

STUDY ON WOMEN LEADERSHIP IN CONSTRUCTION ORGANIZATIONS

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Over the years as women increasingly enter managerial roles that traditionally have been occupied by men, the study on women leadership continues to attract attention. Within the research on women leadership, there is a substantial body of opinion which holds that modern organizations require a non coercive leadership style based on teamwork and building relationships. Further it states, that this is the very style of leadership naturally employed by women. However within the construction industry women are not only under-represented, but also their vertical distribution throughout the industry is highly skewed. This study examines the literature relating to leadership in construction and the leadership generally exhibited by women in organizations in order to analyse the suitability of women in leadership positions in construction organizations. This study has been based on theoretical and practical knowledge obtained through comprehensive literature review. The research will serve to raise the status and value of women in the management of construction organizations.

Keywords: construction organizations, leadership, leadership styles, women.

BACKGROUND

In the UK economy the construction industry is a significant industry which contributes approximately a tenth of the nation's gross domestic product and employs 1.9 million people in the region (Office of National Statistics 2002). According to the Built Environment Professional Services Skills survey 2003/2004, 80% of firms experience skills problems within their existing workforce. Furthermore, although the female population in the UK accounts for 51% and over 13 million women are employed in the UK, they still constitute only 12% of the construction industry's workforce (CITB 2006). This shows that the construction industry's existing problems can be overcome by women's participation with different skills and capabilities. Previous studies have found that women have progressed slowly and have confronted a greater number of barriers to their development than their male counterparts. A study conducted by Still (1994) has found that the presence of women in leadership positions in construction can assist in increasing the representation of women in construction organizations. However the promotion of women in leadership positions has also been challenged with many barriers. One of the barriers is women are not being seen as leaders or as leadership candidates in significant roles.

Therefore there is a need to find the suitability of women leadership in construction organizations to prevent them from not being seen as leaders. In order to construct successful women leaders firstly their natural leadership styles and their qualities should be studied to find their potential areas in the industry. Since leadership can be developed by proper training, the additional and required leadership qualities should

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also be investigated to widen their leadership scope within the industry. Although from the recent past many researches have been undertaken on leadership and gender not many are on women leadership in construction industry.

Therefore this research aims to present a review of the literature relating the leadership utilized in construction in different contexts and the leadership generally exhibited by women in organizations in order to analyse the suitability of women leadership in construction with an emphasis on leadership styles and characteristics. Firstly the study reveals the present position of women in leadership position in the UK construction industry. Secondly it investigates the leadership styles adopted in construction for different contexts. Thirdly it examines the leadership styles generally adopted by women in the management of organizations and their characteristics. Finally this study discusses about the suitability of women leadership in the management of construction organizations in order to promote more women leaders in the industry. This research has been based on theoretical and practical knowledge obtained through comprehensive literature review.

PRESENT POSITION OF WOMEN IN THE UK CONSTRUCTION

In the UK economy, construction is the second male dominated industry after quarrying and mining. Although over 13 million women are employed in the UK, accounting for 49.9% of the workforce their representation in the construction industry remains less. Despite the increase in the number of women employed in the construction industry over the past decade, they still constitute only 12% of the industry's workforce (CITB 2006). Further women are not only under represented within the industry but also their vertical distribution in organizational hierarchy is highly skewed.

Women are segregated by the type of organization within which they are employed. According to a survey by members of the Chartered Institute of Banking (1996), it was found that substantially more women were employed by housing associations than by any other sector within the construction industry. The survey showed that, in general, women are over-represented in the public sector and they are under-represented in the private sector, with the greatest discrepancy in self employment, where women accounted for less than 0.3% of the membership.

The research by Harris (1989) has found that though there is a greater awareness regarding construction related professional activities such as engineering and architecture among advanced level students and undergraduates, the status of the industry as a career opportunity does not compare favourably with other options (Fielden *et al.* 2001). During the year 2003/2004 female account for only 14% of engineering and technology students under higher education and 10 % for Engineering, technology and manufacturing students and 6% for construction students under further education after advanced level (EOC 2006; EOC 2005).

Frequently it has been noticed that educational segregation leads to occupational segregation. Women are tend to be concentrated in health and social work (79%) and education (73%), whereas men are tend to be concentrated in construction (90%) and transport, storage and communication (76%) (Labour Force Survey Spring 2005 dataset cited EOC 2006). This reflects that construction continues to be the most male dominated industry even though women's employment within the industry has risen over the past decade.

Table 1 reflects the under- representation of women professionals in built environment institutions compared to male members. This results in lack of professional qualifications for women to develop their career. In addition it is apparent from women's memberships in different professional bodies of built and human environment (8%) that women's career development towards the leadership positions is limited.

