in Figure 1).

*Contributing Factors.* There would also seem to be a range of factors that can facilitate the professional identity process and these are captured in Figure 1 under the subheading Contributing Factors. Based on the data, these include:

- participants' experience of positive leadership incidents;
- the capacity of work environments to satisfy their basic psychological needs of autonomy, competence and relatedness (Deci et al 1994);
- the opportunity to explicitly reflect on and narrate their leadership experiences (Stead and Elliott 2009);
- the range, availability and suitability of the participant's social resources (including role models, sponsors, executive coaches and other sources of support);
- the strategies employed by participants in relation to these social resources. Specifically imitation and adaptation strategies used with role models from both genders may be important in identity formation processes.
- achieving authenticity, a sense of being who they are in their role and leading from a "true to self" perspective.
- having insight into the gender aspects of their organisational context, understanding how they shape and are shaped by their environment. Eagly (2005) describes dynamic forces, including gender and traditionally male leader role requirements, that may interact to impede the efforts of female leaders to achieve authenticity and this perspective reinforces the importance of both gender and organisational awareness to the professional identity process. According to Stead and Elliott (2009) developing an awareness of gender and how gender is reproduced through organisational practices is a learning opportunity for women and men at all levels of organisations and this is reflected in this study.



*Potential Derailers.* The themes that emerged in the study suggest that potential derailers in constructing a positive professional identity as a leader include both the impact of the organisational context (demographics and culture) and the specific career barriers encountered by the individual participants. Career barriers include a lack of access to formal and informal networks and feelings of isolation and tokenism. The prevalence of gender stereotyped roles, difficulty in being promoted and the double burden of managing work and home are also extremely challenging to the process of identity construction, as is the impact of career breaks on career progression, the double bind of leadership behaviour due to gender stereotypes, and a lack of role models for senior women.

*Implications for Coaching Practice: Suggested Indicators.* Executive coaching engagements permit a broad range of developmental avenues or entry points. This study suggests that an initial step in a coaching process with female managers may include a series of explorations that help to locate the participant on the proposed leader identity continuum. That is, to investigate the degree to which the individual has or has not developed a professional identity as a leader. The research suggests key areas for investigation (captured under the heading of Suggested Indicators in Figure 1) which include:

- i) the participant's perceived self-efficacy in their leadership role;
- ii) the participant's self-determined motivation (the degree to which their behaviours are autonomous or controlled);
- iii) the perceptions the participant holds about leading from an authentic (true to self) perspective;
- iv) their awareness of the gendered aspects of their organisational context.

The study suggests that these are important aspects of the professional identity construction process for senior women. The degree to which participants feel confident in leading, are personally engaged in their role, are able to be themselves at work and can understand the implications of their environment may serve as useful pointers in identifying each participant's identity construction stage or phase. In exploring these key areas the study suggests that the individual's leader identity may become more explicit and this may help to direct the ongoing developmental tasks within the coaching engagement.

*Strength building.* This study has also highlighted the salience of a range of personal attributes and characteristics such as resilience and cognitive hardiness. These attributes seemed to have an important role to play in mitigating the impact of career barriers cited by

participants. This represents a strength building activity that can be addressed in executive coaching and, more broadly, form part of an explicit process of identity construction.

The gender perspective and professional identity construction framework that has emerged from participant experiences highlights the development of a professional identity as a leader as a core growth opportunity for senior women. In capturing the aspects of professional identity construction, the factors outlined in Figure 1 may provide a useful development guide for executive coach practitioners and organisations in exploring this perspective and realising the leadership potential of their senior women. Importantly the framework is not suggested as an alternative approach to executive coaching for leadership development in general but rather as an additional perspective, to complement the range of developmental perspectives already in use (Peltier 2010).

This study recommends that executive coaching be tailored to provide a forum for female participants to explore the ongoing negotiation of their inner self with their leadership role within organisations, in such a way that reflecting on these experiences will clarify or strengthen this aspect of their leadership identity (DeRue et al 2009). As shown in Figure 1, a gender perspective on professional identity formation brings into sharp focus the importance of each individual's personal traits and history and the unique organisational context in which they work including demographics and relational support in the workplace. The study recommends that executive coaching engagements with female managers should include a focus on their identity formation as a leader. Exploration of the contributing factors for identity formation as a leader, and the potential derailers, combined with an understanding of where participants are in this formation process is recommended to optimise the executive coaching outcomes for senior women.

