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ARTICLE

Women and managerial careers: constructing leadership identity in a male-dominated corporate environment

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Abstract

This study analyzes successful leadership claiming actions and factors that enabled the social construction of a leader identity in the trajectories of women in a technology company, a traditionally male segment. These subjects are investigated through a qualitative case study, from a longitudinal perspective with cross-section data collection. The study is based on interviews conducted with female professionals who worked in the company – an environment permeated by important gender issues – carried out in two stages (in 2006 and 2021). The analysis reveals that successful leadership claiming actions among these women were derived from their predominantly agentic posture but endowed with a collaborative and collective orientation, an attribute of commonality. Their competence, hybrid management style, adaptive behavior to the environment, and the support/sponsorship obtained from some of the company's leaders, were favorable factors for granting leadership to these women.

Keywords: Gender. Leadership. Leader's identity. Information technology. Work and gender.

Mulheres e carreiras gerenciais: a construção da identidade de líder em um ambiente corporativo masculino

Resumo

Este artigo analisa ações de reivindicação (*claiming*) de liderança exitosas, assim como fatores que viabilizaram a construção social da identidade de líder nas trajetórias de mulheres inseridas em uma empresa de tecnologia, segmento tradicionalmente masculino. Essas questões são investigadas por meio de um estudo de caso qualitativo de perspectiva longitudinal com corte transversal baseado em entrevistas conduzidas com profissionais mulheres que atuaram na organização considerada – ambiente permeado por importantes aspectos relacionais de gênero – realizadas em duas etapas (em 2006 e 2021). A análise revela que as ações de reivindicação de liderança bem-sucedidas entre essas mulheres derivaram de sua postura predominantemente agêntica, porém dotada de uma orientação colaborativa e coletiva, um atributo de comunalidade. Foram fatores favoráveis para a concessão da liderança (*granting*) a elas as competências, o estilo de gestão híbrido e o comportamento adaptativo ao ambiente que demonstraram, bem como o suporte/patrocínio obtido de lideranças da empresa.

Palavras-chave: Gênero. Liderança. Identidade de líder. Tecnologia da informação. Trabalho e gênero.

Mujeres y carreras directivas: la construcción de la identidad del líder en un entorno corporativo masculino

Resumen

Este artículo analiza acciones de reivindicación exitosas (*claiming*) de liderazgo y factores que permitieron la construcción social de la identidad del líder en las trayectorias de mujeres empleadas en una empresa de tecnología, segmento tradicionalmente masculino. Estas cuestiones se investigan a través de un estudio de caso cualitativo desde una perspectiva longitudinal transversal basado en entrevistas a mujeres profesionales que trabajaron en la compañía – entorno permeado por importantes aspectos relacionales de género – llevadas a cabo en dos etapas (en 2006 y 2021). El análisis revela que las acciones de reivindicación exitosas se originaron de su postura predominantemente agêntica, pero con una orientación colaborativa y colectiva, un atributo comunal. Los factores favorables a la concesión de liderazgo (*granting*) fueron sus habilidades, su estilo de gestión híbrido, su comportamiento adaptativo al entorno y el apoyo de algunos líderes de la empresa.

Palabras clave: Género. Liderazgo. Identidad del líder. Tecnología de la información. Trabajo y género.

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INTRODUCTION

The low representation of women in leadership positions in organizations is a worldwide reality. As a consequence, according to data published in 2021 by the World Economic Forum, it is estimated that, without intervention, it will take 267.6 years to achieve parity between men and women in economic participation and opportunity.

Eagly and Carli (2007) propose that the labyrinth is a metaphor that appropriately represents women's paths to top positions in organizations. They must go through a journey permeated by explicit and hidden challenges men do not face, which requires skill and luck. In traditionally male environments, the limited advancement of women in any leadership level suggests that individual characteristics, attitudes, and strategies adopted by them play a more critical role to obtain a promotion than in other contexts with less inequality. This study focuses on women who conquered leadership roles in such adverse conjunctures.

DeRue and Ashford (2010) expand prior theory proposing a broader and more integrative framework to understand the development of leader and follower identities. The authors advocate a leader-follower relationship where each party plays one of the roles, and the interactions intensify and stabilize such identities. Grounded on this relational and process-based perspective, this research examines women's successful actions in claiming leader identity as well as factors of influence that led to the granting of this identity. A case study with a longitudinal perspective and cross-section data collection was conducted, observing women who worked for a tech company. The interviews were carried out in two stages, one in 2006, with ten participants recording their perceptions about gender relational dynamics in the organizational context, and the other in 2021, with five professionals who took on leadership roles at the tactical and intermediate levels of the company. The study analyzed their history until they achieved recognition as leaders. Understanding the rise of women to these management levels is significant since the correspondent positions are usually the first step in the path to reaching the top in the organizational hierarchy.