Table 1: Membership of the Built Environment Professions

Professional body	Total membership	Women members	Percentage of women members
Royal Institution of Chartered Surveyors	107,817	11,173	10%
Institution of Civil Engineers	78,641	3,678	5%
Chartered Institute of Building	37,511	1,181	3%
Royal Institute of British Architects	28,328	2,858	10%
Institution of Structural Engineers	20,173	9,50	5%
Royal Town Planning Institute	17,924	4,714	26%
Total	290,394	24,554	8%

Source: Watts, 2003 cited Greed, 2006

According to Labour Force Survey Spring report (2001 cited CITB 2003) women represented in following percentages for different positions in the construction industry: Manual work 6%; Sales 9%; Clerical and Secretarial 63%; Manager and Administration 13%; Professional and Technical 9%. These figures exhibit the greatest degree of vertical occupational segregation in the construction industry. That is the representation of women in managerial level and bottom level in an organization's hierarchy is highly skewed. In addition it was found that the proportions of women in management, professional, and sales jobs within the construction Industry are far below the national average. The poor image of construction, lack of role models and knowledge, poor careers advice, gender-biased recruitment, peer pressure and poor educational experiences are all been cited as militating factors against women's entry in to the industry (Dainty *et al.* 2000; Gale and Skitmore 1990; Johnson *et al.* 1992; Wall 1997). Therefore in order to improve women's representation in the leadership position industry it is important to examine the leadership styles which can be found in the construction fields and leadership style which is best able to predict outcomes.

LEADERSHIP IN THE CONSTRUCTION INDUSTRY

Leadership is a concept which has been defined in many ways by many authors. Sadler (2003) describes leadership as an elusive concept, difficult of definition and the definitions offered by different writers in the field differ considerably. According to Armstrong and Stephens (2005), leadership is the process of developing and communicating a vision for the future, motivating people and gaining their commitment and engagement. It can be seen that leadership focuses on the most important resource of the organization i.e. people. In the new era of literature, an acronym accurately portrays key concepts to the provoking change and inspiring leaders to take on more challenging roles. The first letters of leader define the significant characteristics which are: Listening and learning from others, Energizing the organization, Act for the benefit of every one, Development of themselves and others, Empowerment of others to lead and Recognition of achievement (Badloni 2000 cited Porterfield and Kleiner 2005).

John Adair suggests that there are three areas of need which leaders need to satisfy. These are Task needs (to get the job done), Individual needs (to harmonize the needs of the individual with the needs of the task and the group) and Group needs (to build and maintain team spirit) (1973 cited Armstrong and Stephens 2005). Leaders should consider the styles in which they influence the group in order to complete the task successfully. Leadership style refers to the behaviour pattern of an individual who attempts to influence others. Style is an important part of leadership which shapes a manager's approach to leadership. However Mullins (1999) and Vecchio (2002) had stated that no evidence has clearly shown that a particular leadership style is optimal for all managerial situations. However the appropriateness of leadership to different situations should be studied properly to improve the effectiveness of leadership within organizations.

Although many studies have been undertaken in the area of leadership styles they have generally tended to be among manufacturing industries characterized by permanent organization structures (Giritli and Oraz 2004). Harvey and Ashworth (1993) state that the construction industry has characteristics such as project characteristics, contractual arrangements, project life-cycle and environmental factors that separate it from all other industries. A typical construction project is composed of a multitude of organizations. Individuals or groups are drawn together from several divisions or from different organizations for a short time related to a specific task. The project-based nature of construction industry with its temporary multi-organizations will almost certainly have an important influence on the managerial leadership styles of professionals working in the industry.

Generally in project environments, there is a strong preference for a participative style but it may not be the most effective for all situations. Cleland (1995) argues that project leadership should be appropriate to the project situation because leadership is a continuous and flexible process. Naum (2001: 219) states that large capital investment projects coupled with a high complexity of decision issues can require different styles of leadership, and it is acknowledged that a participative style of leadership in a bureaucratic organization is expected to be more appropriate than a directive style. In contrast, Nicholas (1990) suggests that a less participating, more directive style might be more appropriate when there is less time and high pressure to complete the work. In order to elucidate further Giritli and Oraz (2004) state that the most effective style of leadership depends on project circumstances like project duration and intensity of work completed.

A study by Chan and Chan (2005) evidenced that transformational leadership and transactional leadership can be found in the construction fields. Transformational leadership "occurs when one or more persons engage with others in such a way that leaders and followers raise one another to higher levels of motivation and morality" (Burns 1978, p. 20). Further the construction industry is characterized by its vibrant and rapidly changing environment. Meeting stringent requirements of time, cost, quality, and safety has always been the norm of professional personnel at all levels of organizations today. The nature of their jobs is characterized by continual changes in working environments, making them more flexible, responsive, and adaptive to solving problems with new ways of thinking.

