

Women's Leadership Development Programs: What Is Working Well Now?

An increasing sense of urgency to attract, develop, and retain the best talent to lead in the unpredictable global marketplace of the future has put pressure on corporations to develop potential women leaders and create more gender-balanced organizational leadership. In addition, the #MeToo and #TimesUp movements have put a spotlight on ways that a lack of gender-balanced leadership contributes to maintenance of organizational cultures that turn a blind eye to sexual harassment and gender-based discrimination. Debebe et al. note that “the quest to develop talent across all workforce segments coupled with the persistent underrepresentation of women in leadership positions in organizations across the globe has led to increasing demand for women’s leadership development programs (WLDP) over recent years.”¹ It is now widely understood that it is not enough for women to learn and practice leadership skills in WLDPs only to return to organizations in which unfair attitudes, policies, and practices, (known as second-generation bias), create barriers to women advancing to leadership roles. For this reason, scholars suggest it is important for WLDP’s to incorporate a dual agenda of developing women leaders and changing organization cultures so that diverse talent can emerge and thrive.²

For more than twenty years, scholar practitioners have been refining the theoretical frameworks and practices used in WLDPs. The goal of this research, is to gather and share current knowledge from experienced scholar practitioners who have designed and managed customized corporate WLDPs,³ and to find answers to the following questions:

- What is currently working well in the corporate programs they have designed?
- What recent innovations have had the most impact on women’s leadership development?
- What results are they seeing in terms of women’s advancement and organizational learning and change?

This research examines these programs as they relate to four principles that are frequently cited as important for designing WLDPs that reflect the dual agenda of developing women leaders and changing organization cultures:⁴

1. Engage men as allies in this dual agenda.
2. Embed WLDPs within the context of the organization to change organization culture.
3. Build a strength-based leadership identity to counter negative stereotypes.
4. Educate women and organizations involved in WLDPs about gender dynamics and second-generation bias.

For this study each participating scholar-practitioner was asked to identify and describe one recently-designed customized corporate WLDP program that reflects current practices and innovations that seem to be having an impact. These case studies will be the reference for understanding more about current and innovative practices utilizing the four design principles.

Design Principle #1: Engage Men as Allies

Much has been written⁵ about the need to engage men as allies in creating more inclusive work cultures because men still constitute the vast majority of senior leaders in most organizations. Men can become allies when they develop a deep understanding of gender dynamics and the role of unconscious bias in maintaining systemic barriers for women. When this understanding leads to an earnest desire to get involved in changing unfair attitudes, policies and procedures, men and women can work together as allies to change organizational cultures. The participants in this research shared a variety of approaches they utilize in their WLDP’s to engage men as allies.

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Design Principle #2: Embed WLDPs in the Organization

Scholars agree that for real culture change to occur, the WLDP must be embedded in the organization, not just delivered as a stand-alone leadership training event.⁶ Our participants offer different ideas about how to do this. Some of our research participants felt that WLDPs must be part of the organization's business strategy, which should include a clear business case for advancing women as well as goals for women's advancement in the organization. Other research participants spoke about the need for WLDP participants to engage in high-visibility, high impact projects defined by the organization as a way to embed WLDP's.

Design Principle #3: Build Strength-Based Leadership Identity

Many of our research participants mentioned that they agreed with scholars that a strength-based approach to women's leadership development is more effective than a deficit approach.⁷ Scholars suggest that women's leadership development work is identity work because it may be hard for women to see themselves as leaders. Recent studies demonstrate that when asked to draw a leader, both women and men almost always draw a man.⁸ Other scholars note that when women are exposed consistently to leaders who fit only one profile (men), they may unconsciously internalize the message that women are not leaders, and, therefore, that they are not leaders.⁹ Using strength-based approaches, such as including successful women role models as guest speakers, strength-focused 360 degree feedback, strength-based coaching, theater-based exercises that give an embodied experience of leadership and the creation of leadership statements can help develop and reinforce leadership identity. Participants in this research reported using a variety of strength-based approaches in their programs.

Design Principle #4: Educate Women and the Organization on Gender Dynamics and Second-Generation Bias

The participants in this study agree that the skills of effective leadership are the same for women and men. What's different is that women need strategies to overcome the ways they are blocked from attainment of leadership, even though they have the same skills. Because of this, women and organizations need awareness of the research on gendered organizations, i.e., organizations that favor and reward masculine values and practices that create barriers and double binds for women. Our research participants offer several innovative ideas for ways to educate both women and organizational leaders on gender dynamics and second-generation bias.

