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Coaching and Mentoring: Narratives of women in leadership

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Overview

"Coaching and mentoring are also seen as important tools in helping to develop female leaders. In many contexts, there is a significant shortage of female leaders in civil society, due to prevailing cultural and social norms. Coaching or mentoring is increasingly used in leadership development programmes for women, especially because they can develop confidence and self-belief" (Deans et al, 2006:1)

This research explored the influence coaching, mentoring and role models have had on female leaders through their narratives

Research Objectives:

- Explore life histories to understand significant people and events in the lives of female leaders and the influence these have had
- Understand whether female leaders have engaged in coaching or mentoring (or both) either formally or informally
- Analyse whether gender influences the choice of coach/mentor/role model

Research Methods

- The study used a qualitative approach drawing on the embodied lives of female leaders, through the following:
 - critical event life histories (Bheenuck, 2010; Scott, 1991; Biesta et al, 2005),
 - artefacts (Clandinin and Connelly, 2000), and
 - unstructured discussions (Riessman, 2008).
- There were 7 female participants: in the main mid 40s-early 50s, bar one participant who has reached Director Level in her early 30s. There is a mix in terms of current family life, and women with/without children. All the women have completed an MBA programme.
- Using a narrative inquiry approach allowed the voices of these women to be heard and their stories to be brought to life (Bleakley, 2005; Clandinin and Connelly, 2000; Patterson, 2013)

The Participants

Name	Age	Role	Overview
Kate	Early 30s	Working in private sector, consultancy	In transitional space, moving to new Director role. Grew up in North West, parents divorced at young age. Rapid career growth since completing MBA in 2016
Amy	Early 50s	Working in private sector, facilities management	Working as a senior manager in procurement. Married twice with adult children from first marriage. Moved from South to North England for career. Completing her MBA and wants to break the current barrier of there being no females on the Board in the company she works for.
Jane	Late 40s	Working in public sector, Higher Education	Academic, part of the leadership team in a University in North of England. Came from a working class family (self quoted). Moved into academia in 2007, working on her self esteem which is helping her career to grow
Michelle	Late 40s	Working in public sector, NHS	Senior leader working at Director Level in an NHS Trust in the North of England. Divorced parents. She is married with no children. Her career has been varied and she moved to NHS in 2009 and is very passionate about the NHS and her career. She has had to overcome health problems
Claire	Late 40s	Working in private sector, multinational	Group Level Director of a multinational company; in a transitional period at the time of the interview, moving to being self employed. In her early career she ran her own business. Brought up by her maternal grandmother from being 6 days old. She overcame cancer at 18 years old, has more recently been diagnosed with cancer again. Married with no children and lives in the North of England.
Tracey	Mid 40s	Working in private sector, multinational	Director role, as a recent promotion, in a multinational company. Her career has meant she has moved around the UK She is divorced and has two children. She is still close with her friends from primary school.
Sharon	Late 40s	Late 40s, working in public sector, Council	Senior management role in a Council. Her career has been varied including working in banking and as a Director in a 3 rd sector organisation. She has one child with ex-husband and recently married her childhood sweetheart! Came to higher education later in her career and achieved a BA (Hons) in 2013 and then an MBA in 2018. She is from, and continues to live, in the North of England, in the town she grew up in.