In Brazil, there are few studies on women in leadership positions, and the existing literature tends to focus on research with C-level executives (Cavazotte & Oliveira, 2018; Kanan, 2010). Various studies on gender and leadership, from different perspectives, have been published internationally, particularly in recent years (e.g., Badura, Grijalva, Newman, Yan, & Jeon, 2018; Eagly & Heilman, 2016; Shen & Joseph, 2021). They have focused on understanding why women cannot progress hierarchically at the same rate as men – also emphasizing C-level executive positions. It remains unclear how some women are promoted to leadership positions amid the gender bias that surrounds them, especially in economic segments that stir up gender stereotypes attributed to women. The research findings expand knowledge about women and leadership, especially in professional areas and industries considered bastions of masculinity. The results may help women professionals pursuing leadership positions and organizations interested in promoting gender equality.

The article is organized as follows. The next section presents studies on women's career advancement in companies and the leader identity model proposed by DeRue and Ashford (2010). The research method is detailed subsequently, describing the data collection process and the participants' profile, the topics that emerged from the data collected, and the company studied. After, the article offers an analysis of the participants' gender-related organizational context, examines successful actions in claiming leader identity, and explores the factors favoring the process of granting such an identity. Finally, the conclusions are presented considering the research contributions to the literature.

THEORETICAL FOUNDATION

Women and challenges to reach leadership positions

Despite advances in women's professional work, the distribution of leadership positions between men and women is still unequal. Such inequality is explained by Eagly's social role theory (1987), which emphasizes the beliefs and expectations widely disseminated in society about how men and women are – gender stereotypes – and about how they should be, which together constitute so-called gender roles. According to this perspective, men are associated with attributes of agency, such as command, aggressiveness, ambition, and firmness, whereas women are related to communal attributes focused on caring for others, such as collective values and attention to interpersonal relationships. For most people, agentic attributes are also prototypical characteristics of leaders (Koenig, Eagly, Mitchell, & Ristikari, 2011), and being a prototypical leader contributes to receiving positive judgments about leadership effectiveness (Giessner, van Knippenberg, & Sleebos, 2009).

According to the role congruity theory by Eagly and Karau (2002), the divergence between the role of a leader and the gender role attributed to women – both sociocultural constructions – impairs women's progress towards leadership and how they are evaluated when performing this role since their leadership potential may be underestimated. However, if women meet the criteria more aligned with the established prototype for a leader, they may fail to meet the precepts attributed to their gender – which have a normative character – and, thus, face issues regarding social acceptance (Bourdieu, 2020). In this sense, Bourdieu (2020) argues that forceful and regular action of agents and institutions over the centuries maintains the supremacy of male power by producing, disseminating, and protecting the concepts of femininity and virility, as well as fallaciously covering them with a biological character. Therefore, the inequalities observed in the careers of men and women may exist even when they have identical attributes regarding personal, family, and employment characteristics (Frear, Paustian-Underdahl, Heggstad, & Walker, 2018).

Eagly and Carli (2007) argue that the solution for a woman to be accepted as a leader involves balancing the so-called double bind, i.e., finding an equilibrium between the attributes normally associated with a leader and those expected of her gender. Indeed, women who adopt a hybrid behavior in relation to both spheres are more likely to be identified as leaders. Thus, because women need to manifest more diverse characteristics, it is more complex for them to achieve leadership positions (Schock, Gruber, Scherndl, & Ortner, 2019). In addition, women who concomitantly meet agency and communal requirements tend to obtain better performance as a leader and favorable results regarding resilience and identity integration (Zheng, Kark, & Meister, 2018).

A literature review on gender and leadership emergence (Badura et al., 2008) showed that men still tend to emerge as leaders more often than women, although such imbalance has decreased. The authors also observed that agency traits were more present in men and communal traits in women. Another literature review found that women are less likely to act as leaders than men, especially concerning agentic behaviors, even when men and women have the same degree of knowledge, skill, and motivation. One explanation may be the women's belief that they will face negative reactions if they engage in this behavior (Shen & Joseph, 2021).

Eagly and Carli (2007) highlight the importance of networking with people from all hierarchical levels for women to progress in their careers, with particular attention on obtaining formal and informal mentoring. Women professionals who declare to use networking frequently tend to consider themselves more successful, satisfied, and rewarded (Offermann, Thomas, Lanzo, & Smith, 2020). However, women usually have less access to CEOs who are more influential in the organization (Collins & Val Singh, 2006; Ibarra, Carter, & Silva, 2010).

Leadership identity construction: claiming and granting actions

This section synthesizes DeRue and Ashford's (2010) model on the construction of leader and follower identities as a social process. From this perspective, individuals' claiming actions affirm their roles as leaders or followers, while granting actions confer such roles to another person. A granting behavior may either be a reaction to claiming or motivate the initial claiming behaviors. Claiming and granting can be verbal or non-verbal (as revealed through statements or acts), direct (explicit) or indirect. The latter tend to be more subtle. For example, avoiding taking initiative is an attitude consonant

with claiming the role of follower and referring to the personal influence network to claiming the role of leader. Whenever these behaviors are reciprocal, they ratify and reinforce each other to construct the leader and follower identities until they form a positive spiral. If, instead, claiming and granting behaviors are not reciprocal, they tend not to repeat, themselves forming a negative spiral.

