The Role of Resilience for Women Entrepreneurs and Leaders

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ABSTRACT

This study investigates the presence and importance of resilience to women entrepreneurs and leaders. Five women from Connecticut ranging in age, experience, education, and fields of work were interviewed to gain an understanding of the challenges of a leadership position or entrepreneurial career, and the role that resilience has played. Semi-structured interviews were used which allowed an in-depth exploration of their successes, struggles, and prior education and training for the roles held. Interviewees also provided recommendations and insights for other women pursuing entrepreneurship and/or leadership. All five interviewees agreed that to be successful in their positions, and even obtain their current positions, resilience skills played a foundational role, as they must confront challenges daily. In conclusion, women professionals may benefit from participating in specialized resilience training which addresses the challenges unique to women's perseverance in highly competitive careers to promote healthy habits in the work environment, and resources to preserver during challenges.

Introduction

Since the 1970's women's educational attainment has been par, or exceeded that of men's (Defrank-Cole, 2019), yet they are still dramatically underrepresented in leadership and entrepreneurial roles. However, women are pursuing entrepreneurship and leadership more often today than in decades past. Some women have decided to become entrepreneurs after the disparities they faced in the corporate world (Heilman and Chen, 2003). While women have made advancements in corporate and especially educational industries (Defrank-Cole, 2019), they are still significantly disadvantaged in male-dominated fields. Part of these differential outcomes may be driven by socially-sanctioned roles for women vs men (Eagly et al., 2004). Women are generally the primary caretakers of children, and this responsibility is often a trade-off of time and energy for career development. It has been noted that "…family life has a dramatic impact on the progress of female executives with young children…" (McGowan et al., 2012). Because of the history behind women being the caretakers and managing the home, oftentimes young women may be perceived as not as committed to the organization and be disadvantaged in obtaining promotions. This is due to the feminine stereotype that women are the nurturers (Bem, 1981). It takes a huge investment of time and energy to become a successful businesswoman and leader especially due to the gender biases women confront on a day-to-day basis. There are certain qualities and characteristics that businesswomen must have to be successful. Resilience has recently become a topic of discussion when in relation to entrepreneurs and leaders but still has not received too much attention and is often overlooked (Hartmann et al., 2022). Training for resilience therefore presents an opportunity to support women's career endeavors. Resilience training focuses on emotional, cognitive, mental, physical, and spiritual resilience all while building resources to cope with, and grow from, the inevitable personal and professional stresses of life (Reivich et al., 2011). Resilience, or "an ability to go on with life, or to continue living a purposeful life, after hardship or adversity," (Tedeschi & Calhoun, 2004), is a quality that people who work in the business world must have to be successful and maintain good standing in the face of adversity. Having a better understanding of what resilience means and how it can help women's relationship with work environments would likely affect their attitudes towards their jobs and overall

efficiency. If women have the opportunity develop these skills through training, it may enable them to preserver through the challenges inherent in entrepreneurial or leadership careers.

Theoretical Foundations

Entrepreneurs must mitigate risk on a daily basis – being ready and willing to face hardships that could potentially threaten the business (Simon et al., 2000). Financial crises, technological innovations, or new competitors are all threats that are very likely to surface at one point or another. To overcome these obstacles, resilience is needed. By analyzing the biographies of eight sustainably successful entrepreneurs, Duchek (2017) was able to gain insight on how these eight individuals developed their entrepreneurial resilience. Everyone became successful in fields that their parents had no previous experience in: meaning they did not carry on any "family legacies" rather they started from scratch in their own field of interest. Duchek found that there are situational factors and individual factors that influenced each entrepreneur. Some of the situational factors that influenced them were the parents' behavior and the parents' experience. Some of the individual factors include personal traits, mindset, skills, and abilities. Duchek's study contributes to the little information currently available on resilience in relation to entrepreneurs and will help serve as a guide to future research (Duchek, 2017).

Again, although the proportion of women in the full-time workforce is still growing, and women's educational attainment exceeds men's, they still hold relatively few leadership positions (Defrank-Cole, 2019). Leadership positions are often held by men even though research suggests that women perform comparable, if not better than, men in these roles (Eagly & Carli, 2003). Women face many internal and external barriers to becoming a leader. Some of the internal battles they encounter are imposter syndrome and lack of leadership identity while some of the external barriers are societal views and institutional practices (Almaki et al., 2016; Hannum et al., 2015; Herbst, 2020; Longman et al., 2018; Morley, 2013). The business world has systemic barriers that disadvantage women, especially in terms of leadership opportunities. Some of these systemic barriers are the gendered nature of higher education institutions, gender bias and discrimination, and unsupportive work cultures. Since these barriers are deep-rooted in society, progress toward gender equity is slow. Resilience is needed to stay the course when confronting these hurdles and help to eventually overcome them.

