

Online Executive Education for Women Leaders

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Abstract

Women today are increasingly becoming an integral part of the corporate world, as seen in the rising number of women assuming senior global leadership positions that were previously held by men. These women leaders are at the forefront of the business, political, societal, and multicultural scene, giving them a chance to create the type of world that they would like to live in and transform the position of women in the society. Despite the increase of women in the workforce, they continue to be underrepresented in managerial positions. It is critical that businesses take responsibility for creating a culture that values diversity and developing its women talent pipeline at all levels of management. This paper discusses the importance of women leaders and the various initiatives that companies can undertake to advance the careers of women in the workplace. The paper presents some findings of an online executive education course created specifically for women managers. The findings showed that the women participants were highly satisfied with the program. A significant part of the participants' learning came from the industry guest speakers who were successful female managers invited by the sponsor organization to share their experiences of moving through the ranks to senior level positions. The paper further examines the implications of the findings and concludes with possible future research.

Introduction

Women today are increasingly becoming an integral part of the corporate world, as seen in the rising number of women assuming senior global leadership positions that were previously held by men. These women leaders are at the forefront of the business, political, societal, and multicultural scene, giving them a chance to create the type of world that they would like to live in, and transform the position of women in the society.

In terms of achieving growth and profitability, women play an important role in public and private organizations. For example, a recent study of Fortune 500 firms found that those with more women in senior positions were 18 to 69 percent more profitable than median companies in their industries (Wolfe, 2010). Further, a McKinsey study of top European companies found that greater gender diversity resulted in higher than average stock performance (Desvaux, Devillard-Hoellinger, and Meaney 2008). Despite the increase of women in the workforce, they continue to be underrepresented in managerial positions. This gender gap is most evident at the senior management and executive levels due to the absence of training and professional development opportunities for women globally (Davis, 2012). As such, it is important for organizations to

increase the strength of women in mid to top-level positions, which would increase the likelihood of sustaining gender diversity at every level of the organization (Taneja, Pryor, and Oyler, 2012).

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Women Leaders

Women leaders bring with them a set of experiences and perspectives that differ from those of male leaders. Their styles of leadership are more relational-oriented, nurturing, caring, and compassionate. Research by Adler (1997) showed that global business women gain access more easily to new clients, suppliers, and government officials. They receive more time when meeting with international contacts and are more frequently remembered. This new perspective has been termed the "feminization of management" (Omar and Davidson, 2001) and is built on the recognition that women, while unique, are equally capable of making a valuable contribution towards the success of the organization. According to Alder (1997), most researchers credit women with some or all of the following qualities: empathy, helpfulness, caring, and nurturance; interpersonal sensitivity, attentiveness to and acceptance of others, responsiveness to their needs and motivations; an orientation toward the collective interest and toward integrative goals such as group cohesiveness and stability; a preference for open, egalitarian, and cooperative relationships, rather than hierarchical ones; and an interest in actualizing values and relationships of great importance to community. These unique qualities are important contributors of organizational success.

Recognizing the growing importance of women leaders is the first step in creating and understanding the type of global leadership that will lead to organizational success. It is vital that women have access to relevant development opportunities at all phases of their career (Knight, 2012). In the early stages of their career, women should be provided with opportunities to experiment and practice their skill set and abilities in a supportive environment (Dent and Holton, 2012). Women-only development programs can be an effective way of doing this, as many women feel free to discuss their particular issues and concerns in a supportive and safe climate.

There has been a long-standing discussion about whether or not to offer classes limited to one gender. Some studies have shown that women feel more at ease in single sex institutions when it comes to studying science and mathematics, with gender stereotyping coming out more in the curriculum in post high school in a co-educational environment than in a single sex environment (Sullivan, Joshi, and Leonard, 2010; 2011). In addition, there is strong support from research findings that emphasizes the value of women-only developmental programs. For example, there is considerable evidence that appropriate women-only education and training is of critical importance to women's career development (Clarke, 2011). Hence, women-only programs could be an effective way of enhancing a participant's skill set. As women advance into more senior and director level positions, organizations should help women gain experience that will prepare them for more senior appointments.

Company Initiatives for Women Leaders

Clearly, organizations play a vital role in reducing the barriers to women's advancement. Some factors that contribute to the career development and progression of women professionals include having a female role model or mentor who can help with time management, stress management, prioritizing, teamwork, and communication skills. Organizations can also implement initiatives such as the development of career advancement plans in consultation with senior management, and opportunities for continuous, life-long learning (Arifeen, 2010).