The level of visibility, clarity, and credibility of claims and grants in the organizational context influence reciprocity stability between these two types of behavior toward leader-follower relationship. The more these characteristics are present, the greater the probability of reciprocal responses since the instrumental, interpersonal, and image risks associated with a lack of reciprocity are reduced. Another influencing factor is a previous history of claims and grants, leading to a propensity for repetition, mainly if there are no significant changes in the social setting.

The model also explains how the behaviors of claiming and granting leader and follower roles are related to the levels that make up leadership identities. DeRue and Ashford (2010) propose that the identity of a leader or a follower are constituted by three factors: individual internalization, relational recognition, and collective endorsement. The first refers to the condition in which the person assimilates the identity of leader or follower as a self-definition, comprising the elaboration of particularities related to each role. Another factor for the construction of leader and follower identities is the recognition by the other part of a relationship, who takes on the alternative identity (relational recognition). This is essential for the emergence of leaders and followers; without such reciprocity, the other factors will not be enough to establish these roles. Collective *endorsement* restimulates the organization of these identities to collaborate for their solidity.

The model proposed by DeRue and Ashford (2010) is in line with recent leadership studies that understand it as a social process of influence, presenting an integrative view of the field. However, further research is needed to deepen how the process occurs with minority groups, in this case, women – often socially framed in a gender role (Eagly, 1987) that limits their leadership opportunities.

METHOD

Data collection and participants' profile

This qualitative research consisted of a case study adopting a longitudinal perspective and cross-section data collection (Vieira, 2004). Data were mainly obtained through semi-structured interviews with women from different backgrounds, exploring their experiences when working in a company operating in a male-dominated setting, referred to as Alpha. The first stage of the research was carried out in 2006 with ten women (employed in the positions listed in Box 1), and the HR manager. The study also accessed data from the internal documents of the company – such as the plan for jobs and salaries, the plan to assess performance, and the organization chart – and from non-participant observation. This stage aimed to understand the organizational panorama regarding gender issues and how much relational dynamics represented important barriers to the constitution of women's leadership in the company. The selection of professionals sought to include women from several departments of the organization, including some in leadership positions to obtain different perspectives at different careers stages. Contact with the participants was established through the HR manager. These interviews were conducted individually and in a private environment on Alpha premises.

Box 1
Job position of participants in the first stage

Names*	Job position
Júlia	Software Development Team Leader
Paula	Purchasing and Logistics Manager
Adriana	Human Resources Supervisor
Heloísa	General Services Supervisor
Suzana	Accountant
Marina	Journalist
Jéssica	Customer Service Technician
Priscila	Human Resources Administrative Assistant
Ângela**	Commercial Strategic Planning Supervisor
Ana**	Technical Supervisor of Tests and Maintenance

*Names changed to keep anonymity.

**Also interviewed in 2021.

Source: Elaborated by the authors.

Five women were interviewed in 2021, all former Alpha employees – two of them were among the participants interviewed in 2006. The intention of the interviews at this stage was to analyze their careers focusing on leader identity construction processes (DeRue & Ashford, 2010). Therefore, the study sought to interview women who had become leaders at Alpha and worked in various areas of the company. The intention of choosing interviewees who experienced the process in distinct departments of the company was to analyze a variety of panoramas and reveal possible discrepancies between staff jobs and line jobs, as done by Lyness and Heilman (2006). Box 2 shows the profile of participants in the second stage.

Box 2
Profile of participants in the second stage

Name*	Education (until leaving the company)	Age when entering the company	Job positions or occupations	Period in the company
Fernanda	Undergraduate degree in robotic mechatronics engineering and control and automation engineering and graduate degree in industrial control and automation engineering	24	Engineer; project manager; product manager	2005-2018
Elisa	Undergraduate degree in electrical engineering and graduate degree in software engineering	25	Engineer; software development technical leader (informal)	1996-2019
Laura	Undergraduate degree in social communication and master's in business administration	29	Marketing analyst; communication supervisor of the department of marketing	2007-2009
Ângela**	Undergraduate degree and master's in business administration	25	Technical assistant; commercial strategic planning supervisor; advisor to the commercial director	2000-2015
Ana**	Technical certificate in electrotechnology, undergraduate degree in accounting, and graduate degree in production engineering	18	Technical assistant; technical supervisor of tests and maintenance; operational management advisor (informal)	1987-2019

*Names changed to keep anonymity.

**Also interviewed in 2006.

Source: Elaborated by the authors.

The interviews in this second stage were conducted individually through video calls. The interviewees were found and contacted based on the data obtained in the first stage of the research, directly by a social network of job search, by indication of another participant or former employee with profile in the same social network mentioned.

In the two stages, the data was audio recorded and transcribed. The interviews lasted, on average, one hour.