Transactional leadership is simply contingent reinforcement. Transactional leaders link with their followers merely in an exchange process. The leaders set out a list of performance and achievement guidelines for followers against which rewards in terms

of money, praise, and promotion will be given in return. According to Chan and Chan (2005) transformational leadership can augment transactional leadership to produce greater synergistic effects on the employees' work outcomes than either transformational or transactional leadership in isolation. In this study employee work outcomes were measured by three factors, namely, extra effort exerted by employees beyond original expectations, leader effectiveness perceived by employees, and employees' satisfaction with leaders. However, transactional leadership cannot augment transformational leadership to the same extent. Tichy and Devanna (1990) considered that transformational leadership should be able to work as a guide and framework for leadership throughout the organization in times of change.

An earlier study by Bresnen *et al.* (1986 cited Giritli and Oraz 2004) showed that task-oriented forms of leader behaviour are more appropriate where subcontract labour forms the bulk of the workplace. However construction professionals need different leadership styles in different phases of the project life cycle. Further the temporariness of project cycles may have a bearing upon an understanding of leadership in construction work and its effects. The style of leadership changes as the project progresses through its life cycle. Similarly, the environment in which leadership is exercised is also influential in shaping the leadership style of people who occupy managerial positions in construction settings.

Presently there is an argument on gender based leadership to find out which gender characteristics (feminine or masculinity) have more effective leadership styles. The intention of leadership theories is to explain relationship between leadership styles and the context in which leadership is evaluated. A review of management literature reveals that studies of leadership have focused mainly on finding the most appropriate or effective leadership style.

The study on gender differences in leadership by Powell (1990: 74 cited Yukl 2006: 430) states that,

“There is a little reason to believe that either women or men make a superior managers, or that women and men are different types of managers. Instead there are likely to be excellent, average and poor managerial performers within each sex. Success in today's highly competitive marketplace calls for organizations to make best use of the talent available to them. To do this, they need to identify, develop, encourage, and promote the most effective managers, regardless of sex.”

WOMEN LEADERSHIP IN ORGANIZATIONS

The upsurge of women in the workplace and in positions of leadership has raised concerns whether women have the same leadership styles as men. Earlier thinking on this subject typically perceived women who had achieved leadership status as being successful imitators of characteristics generally believed to lie solely in the male domain, such as toughness and aggressiveness (Helgesen 1990).

However the contemporary thinking conceptualizes a feminine style of leadership that is singularly different from its male counterpart (Stanford *et al.* 1995). According to a research by Helgesen (1990) certain characteristics are described as essentially feminine such as heightened communication skills (especially the ability to be a good listener and to be empathetic); advanced intermediary skills (for negotiation and conflict resolution); well-developed interpersonal skills; and a soft approach to handling people. According to a research conducted by Park (1996), the results

provide a strong support to the relationship between masculinity and task-oriented style and feminine with relationship-oriented style.

Few theorists assert that women are ideally suited to the non-bureaucratic, employee-involved organizations during 1990 where teamwork and a free flow of information are paramount (Fierman, 1990). Helgesen (1990) suggests that women leaders possess a greater capacity for prioritizing than their male counterparts which comes from managing different commitments.

A research conducted within Greek firms by Bourantas and Papalexandris (2003) states that women possess qualities which could contribute significantly to improve communication, co-operation, team spirit, organizational climate and commitment which are necessary for achieving excellence in present organizations. Further the study states that these qualities are not expressed in the managerial behaviour of women. In addition it was found that Greek firms' major source of dissatisfaction is the poor human relations which is the lack of understanding between members of the organization and the inability to communicate and perceive each others' needs. It was believed that women managers if allowed could express their traits of understanding and compassion which they possess by nature and which they cannot portray unless a proper encouragement is given.

The heuristic model of female leadership developed by Stanford *et al.* (1995) characterizes a woman leader as one who prefers to operate from a reward or referent power base. Further it states that women possess a high degree of employee involvement that typically results in a team based management approach. In addition woman has entrepreneurial vision which she is able to communicate effectively to her employees; this in turn serves as an extraordinary motivating force to achieve the organization's mission. Further it states that women leaders encourage mutual trust and respect between herself and her employees.

According to a feminist author Sally Helgesen the talents, experiences, attitudes and skills that women bring with them are precisely those needed in the evolving post-industrial economy (1990, cited Boon, 2003). She further states that this confluence of abilities and required leadership capacities is creating unprecedented opportunities for women to play a vital role in leading transformational change in organizations. Women are better at seeing the human side, quicker to cut through competitive distinctions of hierarchy and ranking and impatient with cumbersome protocols.