Research Case Studies

Case Study: Simmons Executive Education

Simmons School of Business in Boston, Massachusetts, has specifically focused on advancing women in their careers for more than 40 years through undergraduate, graduate and executive education. Simmons offers customized women's leadership development programs for a number of corporate clients.

Simmons offers several examples of innovations and best practices in a recently customized corporate WLDP related to Principles #1, #2 and #4: engaging men, embedding the WLDP within the context of the organization and educating the women and the organization about gender dynamics and second-generation bias. Simmons uses the Four Frames Model to inform the structure of its program with a focus on the dual agenda of preparing women for advancement and preparing organizations for more balanced leadership. The purpose of the program is not to "fix" the women. The purpose is for participants to gain a nuanced view of how gender dynamics are playing out in the organization, to better understand how gender may be having an impact, and then to decide what *they* want to do about it. The program features a session on gender and leadership in which participants use a live case to talk specifically about how gender plays out in their organization and actions they could take individually or collectively to shift the culture to be more inclusive.

The Fourth Frame of the Four Frames Model is a particularly important determinant of Principle #1, engage men, in the design of this program. Kolb et al. note that Frame 4 starts from the premise that organizations are inherently gendered and that in order to bring to light deeply held, and often unquestioned assumptions that keep organizational cultures in place, men must be part of a process of inquiry, experimentation and learning about how gender bias is operating.¹⁰ One of the fourth frame components in this program is to have men allies come in to talk in groups with the women about small changes the organization could make to achieve gender equity. Men in senior leadership positions are invited to come in at the midpoint of the second and final session in this program. They introduce themselves to the whole group over lunch, then work in groups with the participants. To correct for hierarchy and gender dynamics, the men are instructed to primarily listen to the discussion of the women about how gender dynamics may be having an impact in the organization. The wom-

en talk about possible small wins the organization could achieve in regard to gender equity, with a focus on changes in policies and practices. At the end of the small group sessions the senior men report back to the group as a whole about what they learned and their thoughts about actions they could take as allies to help create a more equitable culture.

Case Study: Cranfield University

The Cranfield University School of Management, Cranfield, U.K., is an exclusively postgraduate University with 25 years of research into women's leadership. In addition to academic and executive education courses, the Cranfield School of Management customizes WLDPs for international corporate clients who want to implement the latest thinking on women's leadership development and leadership practices.

The purpose of the program is not to “fix” the women. The purpose is for participants to gain a nuanced view of how gender dynamics are playing out in the organization, to better understand how gender may be having an impact, and then to decide what they want to do about it.

Cranfield offers examples of innovations for Principles #1, #3 and #4 - engaging men, building strength-based leadership identity and educating women and the organization about gender dynamics and second-generation bias. Cranfield recently designed two interactive WLDPs for a corporate client to support the CEO's goal of increasing the number of women in the top three levels of the organization to 30% within 12 months. While the goals of this particular program are to increase the number of women in senior leadership and to change the organizational culture, one innovative component of the program is designed to address the way the women themselves live out unconscious gender bias. The program design developed by Cranfield to address this particular component of the change process are described here and involve development of two WLDP's, Level One and Level Two, that run interactively with each other.

The Level One program is for senior women who are just below the CEO, and the focus of their program is on leadership. They meet for two and a half days, with most of that time spent in structured strength-based coaching groups with a professional coach. They also engage in theater-based exercises. The developers believe that this model helps women build leadership self-advocacy through

understanding what they bring to leadership. The women make presentations about their current contributions to the organization as leaders. The Level One women each have an executive sponsor for six months who advocates for her advancement and access to high-visibility opportunities. At the same time, the woman is teaching the executive about the issues she faces. The Level One women also have two individual coaching sessions with a professional coach after the WLDP ends.