Resilience is defined as "being able to recover quickly from difficult conditions" (Soanes & Stevenson, 2006). The act of being resilient is not always as easy as it seems. In a work environment, there are countless different types of people, with varying agendas, all trying to get their voices heard and objectives implemented with may or may not align with organizational goals. This may lead to overstepping boundaries and difficult situations often arise. When this happens, resilience skills are especially important. Training for resilience may help people learn skills to adapt to and overcome problems/setbacks in their personal and work life.

Unfortunately, due to the limited research on resilience in the workplace, specifically amongst women leaders, it is difficult to assess the effectiveness of resilience (Sobratee & Bodhanya, 2018). The research to date focuses on understanding the process of resilience from a socio-ecological perspective, a more holistic approach (Cooke et al., 2019; Yang et al., 2020). Daphne Pillay-Naidoo and Petrus Nel (2022) studied women leaders in the academic and support divisions from four higher education institutions in South Africa. Their sample had 255 female leaders, a majority of this sample being women 45 years and older (66.7%), 61.6% being married. A little over half (55.3%) of their respondents had a PhD degree and more than half (55.7%) of participants were leaders in the academic environment. To measure resilience among the participants they used the 14-item Resilience Scale (RS-14) (Wagnild, 2009). This is a 7-point scale ranging from 1 (strongly disagree) to 7 (strongly agree). The higher the score, the more resilient while the lower the score, the less resilient. Through this study, Pillay-Naidoo and Nel found evidence that supports the importance of resilience and put an emphasis on emotional intelligence since it plays a crucial role in the resilience of female leaders (Pillay-Naidoo & Nel, 2022).

Another important question is whether there are gender differences in resiliency. A survey using a sample of Afghan men and women to examine the effects of resilience, self-efficacy, and entrepreneurial intentions explored this

question (Bullough, Renko, & Myatt, 2014). Gathering participants was difficult due to the climate of Afghanistan but they were able to gather participants who were mostly literate, had primary education, and were in a position in their lives where there was a potential to start a new business. They survey 163 male and female professionals in the working community. In the sample they collected, women were slightly overrepresented due to the university having women's business education. The results indicated that there are not many large gender differences in how danger or resilience are perceived. The research contributes to understanding the role of self-efficacy and resilience which can be deployed in educational settings (Bullough, Renko, & Myatt, 2014).

Understanding the decision-making processes of women entering a leadership role is also important. Every decision women make lead them to that leadership position, so it is important to understand their decision processes. Ndemo and Wanjiku-Maina studied this at the University of Nairobi in Kenya. Fifteen women entrepreneurs were selected, and their eligibility was based on the following factors: if they were owners or operators of micro enterprises in Nairobi or if they employed between one and ten people. The research found that enabling independent decision-making for the female entrepreneurs was the best way to help the enterprises thrive. The participants all shared the desire to consult their husbands for business decisions even though there was a unanimous agreement that their enterprises worked better when the women made decisions independently. The study found that when women strengthen their decision-making processes and leadership, it not only benefits them economically, but strengthens their families as well (Ndemo & Wanjiku Maina, 2007).

The limited availability of literature on resilience and entrepreneurs and leadership, specifically women entrepreneurs, implies more work/research is needed on this topic. It is also important to note that many studies have come to a similar conclusion: that women have the skills and characteristics that it takes to become successful leaders. Sometimes, women leaders can be even more effective than men, but due to historical societal barriers and gendered expectations, it is difficult for women to have the same opportunities to obtain leadership positions. Women are often successful in a leadership position because they show compassion, sensitivity, and intelligence. These qualities are not mutually exclusive to one gender, but research supports that these qualities are aligned with feminine stereotypes (Eagly & Carli, 2003).

Method

Research Design Overview

To gain insight on the role resilience plays in the workplace of women entrepreneurs and leaders, in-person and zoom interviews were conducted with five women in Connecticut, USA. Those who participated ranged from their early twenties to mid-sixties and all had varying levels of experience when it came to running a business and/or leading people. The interview method was selected for data collection due to the richness of the information obtained, and for the interviewer to have personalized experience with the interviewees rather than sending out a questionnaire en masse.

Data Collection

The interviews were audio recorded and had an average run time of 30 to 40 minutes. The semi-structured interview method was used where each interviewee was asked the same open-ended questions, allowing each participant to elaborate at will. This collection process worked well with the nature of this research because it gave the women the ability to speak freely about their experiences in past and current work environments. A convenience sample of five women were who were known to the primary author were selected due to their experience as a leader and/or entrepreneur. The primary author sought a diverse sample of participants from different backgrounds, ethnicities, and ages.