Topics covered in data collection

All interviews followed a semi-structured script addressing: 1) perspectives and perceived challenges to ascend to leadership positions and 2) characteristics of the leadership granted (when applicable).

The interviews conducted in 2021 added a third topic, namely, successful claiming actions and favorable factors that led to leader identity granting.

The company

Alpha is a Brazilian company in the technology industry that offers telecommunication products and services for the corporate market. Between 2006 and 2021, it diversified its operations to include government agencies and expanded its scope to serve other Latin America countries. It grew to be a large company at some point in that period, but the organization had to downsize due to several crises and today is a medium-sized company.

In 2006, only two women were in managerial positions (8%), and none were in C-level positions. In 2011, the highest position occupied by women was still at an intermediate level, as managers and advisors (8% and 9%, respectively). At the organization's tactical level, 27% of supervisors were women. There were no women in the highest technical position ("specialist"), and they were only 13% of engineers, 31% of analysts, and 15% of technicians. In the second stage of the research, the participants reported that, a woman had never reached the executive level (C-level) until they left the company. Only four women held managerial positions, during the period they worked in the organization. Currently, of all management positions in the company, 23.81% are held by women, and none of them hold executive positions. These data indicate a stable situation regarding women in the company during the period between the data collection stages.

Analysis

Next, we present the analysis of the research results. First, the organizational gender context of the company. Second, the successful leadership claiming actions and the factors supporting granting behavior.

The Alpha case: a company averse to female leaders

The first stage of the research revealed significant gender issues at Alpha, which influenced the construction of the leadership identity of women in the company. In summary, these issues refer to promotion and salary policies, the organization of labor activities, performance evaluation, and organizational culture.

In practice, the company's promotion policies were unsystematic, non-transparent, and controlled by top leaders who privileged men's advancement. Adriana, the HR supervisor, declared: "Even today, we realize that there is a difference [about gender and promotion policies]." Priscila, an employee working in the same area, reported: "I don't know much about the promotion policy because it's something that is more hidden; they don't show us [...] It's a sexist company, so they value men more [...], give them more opportunities." Heloisa was also categorical, like several other interviewees: "I know that gender is important for Alpha in this sense. Gender makes the difference."

The tonic of the testimonies revealed that gender bias extended to salary policy, as in Marina's report, who, when asked if she believes that men earn more than women even occupying the same position, was vehement: "Definitely! Why? By comparison, very clear comparison." Priscila stated: "There is the minimum salary, but men holding the same position have more benefits." This was another important aspect identified, which led to conclude that women's work was subdued and less appreciated than men's.

Another relevant issue was the predominance of men in the company, except in administrative areas and the helpdesk department, which required low qualifications and the positions were filled only by women. A statement collected from the HR manager demonstrates a deliberated intention from the company to distribute genders in this way: “In the technical area, we see that it [the work] is a little more difficult [for women] than for men.” Also, in an internal document examined, the company had expressly defined the priority assignment of engineers to leadership positions, which was another restriction factor for the interviewees who were not engineers. For example, the HR manager was a male engineer with no background in the division he managed. Ana and Jessica – who were in other technical areas rather than engineering – declared there was little or no chance of promotion in their departments. Jessica states: “I think it’s difficult to attain higher positions in the area I work here at Alpha.”

This situation was aggravated by the fact that there was practically no possibility of horizontal movement for the interviewees, which prevented them from obtaining new experiences and learning that could lead to a promotion. They emphasized the lack of career expectations at Alpha. They saw or felt the effects of stagnation, except for one engineer and one purchasing and logistics manager (the latter at a higher hierarchical level than the others).

Even if you wanted to acquire knowledge in other areas, I find that very difficult here [...], so, it limits you to that square and demotivates you [...], you don’t have the chance to show your potential because, often, you have to stick with the tasks they hired you to do (Suzana).

The feedback they received also represented an important aspect of the lack of stimulus for professional growth in their work routines. Without criticism that led them to seek improvement or praise that encouraged them to develop new goals, the performance evaluation had the role of keeping things as they were. As Priscilla commented:

What I say is: there is no recognition. It’s not too demanding either; it doesn’t give you that excitement, right? So that you want to improve... you stay in that routine there, and they say it’s all fine and good. But you also don’t get any praise (Priscila).

Suzana also reinforces this perception: “If you do well what they hired you to do, the company is satisfied. That’s sad.” Women tend to receive more patronizing feedback, which does not contribute to leadership development; this tendency is more significant in environments with cultures that favor men and where there is a greater discrepancy in power between the genders (Bear, Cushenbery, London, & Sherman, 2017).

The path to ascend to leadership positions in a company in which women is the minority and are overexposed, according to the interviewees, was considerably more challenging. Júlia, who became a leader in a male-dominated occupational area (software development), reports her view on this:

You know that saying that a woman has to work twice as hard to get her competence acknowledged? I think that’s true. [...] and you can’t make mistakes. At the very least, you must meet all requirements to avoid making a mistake. You must be careful not to make a mistake. But, when the company realizes your competence and your efforts, I think that it will support and promote you regardless of whether you are a woman. My boss is a woman, and my work is closely monitored. She is very demanding with everything, every little thing, with all activities. That’s why I say: the female administration is more thorough (Júlia).