Companies should also consider implementing suitable initiatives that are effective in eliminating barriers and in leveraging opportunities for retaining and advancing women managers. This requires a sustained and coordinated commitment from top management. In order to nurture women employees, companies could sponsor women for leadership positions or roles within the organization, provide suitable training and development programs or access to further studies to advance leadership skills and attributes, and initiate leading edge succession planning processes that focuses on career, workplace, culture and work-life practices. Such initiatives can help women managers enhance their awareness of different leadership approaches and bring about new levels of confidence to help them achieve their professional goals.

Previous research has shown that training and development programs provide opportunities for women to develop self-awareness, undertake challenging assignments, improve their self-confidence, develop leadership skills, learn strategies for balancing work and personal life, and build strong support networks (O'Neil and Bilimoria, 2005; Weyer, 2007). These benefits have been identified as important elements in ensuring that women progress to senior positions in organizations and onto boards. Some relevant training and development programs include an Executive Women Leadership Program that adapts quickly to the changing needs of women in business. Such programs cover cross disciplines such as people leadership, negotiation, decision making, entrepreneurial thinking, managing change, corporate social responsibility, strategic thinking, and innovation management.

Women-Only Executive Education

Women-only development programs can be used to redress the gender imbalance within the ranks of middle to senior management. Executive courses catered specifically to women can also provide women professionals with relevant development opportunities throughout their career, as these women-only programs allow women to freely discuss their particular issues and concerns in a supportive and safe climate. These women-only courses provide an optimal learning environment for women to share and analyze the unique strengths, challenges, and opportunities facing women in business.

Some of the emerging courses women professionals should look out for include short courses in the areas of leadership, decision making, change management, innovation, entrepreneurship, corporate social responsibility, business strategy, and services. Such courses are normally offered on-campus as part of Executive Education at leading institutions such as University of California Berkeley, Rotman School of Management, and Stanford Business School.

Online Executive Certificate of Leadership for Women

GlobalNxt University offers an online program, the Executive Certificate of Leadership for Women, to meet the needs of busy women professionals. GlobalNxt University is a pioneering academic institution that delivers degree programs through a unique online global classroom

pedagogy. Through a state-of-the-art online learning platform, the University offers students highly interactive learning at anytime, from anywhere. The University's globally diverse student population is represented by over 72 different countries. In addition, through close industry partnerships, the University has talent development programs with over 100 multinational companies.

The Executive Certificate of Leadership for Women, facilitated by PhD qualified women faculty, is designed and customized to meet the training and professional development needs of women employees of a global company in the consulting, information technology, and outsourcing business. The company operates in more than 30 countries and employs about 160,000 employees.

The Executive Certificate of Leadership for Women is a 22-week online program (one week student orientation, 18 weeks covering six modules, two weeks for final reflective project, and one week for grading and moderation) aimed at delivering deep learning that is inclusive, meaningful, and authentic for its participants. The program provides a sound understanding of business leadership fundamentals that will equip women executives with the ability to manage innovation and value creation for all stakeholders. Apart from being flexible and efficient, the program is cost effective, as it brings international women faculty and industry leaders into the specially designed online community, greatly reducing the need for women executives to have to leave their work venues in order to participate in sessions.

As the program was designed by women for women, the faculty and industry leaders acknowledged the specific issues that women face such as juggling family and work responsibilities and managing dual-career relationships associated with pursuing career at the expense of family. As such, the program provided a high level of support as well as a safe environment for participants to share concerns in ways that may not have been possible in a mixed gender group. For example, many of the participants commented that they learned from each other through sharing experiences, discussing frustrations and exploring strategies for overcoming barriers to career advancement.

The program comprises the following six modules: People Leadership; Ethical Decision Making, Entrepreneurial Thinking, Managing Change, Corporate Social Responsibility, and Strategic Management for Innovative Businesses. These modules are designed to help the sponsor organization build capacity to realize its vision and strategies to lead the global IT industry. In order to integrate the learning outcomes of the various modules, students have to prepare an assessment portfolio consisting of their work in the online discussion boards (based upon relevant topics/case studies), and a final reflective project for developing their leadership profile. The online content and the course assessment items are developed by the program's female faculty, in close consultation with the sponsor's Human Resource Department.

Each module is delivered in a blended mode consisting of ongoing online asynchronous discussions, end of module reflective discussions, and two synchronous webinars over a period of three weeks, with a minimum of seven hours per week study time for the online component and two hours for each webinar session. The two webinars are facilitated separately, with the first webinar run by a female industry speaker selected by the sponsoring organization, and the second webinar conducted by the female faculty member.