Findings

The qualitative data which was collected lead to the understanding that women have characteristics of resilience in entrepreneurial and leadership settings even without training. It is also important to note that even in fields dominated by women, resilience still plays a factor. The overarching theme that was found through this research is that women in positions of power all share traits of resilience. The businesswomen and leaders who were interviewed all shared a similar consensus that resilience training was not readily available to them. If the opportunity were given to these women to participate in resilience training, they would. They all agreed that resilience training would strengthen their abilities to handle difficult situations and prevent conflict with their coworkers or their clientele. Though only one of the participants had previous training in resilience, the rest of the women interviewed showed characteristics of resilience through the adversities that they faced in their fields of work. This shows that women are inherently resilient and do not necessarily need training, however, could benefit from it.

Besides this main take away, each interviewee had pearls of wisdom to share. For example, in industries that are dominated by men, Interviewee 1 stated, "You must be better than the men around you". You need to set yourself apart from the masses and stand out, especially because of the gender bias that runs rampant in so many industries. She also explained that because women are nurturers, we should use this to our advantage. In her experience as a leader, she has noticed that her staff worked more proficiently when they felt they were being cared for. Similarly, Interviewee 2 noted that capitalizing on the soft skills that women naturally have is a great way to gain traction in a leadership position while also gaining an understanding of the overall culture of the industry you're working in is key to being successful. Interviewee 3 emphasized that it is important to know that as a businesswoman, you are not too much for other people or your business competitors, they just can't handle what you have to offer. On the other hand, Interviewee 4 navigated her way through her leadership positions with kindness. She lives by, "Kill them with kindness and eyes wide opened. Kindness and humor go a long way in all walks of life". Finally, Interviewee 5's main recommendation is to bite the bullet and start your own business. There will never be a good time to start a business, so she urges women to find a passion and pursue it.

Discussion

The results of the interviews indicate that resilience training would be valued by leaders/entrepreneurs, and should be made more accessible in general, but specifically for women in these roles due to ongoing authority challenges. The more specific training and resources would enable women in authority to handle unpleasant situations between their subordinates, coworkers, and consumers with greater confidence. Future research may conduct resilience training on this population and then assess its effectiveness in terms of confidence and leader self-efficacy. Including a follow-up assessment months after the training would also enable longer term assessment of the value of such a program.

Entrepreneurial World as a Woman

Becoming an entrepreneur is not for the faint of heart. Becoming established and identifying a niche to cater to is essential when creating a business. These challenges are even greater for women entrepreneurs because the stereotypes of entrepreneurship do not align with feminine gender stereotypes (Laguia et al., 2022). The interviews showed the women in this study shared several similarities: ambition, perseverance, resilience. Most also felt that men were the comparison by which they are evaluated, inspiring them to work hard to protect their reputation. Although entrepreneurship is fraught with risks and challenges, those women who succeed in starting a successful business from scratch experience great pride and satisfaction.

Leadership World as a Woman

Gender diversity in the workforce has been increasing over the past few decades. However, with this increase comes challenges for the women entering the world of business. Something that men normally do not have to consider is how their family life affects the way they are perceived by management. It is engrained in our society's culture that women are the primary caregivers, while men are meant to be the 'breadwinners'. Not only do women face this inherent 'nurturer' role, because they are less likely to be promoted to a leadership position, they are perceived as 'less competent' than men resulting in few examples of female leaders in the highest organizational levels to challenge the status quo (Kiser, 2015). Women's leadership style is thought to be more relational oriented: democratic and participative, while men's is often task oriented and autocratic (Defrank-Cole, 2019). Because of this difference in leadership styles, men are seen to be more assertive, ambitious, and of having self-confidence which is consistent with implicit prototypes of successful leaders.

Conclusion

Through interviewing multiple women in varying fields, there are a lot of similarities in the values they have, the challenges they faced, and the recommendations they have for women who are considering starting their own businesses or who are planning to take on a leadership role. Something that they all agreed with is that resilience training is something that would be helpful in all walks of life, but many of them have not found an opportunity to participate in this type of training. Each of the women that were interviewed had their own takeaways from their own experiences in leadership and entrepreneurship. Not being afraid to be true to yourself and the understanding that you cannot please everyone nor be everyone's cup of tea is a point that all these women have made throughout the interviews. Overall, the women expressed interest in participating in formal resilience training to enhance their leadership skills.

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