*Research Limitations.* The limitations of this study include the cultural and geographical restrictions of the research due to the focus on senior women in Australia. Further, as participants were recalling their executive coaching experiences, an element of hindsight bias (Evers Brouwers, & Tomic, 2006) may have impacted the findings. Due to time and budget constraints, this study did not include a verification of the findings with the interview participants however there may be an opportunity to finesse this aspect of the research if further research on this topic is undertaken in the future.

#### Recommendations for Further Research:

The findings of this study suggest the need for further research exploring the impact of leader identity formation on the success of senior women in organisations. Suggested research questions may include:

- Does leader identity formation predict the leadership success of senior women?
- To what degree does executive coaching facilitate the formation of leadership identity for senior women?
- What are the factors that most strongly influence or enhance the formation of professional identity?

Research may also explore further the gender differences in leadership identity formation in organisations to optimise future development opportunities for women and men.

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## **Appendix 1 - Interview Guide for Female Managers**

### *Explanation about the study*

#### **GENERAL**

- Industry in which the interviewee works
- Size of company
- Information on gender density at different levels of the organisations in which the interviewees is based.
- What is your role? What level is your job in your organisation? How senior is your position within your company?

#### **CAREER HISTORY**

- Can you give me a general overview of your career to date: what steps you have taken?  
What are the things you have faced along the way to get to where you are today?

#### **COACHING**

- How would you describe your experience with executive coaching?
- How did it come about? What was the length, structure and general overview of the content?
- What was useful or not useful for you in this experience?

#### **TAILORING COACHING**

- What views do you have (if any) regarding the tailoring of executive coaching for women leaders?

Thank you so much for taking the time to share this with me.

## Appendix 2: Participant Information

### Women In Leadership Research Project 2010

#### Participant Information Statement

Thank you for your interest in the study entitled: Women In Leadership: Understanding How Executive Coaching Can Help Women Leaders Thrive in Corporate Australia. This study will take place over the next few months and aims to understand the ways in which Executive Coaching has been useful (or not) to women leaders and the ways in which it has assisted them most in their leadership journeys. This study is being conducted by Suzi Skinner, under the supervision of Dr. Gordon Spence.

In order to commence your involvement in the research interview, some basic demographic information (including contact details) will be collected prior to your interview. **All data collected will be kept strictly confidential, except as is required by law.** You will also be required to provide your written consent to participate in the study via a separate Consent Form which will be emailed to you.

Once you are accepted into the study, you will be required to engage in a 60 to 90 minute interview with Suzi Skinner. This interview will be recorded and transcribed for research purposes.

As the subject area being studied is designed to provide greater insight into the leadership journey for senior women, there are not expected to be any risks or inconveniences for participants involved in this research.

Participation in the program is completely voluntary. If you choose not to participate in the research or withdraw at any time this will be honoured by the researcher Suzi Skinner.

All information gathered will remain confidential, except as is required by law. If you have any questions relating to this research, please contact Suzi Skinner (Mob: 0414 210 416).

### **Appendix 3: Consent Form**

#### **Women in Leadership Research Project 2010**

##### **Consent Form**

I, [Click here to enter your name](#), give consent to my participation in the research project

**TITLE: Women In Leadership: Understanding How Executive Coaching Can Help Women Leaders Thrive in Corporate Australia**

In giving my consent I acknowledge that:

1. The procedures required for the project have been explained to me and any questions I have about the project have been answered to my satisfaction.
2. I have read the Participant Information Sheet and have been given the opportunity to discuss the information and my involvement in the project with the researcher.
3. I am aware of the risks and inconveniences associated with the project.
4. I understand that I can withdraw from the study at any time, without affecting my treatment or my relationships with the researcher now or in the future.
5. I understand that my involvement is strictly confidential and no information about me will be used in any way that reveals my identity.

Signed: \_\_\_\_\_ Date: \_\_\_\_\_

Name (please print)

[Click here to enter your name.](#)

\_\_\_\_\_

#### Appendix 4: Interview Participant Identifiers

Interview Participant Identifiers					
Coding Reference	Age	Reporting levels to CEO	Industry	Duration	Coaching Frequency
P1	40-50	4	Investment Banking	1 yr	Fort
P2	40-50	3	Investment Banking	6 months	Mthly
P3	40-50	2	Law	1 yr+	Mthly
P4	30-40	2	IT / Medical	2yrs+	Six wkly
P5	40-50	2	Hospitality	6 months	Mthly
P6	30-40	4	Banking	6 months	Mthly
P7	30-40	3	Pharmaceutical	12 months	Mthly
P8	30-40	4	Resources	12 months	Mthly
P9	30-40	3	TV	6 months	Fort
P10	40-50	3	Media	6 months	Fort
P11	40-50	3	Media	2yrs+	Mthly