An example of the critical events life history form

Year	Age	Any significant events for you - please note them in the years	Historical Context
1989	18	Hospital – ovarian cancer	Fall of Berlin Wall Hillsborough Disaster
1990	19		Mad Cow Disease Thatcher resigns
1991	20		Gulf War
1992	21	21 st birthday – limo & dinner in XXX	John Major elected
1993	22		Jamie Bulger murder Waco Tragedy
1994	23	Met partner at XX ice rink	Channel Tunnel opens
1995	24	Moved from XX to XX – moved in with partner (Flat) Maldives with partner - Monsoon	Barings Bank fails OJ Simpson Trial
1996	25		Dunblane <u>Masacre</u> Charles and Di divorce
1997	26	Bahamas with partner - Hurricane	Tony Blair elected Lady Diana car crash
1998	27		Good Friday agreement
1999	28	Bought house in XX with partner Got engaged to partner	Min. Wage introduced Y2K panic
2000	29	Married partner in St Lucia Moved gran from XX to XX	<u>Millenium Dome</u> <u>Dr. Shipman</u>
2001	30		Foot and Mouth 9/11 Tragedy Blair re-elected
2002	31	Grandma died after having a stroke Fell out with mother	Common Wealth Games Manchester Brazil win World Cup



Artefacts

Analysis and Stories



- The following section draws on
 - **Stage 1:** Listening for the plots: In keeping with the concept of storytelling, the defined plots have taken on the mantle of the start, the middle and the end, as all great stories have! The focus is on the voices here, as Gilligan et al (2006:257) referred to the *"identification of stories being told"*
 - Plot 1: The Matriarch - early influence;
 - Plot 2: On the journey - early inspiration; and
 - Plot 3: Becoming the role model/mentor/coach.
 - **Stage 2:** Composing an analysis: this stage focused on pulling the stories together and the learning in relation to their shared stories.
 - This element will explore both the positive and negative experiences of these female leaders. There were also stories on the choice of mentor (Rutkove, 2016); whether gender influenced this (Tolar, 2012); and whether the relationships were more formal, or informal (Townsend, 2002); sponsorship (Merrick, 2017) or developmental mentoring (Garvey, 2014), and the benefits felt from their experiences.

Plot 1: The Matriarch - early influence



"My mum was my role model. She was in a generation where women didn't work, and necessarily work full-time and have good jobs. And despite all that, she went to night school, she went to the poly, to XXX Polytechnic, and got her diploma. And she did her A Levels part time, and she did really well in her role" (Sharon)."

.. "Because I don't want them to suffer, and I don't want them... they don't get everything; I don't spoil them. But they need to have the support at home, and they need to have a role model to look at; because their dad isn't. So, they have to... I feel like I have to do all of that; which puts a lot on my shoulders ... but there isn't anyone else." (Tracey)

"My grandma always brought me up to be very positive... Things can upset you; things can affect you for a period of time, but actually you've always got to look at the positivity, you've always got to be able to stand on your own two feet, be independent and just move through it and use those examples so that you can teach other people how they can come through things. I think, for me, it's made me very strong, so I can get over things quite easily." (Claire)

Plot 2: On the journey - early inspiration



- *“when I was about 19, 20, I went for an interview in procurement, because I'd been studying to be an accountant at that point. And I met this guy who was then to be my boss for about 12 years, who was just larger than life. And he just really took me under his wing and really worked hard to make me really the person that I am today, or part of the person that I was today.” (Amy)*
- *[early career] “I was in a job where I was doing a lot of work on quality improvement. And the organisation had a management consultant called Jane. And she did a lot of work with us on it...and she was a really flamboyant woman and encouraged me to be ambitious and think more about what I could achieve and gave me a lot of feedback about what I was doing well and built up my confidence quite a bit. And I've stayed in touch with her over the years, only in passing, but she likes to hear what I'm up to and she's been long-retired by now.” (Michelle)*
- *“... it wasn't until I kind of left school, went to work, that I felt I became a bit like me again and a bit like I'd got something to offer ... particularly my first job, I remember working with a female manager and her really building my confidence back up again and saying, “You can do this, you can achieve, you can do these things,” and her helping me to get back on that confidence track.” (Jane)*