For many years it was believed that effective leaders must be confident, task-oriented, competitive, objective, decisive and assertive which were traditionally viewed as masculine attributes. However an effective leadership also requires strong interpersonal skills, concern for building cooperative, trusting relationships and use of behaviours traditionally viewed as feminine especially to modern organizations with dynamic work environments. (Yukl 2006: 427). A recent controversy is fuelled by claims that women are more likely than men to possess the values and skills necessary for effective leadership in modern organizations. (Book 2000 cited Yukl 2006: 428). Proponents of the feminine advantage theory content that women are more concerned with consensus building, inclusiveness and interpersonal relations, they are more willing to develop and nurture subordinates and share power with them.

The continued discrimination against women in leadership selection has been an underlying reason behind the interest among researchers and practitioners in identifying the difference between men and women leadership styles and behaviour. Gender based discrimination was supported by age-old-beliefs such as assumptions

about traits and skills required for effective leadership in organization, inherent differences between men and women, role expectations that men are more qualified than women for leadership roles. The biased beliefs about the skills and behaviours necessary for effective leadership are one of the reasons for sex- biased discrimination (Yukl 2006: 427).

However the sex-based discrimination in selection for leadership positions reflects the influence of popular stereotypes and role expectations for man and women. Some laboratory studies found that even women leaders use masculine behaviours, they are evaluated less favourably than men who use them (Rojahn and Willemsen 1994 cited Yukl 2006: 428). A study by Martin (2001) also states that both female and male managers had mixture of styles. However Powel (1990 cited Yukl 2006: 428) states that the experience of working for men and women leaders over a period of time can reduce the effects of gender stereotypes on evaluation of leaders. Therefore there is a need for organizations to create a favourable context which will allow the coexistence of both the male and female models and make the most out of the synergy of such coexistence.

DISCUSSION: WOMEN LEADERSHIP IN CONSTRUCTION

Breakdowns in communication and disruptive conflicts are always been a problem in construction. Since women are considered as good in heightened communication skills, well-developed interpersonal skills and a soft approach to handling people, their leadership qualities and skills can assist to solve the above problem. In addition extensive use of sub-contracting is another factor that can have an impact on the leadership style used in projects. Naum (2001: 222 cited Giritli and Oraz 2004) suggests that the relationship between procurement method and leadership style is the proportion of sub-contracting against direct labour employment on project sites.

Presently the concept of partnering has gained its importance in the construction industry. According to Naoum (2003) partnering is a concept which provides a framework for the establishment of mutual objectives among the building team with an attempt to reach an agreed dispute resolution procedure as well as encouraging the principle of continuous improvement. The mutual trust and understanding of each other's commitments are important prerequisites for a shared culture in partnering. Cheng *et al.* (2000) suggest that partnering can become successful by using pertinent management for inter-organizational relationship.

Partnering project requires timely communication of information and it encourages open, direct lines of communication among project participants (Hellard 1996) which can result in lesser misunderstanding and can stimulate mutual trust and long lasting cohesive relationship. Effective communication skills can help partnering organizations to facilitate the exchange of ideas. Since women possess more democratic and participative leadership styles and qualities which could contribute significantly to improve communication, co-operation, team spirit, organizational climate and commitment. Therefore their participation in leadership of partnering project organizations can be beneficial to them and to the industry.

A study by Lowe *et al.* (1996) found that there is a strong correlation between transformational leadership and leader effectiveness, subordinate extra effort and subordinate satisfaction with the leader. The results from numerous studies indicate that in terms of leadership effectiveness, the style of transformational leadership has been acknowledged to be one of the most effective ways of leading people (Bass and

Avolio 1989; Burns 1978). According to Bass (1997) transformational leaders accomplish superior levels of success in the workplace as compared to transactional leaders and they are more often promoted. More significantly, they are believed to produce better financial results than transactional leaders (Bass 1997).

CONCLUSIONS

In the construction industry women are not only under represented but also their vertical distribution in organizational hierarchy is highly skewed. A key factor in seeking to change the nature of the built environment is being able to reach a senior position in the main stream of management in order to shape the policy making and strategic planning. The recent statistics reveals that despite the large numbers of women in the profession, they are greatly under-represented in positions of main stream management. This study found that women possess leadership styles which are more towards democratic or participative or transformational styles. Although presently women's leadership is not utilized properly by the construction to overcome its obstacles, the emergence of new management in organizations and new procurement systems can provide more opportunities for women leaders in future. Women leaders' participation in construction project will enhance the relationships between the stakeholders of the construction in future. However further studies should be carried out to recognize the importance of women leadership in the emerging culture in the management of construction projects. This indeed needs to be addressed if women participation is to be increased and if remedial actions are to be taken to overcome the skill shortages in the industry.

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