The Level Two program is for participants who are just below the senior women, and the focus is on career. They meet for three days and have peer coaching groups without a professional coach. The senior women in the Level One program are mentors for the more junior women. The program designers explain that having senior women mentor the junior women is intended to overcome a common gender dynamic where senior women often act out unconscious gender bias by not supporting junior women. This dynamic can also be understood as an enactment of internalized negative stereotypes, or internalized oppression and has been described by scholars as common in many marginalized groups.¹¹

After both WLDPs are complete, the two groups meet for one and a half days in a combined closing event to build a sense of community and ongoing commitment to connection across the levels. This structure is designed to have the potential to increase the impact women have on changing the culture of the organization.

The Cranfield developers do not refer to their women's programs as WLDP's because they feel WLDP's have gotten a bad name and imply a need to “fix the women.” Instead, they call these programs Accelerating Difference programs. Executive men are involved with the consultants in tracking the progress of their ambitious effort to increase the number of women in senior leadership. Senior men leaders, including the CEO, attend the opening dinner to launch the program and stress its importance. They participate in discussions with the women about why they all think there are so few women at the top of the organization. Senior men leaders return for a panel discussion on issues the women have raised on the final afternoon of the program. The purpose of engaging men leaders in these different forums and structures is to educate them in an interactive way about gender dynamics and the impact of structural challenges for women in their organizational systems, and to engage them as allies.

Case Study: The Paradigm Forum GmbH

The Paradigm Forum GmbH (TPF), a global consultancy and think tank based in Switzerland, operates at the intersection of social justice and workplace innovation. The Paradigm Group is noted for its research capabilities and programs in workplace design and cross-cultural management. One major focus of their work with corporations is the design of programs and processes that address discrepancies in how women and men experience the climate or culture of their company. TPF embeds their WLDPs within a three to five-year client engagement that begins with a culture audit. They have the possibility of gradually impacting policies and practices, including the reward systems.

One recent program provides example for Principles #1 and #2, engaging men and embedding a WLDP in the organization to change the culture. The results of the culture audit showed that women in the organization were frustrated and angry. After the first WLDP, the participants gave a presentation about what they learned in the WLDP to senior leadership. As a result, the executive committee asked the consultants to work with the senior men on how to be inclusive leaders.

The consultants modified the original women-only program for an audience of only men and it became a regular offering that began to shift the culture. In subsequent culture audits, senior men were perceived as being more empathetic and engaged with the company's inclusion strategy. Men reported feeling more effective and supportive as leaders; they were more directly engaged in talent management concerns and showed more willingness to create opportunities and promotions for women. Women's advancement increased by 15%- 25% over the following three years.

In addition, a sponsorship program evolved out of the WLDP. The sponsorship program included a "boot camp" for participants and their sponsors who co-created a tool kit as part of the experience. The sponsorship program and supporting boot camp became ongoing programs, and the boot camp became a leadership development opportunity for senior-level women and men.

The success of the sponsorship program and boot camps had a positive impact on retention and became part of the organization's branding to attract and retain talent. What made it work? The CEO was 100 percent behind it and was also a role model as he sponsored several women as part of his senior leadership role. Rewards were built into the performance management system, with 25 % of the discre-

tionary bonus being based on an assessment of diversity and inclusion competencies. The client company has become known as an inclusive organization and has increasingly been able to attract and retain talented women.

Case Study: Babson College Executive Education

Babson College is a private business school established in 1919 to focus on entrepreneurship education. Located in Wellesley, Massachusetts, Babson offers undergraduate and graduate MBA degrees as well as Executive Education and customized corporate programs. Their women's leadership development programs focus on harnessing existing strengths, building new competencies, and developing an entrepreneurial mindset.

A recent Babson WLDP demonstrates Principles #2, #3 and #4, building strength-based leadership, embedding WLDP's within the context of the organization and educating women and organizations.

The strength work in the WLDP for this corporate client is set up as a 360-degree feedback process. Participants receive feedback about their strengths from their current employer, past employer, current and past direct reports, family, friends, community, and others. This feedback fosters an understanding for each woman of her perceived value as an individual leader. The strengths identified in the feedback become a thread that each participant weaves into her learnings about herself as a leader and an entrepreneur.

Each participant in the WLDP must work with her manager to design a project that is outside the scope of her regular job and will both contribute to her advancement and visibility in the organization, and be good for the enterprise. The participants' managers are engaged upfront about how to support the women during the two sessions of the program. The managers, and other senior leaders, are invited to attend the project presentations at the end of the program and to offer sponsorship-type support rather than evaluation. Senior leaders report excitement about becoming aware of new leadership talent, and sometimes become supporters and sponsors of these projects and the women presenting them after the program is complete.