Plot 2: On the journey - early inspiration – lack of mentors

- *"So, I started at 18, and I was promoted when I was 24, so it was six years really, just messing around. And if I'd had got somebody coaching me and mentoring me and saying, "Come on.. you could do this, or you could do that. Have you thought about that?" It would have been different, and I could have got that first promotion a bit earlier. I wouldn't say I was lacking self-confidence back then." (Sharon)*
- *"And to have somebody from an early age would have definitely helped in my career. I wouldn't have made the choices I made if I had a mentor who I could have just had a frank, open conversation with. They'd have, I'd have changed doing what I was doing." (Tracey)*



Plot 3: Becoming the role model, coach or mentor

- *"Being a female role model is becoming really important to me now. And I've now got a mentee, who is female, and she's just wonderful, and I really want to do the best job I can, to give her all of the access to things that she hasn't got access to at the moment." (Amy)*
- *"I've mentored about three or more, over time. I've got one or two that are ongoing. But they're all women, yeah. Because I think in that sense, what's happening within our company - the women in the company - are all looking for a female mentor." (Tracey)*
- *"a lovely lady, only a junior at the time, she was struggling because she was in clinic, in a role that was all very male. She wanted to learn, she wanted to progress, she felt that she was being stifled by her boss. He did not want to take her on, he was forced. She wanted to progress, develop, move forward, and she wanted some hints and tips, initially, about how she could do it. From there we sort of developed, I got her onto an IDP, onto a learning plan. We got her onto a training scheme at work, where she was doing her degree. She now heads up, at a European level, a programme management team." (Claire)*
- *"I think over the years I've offered support to people either who have asked for it, or if they've been in my team and they're moving on and I've said, 'If you want to come and have a bit of chat and mentoring or a bit of support, coaching, whatever you want to call it.' So, I've done a bit of that and I suppose I try and take a lead in managing a coaching style, which has been something I've had to work hard on because my style is to say, 'What you need to do is...' And, 'If I were you, I would...'"(Michelle)*



Story 1: Stories of coaching, mentoring and role modelling in the workplace

- **Female mentors for women:** Strong views of male dominated industries needing to have female role models and mentors for early career women (Chisholm-Burns, 2017). Claire, as an engineer and having "grown up" in a male world, was very passionate about bringing young women into the environment. Tracey reflected that her mentors have all been women, and that this had not been a conscious decision. She stated, *"they've all been strong women; that's for sure"*.

Kate, as a young senior leader, identified with never having had a mentor. This is a very successful, early thirties woman, who has pushed the ceiling and achieved Director level at a young age: she wanted to be challenged, she wanted a woman that had understood her struggles, and had *"guidance and to keep challenging me and pushing me to ask me why I'm doing things. Not to just accept what I'm doing all the time... I'd go for a woman, that's been in a male dominated career, that's said, 'I'm not going to listen to this; I'm going to fight through it'"* (Tolar, 2012; Czerniawska and Guzman, 2016; Jackson, 2019).

- **Career progression for women:** All the women felt that mentoring for early career women would lead to the potential for having more women in senior positions in the business. Early career mentoring can lead to increased self esteem and confidence; and therefore, open up more opportunities (Liang et al, 2002). Amy had very strong views about the benefits of women in the boardroom stating *"becoming a senior female woman because you're behaving like a man is not necessarily the right way forward. And I think having diversity in teams is really important, and I can see where I work now there's no diversity in that boardroom at all and it suffers as a result of the lack of diversity, definitely."*