Júlia reflects on the difficulty of women being promoted and her extreme concern about not making mistakes and demonstrating an exceptional standard of performance, even after reaching a leadership position. According to what she describes, this conduct is followed by her superior, a woman that manages the area. Such observations align with studies that indicate that women need to perform better than men to be promoted (Hryniewicz & Vianna, 2018; Lyness & Heilman, 2006), in this case, because of the stigma of incompetence attributed to them.

The unfavorable context for women was also revealed through informal situations that denote prejudices and even abusive attitudes, as in the example below:

I didn’t like the company’s end-of-year party, which people seemed to attend with the intention of chatting up the women who were there and were all employees. So, people thought they could just go up to you and hug you and kiss you even though they’d never even met you before (Suzana).

This scene, which took place at an institutional event, although commemorative, reveals a sexualized image that belittles their professional status, implicit in the company's culture. Social events often reaffirm unequal gender regimes in an organization (Ortlieb & Sieben, 2019). It should be noted that when viewed with sexual interest, recognition of women as leaders is hampered (Meister, Sinclair, & Jehn, 2017).

In view of the above findings, it was concluded that there was an unfavorable organizational context for women to seek leadership at Alfa.

Successful leadership claiming actions and factors that favor granting

This section discusses the interviewees' successful claiming actions and the factors that favoured granting them a leader identity. In general, these actions seem to have benefited from the convergence of individual and situational factors.

Competencies, agency, and role-shaping

Elisa obtained a technical leadership position informally, mainly due to being the oldest professional in the department where she worked. The various experiences she had in her field of activity and the exercise of tasks that integrated engineering with management areas were other aspects that contributed to this.

Ana began to incorporate several new management advisory functions informally. She attributed her proactive attitude – agentic attribute – to the fact of having achieved more responsibilities:

Some things I embraced and others I was designated [...]; I've always been very independent and, even though I was in [subordinated to] a management area, I was always very proactive and one step ahead. So, I think that helped a lot to take over some things (Ana).

Laura, Ângela and Fernanda had as a starting point for the development of their identities as leaders the initiative to promote relevant management changes without having assumed a leadership position and without guidance or even express permission to do so. The attitude emerged since they identified an important organizational gap and felt able to fill it. For Ângela and Laura, this factor seems to be associated with the qualification obtained as trainees in other companies, in which they had experiences in the same area, and, for the latter, in a master's course. Laura commented, "[a head of another department] said to me: 'Laura, act as if you were a supervisor, and then you will be a supervisor' [...]. I said: 'That's true.'"

Angela, who joined the company as an intern supporting the national commercial manager of the company, attended some meetings with her superior and soon noticed, with her experience in the banking sector, the absence of some practices and procedures. So, she suggested their implementation presenting solid proposals and the results they could obtain (as in the example below regarding performance control). She benefited from her entrepreneurial attitude and obtained approval several times to implement such practices and procedures until she managed to include a department of strategic commercial planning in the Alpha's organizational chart, to which she was formally given the position of supervisor.

I started asking him how he knew which salesperson sold the most or which regional manager sold the most. And he looked at me and said he didn't have that information. Then, I started logging into the company's system and started tabulating [...] one day, I showed him [the report she produced] (Angela).

Fernanda adopted informal leadership attitudes in the face of management problems that she identified in her routine and the understanding that activities were carried out inappropriately, from a fragmented perspective, and in a precarious organization. Thus, she structured processes and workflows to determine deadlines and meet them efficiently. Gradually, Fernanda began to be requested by customers and other company areas.

People started to involve me in things, especially when it came to clients, planning something, or when a task force was needed; and then eventually it was natural to go up to management [...] clients wanted me to participate in the projects because I organized things, I set deadlines to things, and they worked. I think it was more because it came from outside, from other areas: the commercial area, the customer support area, and the customers themselves (Fernanda).

The management differentials presented by the engineer brought successful results and triggered granting from other sections of the company and even from clients. It is significant that the recognition from actors external to the division in which she operated made her formal promotion possible, i.e., the internal barriers of the area – which is predominantly male – were “bypassed.” This example reinforces the labyrinth concept (Eagly & Carli, 2007) about the non-obvious journey women must go through to reach higher positions.

Laura identified the need and proposed the implementation of a management model in the marketing division with a strategic and integrative focus, contrary to what was in place. She reported that the meetings in which she presented the budget for the department and submitted it for approval were decisive in establishing herself as a leader. In these contexts, she objectively specified the impact of each activity on achieving the intended purposes. She declared: “When I arrived at Alpha, I already had a general knowledge about people leadership, and also had a focus on results, which is something they emphasized [...]; I also had very clear goals”. Thus, she convinced superiors of the benefits of the plans she proposed, and obtained, as she mentioned, “increasing autonomy to develop things within this more strategic vision.”