The program includes teaching components on gender dynamics and second-generation bias both for the women in the WLDP and for their managers. Managers participate in an up-front phone orientation, a teaching segment on gender between sessions, and a presentation on outcomes at the end of the program.

Case Study: Marsha Clark and Associates

Marsha Clark and Associates (MC&A) is a global consultancy established in 2000 and based in Dallas, Texas. MC&A specializes in designing and offering public and customized corporate women's leadership development programs. They have developed successful women's leadership development programs for a number of multi-national companies.

The MC&A case study provides examples of Principles #2 and #4, embedding the WLDP in the organization and educating the women and the organization. During this program, individual participants are assigned to existing, high-visibility, high-impact projects that they work on during the program. These projects raise awareness at the senior leadership levels of the organization, both of the strengths of the participants, and of the WLDP.

The MC&A also incorporates educating the women and the organization about gender dynamics and second-generation bias. After the first of four sessions of the WLDP, the managers of the participants attend a one-day orientation to learn about gender dynamics and second-generation bias. The vice chairman of the organization attended this orientation session during one of the early programs and found it very valuable. He asked MC&A to conduct this one-day program on gender dynamics for all the executive women and men in his organization, in addition to the managers of the WLDP participants. This program has now been offered several times for executive women and men and has helped create a more inclusive culture for women in the organization. While originally offered only to the managers of the women participating in the WLDP to support the WLDP, it has become part of a wider culture change effort.

Case Study: Smith College Executive Education for Women

Smith College has a long history as a women's leadership development center. Smith's Executive Education for Women offers both public and customized corporate leadership development programs. Their corporate programs for women support both leadership development and the growth of inclusive company cultures.

Smith shares a recent case that illustrates Principle #1. After designing and launching a WLDP for a corporate client, a program for senior men leaders evolved out of the original WLDP and became part of the women's leadership devel-

opment ecosystem for that client. In this two-day program developed by Smith called Mastering Inclusion, senior men leaders explore unconscious biases that get in the way of advancing women in the organization. The purpose is to create allies who commit to change.

Case Study: The Center for Creative Leadership

The Center for Creative Leadership (CCL) is a global research and training organization based in Greensboro, North Carolina, offering both open-enrollment and customized leadership development programs. CCL's programs for women's leadership development focus on leadership effectiveness and authenticity. Their customized corporate programs focus on what is happening in organizational cultures to help or hinder the advancement of women.

CCL offers a case study of a customized corporate program that reflects other approaches in Principles #2, #3 and #4, embedding the WLDP, building strength-based leadership identity, and educating women and the organization about gender dynamics. In this corporate WLDP, the participants analyze the organization's culture, policies and procedures to identify barriers to women's advancement. They conduct skip-level interviews with their boss's boss to help them strengthen their understanding of the business. Senior leader panels and strategic network analysis and planning during the WLDP also help embed the program in the organization.

A core focus of the WLDP is on authentic leadership, exemplified by an innovative program called the TeachingHorse workshop, which was created by June Gunter.¹²

This program builds awareness, skill and confidence in authentic leadership through experiential work in small groups with a coach and a horse. Horses are very sensitive to nonverbal communication from people. They sense fear or confidence and respond accordingly to the emotions that they sense. During this one-day program, participants gain awareness of what they are communicating to the horse through their non-verbal communications. Through experience, each woman learns that if she sends mixed signals to the horse, the horse won't follow her. The women learn to be congruent in their feelings and actions through practice and reflection with their coach and their group about ways they may or may not be sending authentic and congruent messages through their words and actions to their teams at work. They commit to changes they can make to improve their leadership effectiveness.