Story 1: Stories of coaching, mentoring and role modelling in the workplace

- **Informal mentoring:** The majority talked about developing informal mentors outside of a formal scheme (Durbin, 2010; Singh et al 2002). Several of the ladies recognised the need for formal mentoring in early career, but now it would have to be about the relationship. The relationship element was driven through all their stories and how they also work with their mentees. She didn't focus just on hierarchical level, although this was a consideration: *"their skills and the kind of relationship rather than what they'd actually achieved. I think if they can ask me the right questions then it'd be fine. But I guess somebody that's been potentially higher in an organisation and has come across some of the challenges that I get, that'd be helpful."* Her new organisation had a specific mentoring engagement with Women Ahead, and she was being actively encouraged to join this when she arrived, and the mentor would be her choice. she said that she needed to meet people first before she would choose as she needed to understand whether she would be happy speaking to them (Noe, 1988).
- **Need for mentoring in senior career:** Most of them felt they would need mentoring for their next level positions (Czerniawska and Guzman, 2016). As Michelle takes the next step towards being a CEO she would make her choice of mentor by looking *"at the leader that I thought mirrored some of the values and behaviours that I have and the type of leader I would want to be"* which reiterates the need for relationship and to be organised by the individual not a formal scheme.

Story 2: Stories of 'Confidence'

- **Impostor phenomenon:** Senior women, top of their career, still allowing negative self talk to influence their confidence in the workplace (Sherman, 2013). Several of the women used the term “impostor”. Four of the interviewees had been having coaching to address this. Kate, as the youngest director, talked about changing jobs and the impact her previous CEO had on her confidence levels. Her view was she wanted to start the new job and “... *just be me on a good day. Not me on the day when I feel like I've got impostor syndrome. I just want to do that all the time*”.
- **Impact of upbringing:** Views of how women were seen in the family has impacted on performance now and how easily their confidence can go up and down. Jane felt her upbringing left her with a low sense of confidence, she was never seen to be as good as her brother “... *I became quite reserved, quite quiet, never spoke; and, I suppose, that did have an implication on my confidence*” She also referred to a feedback from a male colleagues recently and said upbringing “*I'm feeling like there's this link that I've heard from childhood to now, of a man saying that you're not good enough*”.
- **Boosting Confidence:** For some of the ladies, a recent coaching engagement has enhanced their confidence and they were feeling that they had started to rebuild. Tracey discussed having been through dark times both personally and professionally and the knock she had taken but through coaching and returning university to study for an MBA she said “*it's made my confidence really grow again. And it's given me some of me back again.*”

Story 2: Stories of 'Confidence'

- **Points of criticism:** Several of the ladies talked about receiving negative feedback and taking this to heart, Michelle said she manages 1500 staff but sometimes ... *"there are times when it does knock my own confidence and then, it even makes me question whether I do know what I'm doing"*
- **Feeling undermined in the workplace:** Claire had been through a difficult situation in the workplace and discussed some horrendous accusations being thrown at her, and these had been made by one of her female members of staff, this has left her feeling under confident. She found it hard to believe that a woman could do this to another woman in this male dominated environment. *I think that's what knocked my confidence, being, 'How could people do that to people?'"* She has started to reflect back on the situation and stated that she is *"feeling my least confident. I actually find that sometimes, in the morning, I get up and I go, 'Oh, god!' I've never, ever felt like this before"* I could feel through the interview that this was not her natural position, this felt confusing to her, this sense of lack of confidence, and that she is now on a "rebuild" phase (Kübler-Ross, 1969); there is a sense of an ending and loss and a rebuild of her own work and life persona.
- **Perception of gender difference:** Some of the women felt like men exuded more confidence in the organisation but also the willingness to be vulnerable was a potential strength of female leaders. This concurred with Carlin et al (2018:765) who discussed the need to discourage female practice of "equating low confidence with low competence". *"I think men, generally, have more confidence and far more bravado about the whole thing. Whereas a woman [would say].., 'I just don't know what I'm doing. Can you help me?' They'll be much more open to talking and listening; whereas blokes are more guarded, and they don't want to look weak. This is the way I would see it"* (Tracey)

Objective 1: Explore life histories to understand significant people and events in the lives of female leaders and the influence these have had

The concept of the early matriarchal role model and upbringing has had an impact on who these women are today in their roles as female leaders. This linked with research of Mendez-Morse (2004), in that their strongest role model and first mentor was their 'mother'.

The impact these people had on their lives and their careers, either consciously or subconsciously, the idea of the family member either saying they could be whatever they wanted to be or reminding them of their background and not encouraging them to be something different!