It is noteworthy that Laura, Fernanda, and Angela brought important innovations that favored the company’s performance. Another important point is that they negotiated the role they should play in the organization, using a strategy based on structural changes and organizational practices called shaping. This strategy may make women’s claims for leadership more acceptable (Bowles, Thomason, & Bear, 2019), as observed in this case. In addition, they defended their proposals in an objective, thorough, and intelligible manner, acting in ways that fit Alpha’s cultural values, such as pragmatism and focus on financial results.

These women’s competencies (knowledge and experience) are the basis of their first claiming behaviors, but the central impulse occurs through their remarkable agentic postures. When perceiving opportunities and deficiencies in the organization, they took the initiative to conceive effective improvements by mastering the situation (an aspect conditioned by competence). Moreover, they were willing to take risks inherent to informal leadership and entrepreneurial orientation. In addition, they were assertive in their proposals through an objective and technical argument aligned with Alpha’s cultural values.

Hybrid management style and adaptive behaviors

As for management styles, Laura’s use of delegation stood out as a strategy to reconcile the development of the internal communication area in the company with the priority of the superior management that was corporate communication. Laura considers that she also got other benefits from this to consolidate herself as a leader: gaining a more accurate global view of the projects, avoiding work overload, and achieving subordinate adherence and development. She stated: “People on my team commented that I developed people.”

Although delegation is a practice that has entails agency and communal attributes, women tend to delegate activities to a lesser extent than men as they associate this act with agentic behavior and pejorative elements. Moreover, they more often experience feelings of guilt when delegating (Akinola, Martin, & Phillips, 2018). The relevance of this resource is verified in Laura’s statement, given its benefits. The interviewee demonstrates a positive and hybrid view of the subject.

Ana handled her divergence from the predominant leadership model at Alpha. She realizes that the leadership style often demanded by organizational culture and dynamics – centralizing – was different from what she preferred to take on. This issue apparently did not affect the process of recognizing her as a leader since she adapted and reversed leadership styles according to the situation, which denotes a pragmatic attitude toward agency.

The company asks an attitude from you, especially when you work in production and with short deadlines. So, sometimes, you need a tougher and not so participative leadership [...], so, you had to be always choosing which [leadership style] you would apply in order not to create problems (Ana).

Gender stereotypes are at the root of the understanding that there are “masculine” and “feminine” behaviors (Bourdieu, 2020; Eagly, 1987) and they attribute expectations to women and men about characteristics and attitudes compatible with their traditional roles, respectively, housewives and providers (Eagly, Wood, & Diekmann, 2000). In the leader prototype, i.e., in the set of typical attributes of this role as understood by people in general, behaviors associated with masculinity predominate (Koenig et al., 2011). In response to these beliefs and the observation of the behaviors of the social group holding power in the context of the company, the interviewees seek to suppress certain attributes associated with femininity and incorporate the predominant male model, as observed in other studies (Bruschini & Puppini, 2004; Lombardi, 2006; Meister et al., 2017). Thus, Ana’s behavior broke away from the female stereotype in the male-dominated operational environment in which she worked, as she commented: “I was never fragile! [...] if I had to lift a weight, I would; I didn’t have those ‘frills’ like some women.” In these fields, virility is associated with physical strength and fearlessness, while femininity is associated with fragility (Barreto, 2006; Hirata & Kergoat, 2002).

In addition to agentic and communal factors, the gender stereotypes that affect women in leadership also encompass emotional factors. Thus, women are seen as incapable of controlling their emotions and preventing them from significantly influencing their actions and understandings, while men are considered as more rational and pragmatic, therefore, as more suitable leaders (Brescoll, 2016).

Laura realized that there was a spontaneous “adaptation to the environment” in her behavior and that of other women. In this sense, she sought to restrict the expression of her emotions, being less “effusive” and more “sober,” and therefore, more consistent with the image of a leader and masculinity linked to emotional control (Brescoll, 2016).

At times, we realize that there are only men around; you get [...] you realize, wow, I’m the only woman [...]. Naturally, when we are in a very masculinized environment, we end up being less effusive in the way we communicate. We end up getting a little soberer because men are more like that. So, we adapt to the environment. You end up behaving more like most people (Laura).

According to gender stereotypes, femininity is related to submission, and affability, while virility is linked to aggressiveness and command (Bourdieu, 2020; Eagly, 1987). When interacting with other people in the company, Angela maintained an attitude closer to masculine attributes as a defense against hostile conduct (and even preventing it). This behavior also helped her to exercise leadership in certain situations.

Men were even afraid of me [...] you hear jokes [...] “don’t hire a woman because a woman gets pregnant!”, “because she has PMS.” [...]. If they said that directly, [if they said] something directly to me that I didn’t like, in that moment, at that very moment, they would be in trouble [...]. I’ve always been a very tough woman, kind of rude, even. I put each one in their place [...]. I faced resistance during some processes [...] to audit the offices I had a problem to the point of saying: “here’s the thing, either you answer me, or I’m going to call the director or the vice president!” [...]. It was an audit with men and for men [...], but everyone did it. I’m sure that, if I were a man at that time, they wouldn’t treat me that way (Angela).