Other Findings

Research participants provided the following information on three areas for future research suggested by Debebe et al.¹³

1. The evaluation of WLDP outcomes. Finding: All seven of the participating WLDPs report that the organizations for which they have designed and conducted their programs track the outcomes in terms of the advancement of their graduates to show the value and ROI of their programs. However, four of the seven do not make this information public, even to their external WLDP directors.
2. The adoption of intersectionality perspectives. Women's leadership experiences are different and cannot be understood through a gender lens alone. Debebe et al. explain that the impact of the interaction, or intersection of race, gender, class, ethnicity, sexual orientation, gender identity, nationality and other cultural differences on the leadership experiences of women in organizations needs to be better understood and considered in the design of women's leadership development programs. Finding: Most of the programs in this study are conducted in global companies. While the participants are diverse in role, function, and geographic location, most research participants did not have any indication that their clients take cultural diversity into account during recruitment in any other way. The topic of intersectionality is an intentional presentation in three programs, primarily referencing categories of difference such as race and ethnicity from a U.S. perspective. Cultural differences do come up organically in coaching and in small-group activities. Three programs include social identity mapping exercises to help people understand and articulate their individual context, get to know each other, and begin to explore their similarities and differences.
3. The role of men in women's leadership development. Finding: All seven programs in this study include men, informally during an orientation either because both women and men are managers, or more formally as the focus of one session where men learn about gender dynamics from the women participants. Some programs include men as speakers or formal sponsors, and some programs have a combination of more than one way to involve men.

4. The use of technology in the participating WLDPs. All seven programs reported experimentation with technology to engage managers and participants in pre- and post-program content. One participant is developing a mobile app to make content available to participants after graduation. Multiple participants discussed using technology to move some content from on-site programs to webinars to maximize face-to-face time for interpersonal skill practice, mentoring, and/or interactive scenario building.

One last finding of interest is that, when asked what topic or segment in their program was reported by participants as having the most impact, strategic networking was reported by half of the participating programs. Other topics reported as consistently impactful were 360-degree feedback, coaching, reverse mentoring, sponsorship, negotiation, the development of take away tool kits, and congruent leadership. All of the participating programs included coaching in different formats.

Reflections and Future Considerations

Participants in this study shared many innovative and creative practices developed for their customized corporate Women's Leadership Development Programs. They described a continuous process of refinement and experimentation with their program designs and showed a willingness to share their innovations in the interest of mutual learning, even though in some cases they are potentially competitors for the same corporate clients.

While all the participants conduct standard program evaluations at the end of their programs, some do more extensive follow-up a few weeks or months later in an attempt to measure the impact of various components of the program. The availability of results metrics such as measures of the advancement of WLDP graduates is disappointing, however. While seven of the corporations represented in this study track outcomes in terms of advancement of their graduates, four of the seven do not make this information public. Without the availability of comparable measures of success, it is not possible to conduct research on the impact of corporate program design variations. It is also difficult to advance robust theory development about women's leadership development without results metrics from these corporate programs.

One of the many bright spots from this study was the finding that engaging senior men and women in training sessions on gender dynamics and/or sponsorship can create a branding advantage for corporations, as reported in The

Paradigm Forum GmbH case study. Becoming known in the marketplace as an organization that develops leaders and invests in women can result in an enhanced ability to attract and retain talent – a strong business case for investing in the development of both women and organizational cultures.

In conclusion, approaches to women’s leadership development keep evolving. The focus of this research was to gather and share some current knowledge about the design and delivery of WLDP’s from a sample of experienced scholar practitioners, with a particular focus on what is working well in their programs, what recent innovations have had the most impact and what results they are seeing. The experiences shared by these practitioners offer insights into both innovative ways to impact women’s leadership development and to address second generation bias in organization cultures. They add to our knowledge of how to achieve the dual agenda, critical to achieving gender-balanced leadership in organizations -- some day.

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ENDNOTES

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3 Seven external designers and directors of customized corporate WLDPs agreed to participate in a qualitative study about what is working well in one program they designed for a corporate client and what challenges they are facing. The seven external institutions participating in this study were Simmons College Executive Education (USA), Cranfield University (UK), Babson College (USA), Smith College Executive Education (USA), Marsha Clark & Associates (USA), Center for Creative Leadership (USA), and The Paradigm Forum GmbH (Switzerland).

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6 Debebe, G., Anderson, D., Bilimoria, D., & Vinnicombe, S.M. (2016). Also see Ely, R. J., Ibarra, H., & Kolb, D. (2011); Kolb, D., Fletcher, J., Meyerson, D., Merrill-Sands, D., & Ely, R. (1998); Kolb, D.M., & Porter, J.L. (2015).

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12 TeachingHorse, LLC, is an experiential leadership development program. www.teachinghorse.com.

13 Debebe, G., Anderson, D., Bilimoria, D., & Vinnicombe, S.M. (2016).

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