Method

The data was collected from female students (n=16) who were enrolled in an online executive education program for women executives from December 2012 to June 2013. A total of 25

Indian based female executives were sponsored by a global company in the consulting, information technology, and outsourcing business, with the objective to advance the executives' leadership skills and attributes at the end of the course. Two surveys were administered, a pre- and post-course survey, as part of a requirement by the sponsoring organization. The response rate was 64 percent. The sample consisted of 16 female middle managers with an average working experience of 7.5 years. Half of the participants spent between 6 to 9 hours per week online, while 43.8 percent spent between 3 to 6 hours.

The survey was derived from the literature, and further refined via a focus group session consisting of learning designers and faculty who have experience in an online environment. All the variables used in this study were assessed using six-point Likert scales, with 1 representing "strongly disagree" and 6 representing "strongly agree."

Findings

A total of 75.1 percent of the participants felt that the various learning tools (e.g. discussion boards, self-assessment exercises, instant messenger) used in the program were effective. In view of this, one participant stated that "the discussion board posts helped a lot in the exchange of ideas, and the knowledge shared in each discussion board was very valuable". The end of module reflective discussion board also provided an opportunity for self-reflection as well as the chance to develop new leadership skills and competencies. The vast majority of the participants felt that the peer interaction in the program contributed to their learning (81.3 percent). Specifically, one of the participants stated that she "learned of [her] peers' experiences in the workplace through [her] peers' sharing of viewpoints on the different topics." As seen here, the opportunity for interacting with other women from a broad range of backgrounds has enhanced both learning and personal development.

The participants also felt that the program modules covered were relevant to their learning needs (93.3 percent), and the program modules were engaging (100 percent). The participants agreed that the online content and readings were useful (87.5 percent), and the program helped them build upon their abilities as a manager (87.6 percent). In addition to the program content, the participants experienced improved self-confidence due to the fact that they were being invited to join the program. This was seen as a strong indicator that senior management valued their contributions, recognized their potential, and was willing to invest in their ongoing development. This also signaled a greater likelihood of them moving into more senior positions and thus created positive career aspirations among the participants.

Moreover, the participants stated that the assessment items were sufficiently flexible to accommodate their learning styles and non-study related activities such as career, family, and travel (62.6 percent). To further reinforce this, one participant stated that "there is flexibility in learning and sharing, and the videos and case studies made a big impact." The participants also agreed that the assessment methods and feedback provided by the faculty in the program helped in their learning (80.1 percent). With regards to this, one of the participants stated that "the professors were excellent and there were a lot of training material and extensive library resources."

In general, the participants were highly satisfied with the program, with 91.6 percent rating their overall satisfaction with the program 4 and above. Some additional comments noted in the feedback section include the following: "the program organization was very good and the asynchronous mode was quite useful and well planned", "there was an opportunity to gain extra

and relevant knowledge without breaking from work- life”, “the course made a big impact”, and “the project work and case studies used were very insightful.”

A significant part of the participants’ learning came from the industry guest speakers who were successful female managers invited by the sponsor organization to share their experiences of moving through the ranks to senior level positions. In particular, they shared stories about the barriers they had faced, the challenge of finding work-life balance, tips for gaining support from mentors and coaches, and how to set more challenging career goals. As role models, they provided practical examples to integrate the theoretical aspects of the program, thus reinforcing learning at the end of each module.

As seen from the findings, the Executive Certificate of Leadership for Women met the training and professional development needs of the women employees of the sponsor organization. The program modules offer an educative component in terms of developing skills in People Leadership; Ethical Decision Making, Entrepreneurial Thinking, Managing Change, Corporate Social Responsibility, and Strategic Management for Innovative Businesses. GlobalNxt University is currently working with the sponsor organization to deliver a second batch of the program for the next group of women managers. In addition, the university has opened the program to other organizations who would like to help their high-potential managers and mid-level executives advance into more senior level positions of greater authority and influence. Consequently, it is critical that businesses take responsibility for creating a culture that values diversity and developing its women talent pipeline at all levels of management. Only then, will more women emerge as successful global leaders on a world stage in the 21st century.

Limitations and Future Research

The data for this study is limited to a batch of 16 students from a single global organization, with all the participants based in India. Future research should extend the scope of data collection to include larger samples of students from a variety of organizations from different countries and industries to further investigate the generalizability of these findings. Specifically, several research questions emerge. Does participants’ country of origin or sponsors’ type of industry play a role in determining the effectiveness of online executive education? How can organizations design and deliver effective online executive education programs for their women managers? These questions provide interesting topics for further study.

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