Expressing power-related emotions, such as anger, seems important for asserting oneself as a leader, but it can be detrimental for women, as these behaviors are counter-stereotyped. In leadership, properly managing the expression of emotions – both intensity and type – is particularly challenging for women. If they show the emotions expected of a leader, they may be rejected for going against their gender role, and the manifestation of any level of emotion can reinforce the stereotype of being too emotional to exercise leadership (Brescoll, 2016). In this study, we observed that adopting behaviors similar to masculinity enabled the interviewees’ recognition as leaders.

Leadership support/sponsorship

An influential factor granting leadership identity to Laura, Ângela, and Ana was having their immediate superiors' support or sponsorship so they could develop their proposals. In the case of the first two, this support was important for them to obtain a formal promotion. Laura states:

My manager, from the beginning, he already saw it, he already supported what I was doing, the work I was doing, which it was high-quality. [...] From the beginning, he made sure that functional update [the formal promotion] was conducted properly [...] He always trusted me completely.

About her relationship with her boss, Ângela evaluated: "I had a really good rapport with him. He was my 'father figure' within the company." It should be noted that the superior exercised great influence in the organization and assumed, after a certain time, a C-level position to which Angela began to report directly, a favorable situation for her to develop and maintain leadership in the company.

Fernanda could not count on a proactive attitude from her immediate boss to be formally recognized in the position she held. She demanded the change, assuming an agentic attitude: "It was a complaint to my direct manager." However, she had a good relationship with him in other aspects: "When I asked him for things, he acted and did them," which may have enabled her to advance in her career. Furthermore, she believes that the four-year delay for her first hierarchical promotion was significant for her to be accepted and successful as a leader in the management positions she assumed, as the accumulation of learning and technical experience acquired during the period qualified her to achieve excellence in her work performance, as shown in the excerpt below. Again, it appears that women must demonstrate a clearly superior performance to reach higher positions (Eagly & Carli, 2007).

I was already a manager. We had a technical problem with a client, and my director said: "I'm going to send you my two best employees, my two best resources to solve the problem." Then, my colleague and I went. So, that was something that made me happy: being considered one of the company's best resources (Fernanda).

In this comment by Fernanda, one can identify yet another visible, clear, and credible demonstration of granting behavior by superiors – as already mentioned about the meetings in which Laura participated. This concession was based on confidence in the competence of both before members of the top positions. Provisional granting like these encourage the continuity of reciprocal claiming actions (DeRue & Ashford, 2010).

In two years, Fernanda was promoted again after working informally in her new position. She expanded her activities throughout her trajectory, from managing two products and leading around ten subordinates in the first position as a leader to becoming responsible for 12 products – some critical for organizational performance – and coordinating more than 40 engineers. To that effect, Fernanda had to attain a certain prestige in the company and the recognition of influential people who interceded many times so she could expand the scope and decision-making power of her position. The support and sponsorship of formal and informal leaders contributed to her progression, as seen in the following excerpt.

I had the respect of some people who were influencers within the company. Maybe I've managed to ascend so much, climb so much and have so many products precisely because of that, because there were other people who said that I was the most suitable person (Fernanda).

In Laura's case, the relationship with members of other areas of the company was relevant to reach a leadership position. She wanted to promote greater integration of the communication department where she worked with the rest of Alpha through systemic management. She persuasively stimulated her team and managers from various divisions to engage with her goal and established partnerships.

I started to engage [employees from other departments] early in the process; then, they felt much more involved [...] because, in my view, transforming these relationships was not just to bring benefits to marketing, it was to bring benefits to the company as a whole [...] the gain was collective. [...] I brought this vision [to the subordinates]: [...] "Our value will be in offering the best support to other areas [...] that way we will get stronger" (Laura).

The search for integration with other areas and the demonstration of an attitude focused on collective interests were important not only for her to reach organizational goals but also to exercise her leadership. “I felt very fulfilled professionally because I had a lot of autonomy.” Thus, the relevance of networking for women’s career progression is reinforced, corroborating the literature. For Fernanda and Laura, coordinating people outside their departments favored this aspect.

It should be noted that, although in a male-dominated company, being inserted in an area compatible with gender stereotypes contributed to Laura’s promotion because it minimized resistance from superiors and she was not being a minority in that specific setting, despite the area manager and vice president being men and engineers. In this sense, the performance evaluations of women who have line jobs tend to be worse than those with staff jobs due to the greater perceived incompatibility between the stereotypes directed at them and the positions’ demands (Lyness & Heilman, 2006).

The vice-president himself always saw value in having men and women in the marketing area [...] He even made comments on how much the women had the sensitivity to perceive things that men did not have [...] even though the majority of the company was formed by men [...] In the Marketing Department as a whole, we had a balance (Laura).