Their critical events diaries also highlighted key turning points in their lives and careers, this could have been through having children, divorce or physically moving from one end of the country to another for a job. The drive and determination came from their early influences.

Objective 2: Understand whether female leaders have engaged in coaching or mentoring (or both) either formally or informally

Boundaries blurred in terms of who they considered to be mentors and the use of the term role model, mentor and coach; which for some of them were used interchangeably (Shapiro et al, 1978; Spriezer, 1981; Levison et al, 1991; Townsend, 2002; Mendez-Morse, 2004; Fried and MacCleane, 2009; DiRenzoe et al, 2013; Stanton-Salazar and Spina, 2013; Durbin and Tomlinson, 2014) .

In some organisations, once they have reached a senior management level, mentoring was no longer seen as being important, whereas this research evidenced, at this stage in their careers, it is more important to have a mentor from a more developmental, than a sponsorship position (Ehrich, 2008) .

There also seemed to be much more focus on the benefits of an informal mentoring relationship (Byman, 2015), perhaps a more focused 'group mentoring' or 'peer-mentoring' model for women may be a useful step forward and should be something to be considered (Benjamin and Rojas, 2018; Buechel et al, 2018). Similarly, Jackson's (2019) PhD study on women in leadership and mentoring found that informal mentoring, through her research with 10 women, was the most commonly discussed and useful relationship.

There was also a need for the early career sponsorship mentoring. Gender did not seem to play a big part in this, however having someone that can help to navigate the organisation in early career felt beneficial for these women, in terms of early confidence; and for some of the women felt this would have expedited their career advancement (Sandberg, 2013; Groysberg and Bell, 2012; Scheepers, 2018).

Objective 3: Analyse whether gender influences the choice of coach/mentor/role model

Gender has been an interesting discussion throughout. My conclusion would be that the majority of the female leaders' stories involved influential women in their lives

However, this has not necessarily impacted on their choices of mentor.

For some of them, having a more sponsorship mentoring relationship within their organisation in early career has been more beneficial, whilst for others having a female role model that represents their values and morals, has been their inspiration (Tolar, 2012; Chisholm-Burn, 2017; Jackson, 2019) .

Recommendations

- The stories that were told have given an insight into the views of senior female leaders and consideration needs to be given to an approach which allows mentees the opportunity to source a mentor through a more informal method and to not design a one size fits all approach to coaching and mentoring (Tolar, 2012)
- Sponsorship or protégé mentors in early career women can help with confidence and the organisational navigation and career progression (Sandberg, 2013; Groysberg and Bell, 2012; Scheepers, 2018)
- There needs to be consideration of gender, in terms of mentor choice, if there is a more formal scheme ((Tolar, 2012; Chisholm-Burn, 2017; Jackson, 2019))
- Coaches and mentors need to be trained; this is not about ego!
- Have an option for external mentoring or coaching. Organisations need to encourage external networking for staff to allow them to meet different people from different industries to expand their own knowledge, and perhaps through those wider networks they would establish the more informal mentoring networks. I recognise this may be hard to manage, but by encouraging external networks, there is potential for more informal peer to peer mentoring which can be beneficial for female leaders later in their career (Czerniawska and Guzman, 2016).



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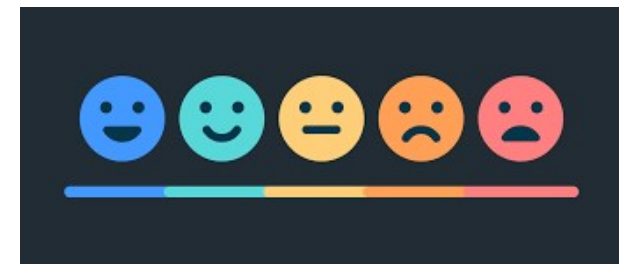
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