Therefore, discrimination factors may be less evident, as observed in Laura’s statement: “I honestly never felt any difficulty in interacting with them and being respected or having their trust for being a woman at any time.” Characteristics typically attributed to women have been valued in organizational discourses, but as long as they are inserted in areas consonant with the female archetype and below the top of the hierarchy (Calás & Smircich, 2007).

DISCUSSION AND FINAL CONSIDERATIONS

According to the model by DeRue and Ashford (2010), the process of constructing leadership identity develops through social interactions. These interactions do not occur neutrally but are influenced by gender stereotypes and normative precepts. Thus, women face major difficulties and challenges in obtaining granting – especially in male-dominated organizational segments (Eagly & Karau, 2002). With that in mind, the first stage of the research presents an organizational panorama marked by great adversities imposed on women in the company studied. It suggests that the path toward identity granting was much more complex and less explicit for them than for men.

When analyzing the journey of the women who reached leadership in the case, it is possible to conclude that having predominantly adopted attributes and behaviors considered agentic – such as assertiveness, proactivity, willingness to take risks, objectivity, and mastery of the situation – was essential to trigger the process of granting them a leader identity. These observations conflict with propositions found in the literature, which argue that the correspondence between agentic behavior and progression to management positions is less evident for women (Frear et al., 2018) and that a high level of agency would harm the chances for women to rise as leaders (Eagly & Karau, 2002; Schock et al., 2019).

In this sense, Eagly and Carli (2007) believe that in male-dominated environment, women should prioritize agency behaviors but, at the same time, demonstrate communal attributes to the extent that they are not seen as weak. However, the interviewees’ reports suggest that what determines the construction of women’s leadership in these contexts is the predominance of agentic behaviors associated with communal attributes that take on a collaborative and collective orientation. This type of conduct and a hybrid management style are considered less threatening (Meister et al., 2017) and contributed to recognizing the interviewees’ leadership by softening the divergence between gender and leadership roles (Bourdieu, 2020; Eagly & Karau, 2002). Therefore, at least for women in a mostly male segment, the study’s observations contradict the conclusion that agentic behavior has a positive impact and communal behavior has a negative impact on the emergence of leadership and that this dynamic determines the gap between men and women on this issue (Badura et al., 2018).

The analyses are in line with the study by Guillén, Mayo, and Karelai (2018) also performed with engineers working in technology. The authors found that men gained influence within the organization when appearing self-confident, while women gained influence only if such self-confidence was accompanied by a prosocial orientation.

It should be noted that explanatory models assuming that men are more agentic, and women are more communal (Badura et al., 2018) reinforce the naturalization of gender stereotypes and contribute to perpetuating the gender disparity in positions of power. It is important to say that this research approaches the subject from an individually adaptive perspective to a condition whose origin involves much broader dimensions. This condition will not be remedied without questioning the structure manifested in the most diverse spheres of society, which sustains inequality of opportunities between men and women. It is emphasized that the development of a collective identity among women is necessary to break this structure; work alone is not enough to free them, given that female labor has been constant throughout history, as well as the oppression toward women (Beauvoir, 1980). In the field of organizational studies, this issue is more directly addressed by critical theory and the postmodernist approach (Alvesson & Deetz, 2001).

As a limitation of the study, due to the passage of time and the retrospective nature of the reports collected in the second stage, events, and other aspects relevant to the purpose of the research may have been forgotten. Future studies on the subject should include superiors, peers, and subordinates to encompass the perspective of those who grant leadership. Particularly in the segments of science, technology, engineering, and mathematics, in which female representation is still low, new research should increase knowledge about the barriers and constraints of the social construction of leader identity for women, both from the perspective of women and their claiming actions and of men and factors that restrict the behavior of granting leadership identity to women working in these segments.

At the same time that professional women are required to reconcile, in some way, the agency and communal styles to obtain the leadership identity (Eagly & Carli, 2007; Zheng et al., 2018), as occurred with the interviewees, it is possible that their agentic action has to stand out not only in form, but also in frequency and intensity in relation to that of men, so that it is seen and recognized as such. Likewise, to overcome the barriers of discrimination regarding their ability to fulfill the leadership role, women may need to deliver managerial results at a higher and more distinctive level than men. This issue should be further investigated from a comparative perspective.

We should also emphasize that the interviewees who formally ascended adopted the roleshaping strategy aiming at innovative and relevant global results. This required the participation of other agents and the formation of supportive alliances (Bowles et al., 2019). Leadership support and sponsorship is a relevant factor in the career progression for both genders, although it is less accessible to women according to studies on networking (e.g., Collins & Val Singh, 2006; Ibarra et al., 2010). Thus, it was through the establishment of a complex and challenging strategy that the interviewees developed networking and benefited from it. It is possible that women need to make more audacious efforts to achieve networking that drives their career advancement in a male-dominated environment compared to men. This and other issues may be addressed by future research with a comparative approach.

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