

*A joint research*

*project of*

*The Radcliffe*

SUITING THEMSELVES:  
WOMEN'S LEADERSHIP STYLES  
IN TODAY'S WORKPLACE



*Public Policy*

*Institute and*

*The Boston Club*

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# SUITING THEMSELVES: WOMEN'S LEADERSHIP STYLES IN TODAY'S WORKPLACE

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## EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Women, at the end of the twentieth century, constitute only about 5% of the senior-level executives in American business. As more women reach leadership levels in their organizations, there is a need to understand the factors that encourage their success as well as those that undermine their potential. The Radcliffe Public Policy Institute, in conjunction with The Boston Club, has conducted a one-year study on the topic of “women and leadership.” The purpose of the research was to obtain a greater understanding of the characteristics, demographics, and styles of women leaders. The study looked at women’s leadership styles and at different attitudes toward leadership among women in a variety of professions and work environments, and at the effects of age, race, and experience on attitudes toward leadership.

Funded by Fidelity Investments, this project was based on a survey mailed to over 700 women in the Boston area (Radcliffe alumnae and members of The Boston Club) and on follow-up focus groups. The 453 women who participated (a 64.7% response rate) represented leaders in the corporate and non-profit spheres, self-employed women, and women in an array of professions and industries.

Leadership has traditionally been defined in male terms because those who head large corporations, professional firms, government offices and non-profit institutions have, for the most part, historically been men. The Radcliffe Public Policy Institute and The Boston Club’s project findings contribute to that understanding and help to replace stereotypical images with the experiences of real women.

Many of the stereotypes regarding women and leadership were challenged by the study findings. Balancing work and family, for example, though clearly a significant and difficult challenge, was not described as a cause of career derailment by the women in this study. While other studies have identified pressure to conform to traditionally male models of leadership as a substantial barrier for women executives, the women surveyed here indicated a high degree of comfort in asserting leadership styles that embody a wide range of traits, some considered typically “female” and others regarded as typically “male.” Also in evidence in the survey sample was the noticeable number of women who have abandoned corporate culture in favor of starting their own businesses, a trend which resonates with the statistics showing that women-owned businesses are the fastest-growing segment of the small business economy.

The study findings indicate a shift away from a focus on how women can learn to fit within stereotypical male leadership styles to how women—and men—exert leadership styles which help to shape the cultures of their varied organizations. Simply “being female” was seen as a barrier by only a small segment (16%) of the population studied. While close to half of the minority women surveyed felt that women have to work harder and longer hours than men to achieve leadership positions, this view was reflected by only 8% of the total sample.

Workplace culture emerged as the single most critical factor to be taken into consideration in determining the level of effectiveness and comfort these women experienced as leaders. The survey responses raised serious questions concerning the role of traditional workplace cultures in supporting and promoting women leaders. Do workplace cultures, in fact, support women leaders—or do women leaders learn to adapt to (or leave) these less-than-sup-

*The study findings indicate a shift away from a focus on how women can learn to fit within stereotypical male leadership styles...*

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portive cultures?

The women who participated in this survey listed personal ambition, comfort with risk-taking and interest in hard work as primary characteristics of leadership. They saw the barriers to leadership as being largely externally-imposed. Among the factors they considered most important to women's achievement of leadership positions were access to key assignments and key players, access to informal channels of communication, and a positive cultural climate for female executives.

## KEY FINDINGS

- There is no “female style” of leadership, according to the women surveyed. While some described their style as collaborative, inclusive, and team-oriented, many also described their style as assertive, decisive, and strong. Focus group participants related their experiences in trying to merge typical “male” and typical “female” traits in their own leadership environments;
- Workplace culture (“the tone at the top”) affects leadership options. Women in traditional corporate environments perceived a greater expectation to adhere to a stereotypic male model of leadership than did those in the non-profit sector. Self-employed women felt more comfortable with power and more optimism about job security than their counterparts in corporations;
- Only 16% of the respondents reported that “being a woman” was a “very difficult aspect” of leadership;
- More than two-thirds of the women surveyed said they felt as comfortable with power, risk-taking, and making personal sacrifices as their male counterparts;
- A much higher percentage of women of color (41.2%) than non-minority women (6%) indicated that they had to work harder and longer than their male counterparts to reach leadership positions. While 36% of the overall sample viewed stereotypes about women as a hindrance to their leadership, many more women of color (57%) viewed racial stereotyping as a barrier and 60% viewed a white-dominated culture as a factor inhibiting their advancement;
- The survey found that the three most significant factors in supporting women's entrance to leadership positions were: a positive climate for women, access to high visibility assignments, and being in the right place at the right time;
- Self-employed and minority women tended to see greater value in formal workplace and government programs in promoting women leaders than did non-minority women and women employed in traditional corporate or non-profit settings;
- Nearly 90% of the women reported that their careers play a major role in their self-definition. Respondents reported great enthusiasm for their professions and for their opportunities as leaders to effect positive outcomes in their organizations and in their broader communities.

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## BACKGROUND

### PREVIOUS FINDINGS

Much of the research on women as leaders has focused on a woman's ability to adapt to a traditionally male-dominated culture and to break through what has traditionally been a male sphere of influence. Recent studies continue to focus on the status of women as outsiders to senior management.

In *The Managerial Woman*, one of the first studies of executive women, Hennig and Jardim examined strategies adopted by women who had achieved entry to senior management positions (Hennig and Jardim, 1976). While the portrait of the woman executive has changed dramatically in the last two decades, the transformation of the organization's culture has proceeded at a much slower pace. For example, Hennig and Jardim describe the status of women as outsiders in traditional work cultures: "Men dominate the informal systems of organizations for the straightforward reason that there are so many more of them....As outsiders to the men's informal system, women need sources of support, advice and information beyond that system, and one of the most viable means of achieving this is in the support group made up of other women" (Hennig and Jardim, 1976, p.195).

A 1987 survey of managerial women conducted by the Center for Creative Leadership similarly concluded: "Since all of the candidates tend to be top performers, chemistry plays a major part in who advances and who doesn't. Women are different and, by definition, outsiders. Accentuating those differences, whether real or imagined, serves to fortify rather than destroy barriers to the top" (Morrison, et. al., 1987, p. 146).

The Center for Creative Leadership's 1987 study also addressed the question of whether women were simply choosing not to follow leadership tracks. Based on in-depth interviews with 76 executive women, their study predicted that women would opt out of their leadership

track for three possible reasons: to start their own business, to achieve better life balance, or to alleviate the stress and exhaustion caused by the pace of their lives. As the report stated, "Only [three] of our executives said they thought they could be president or CEO of their company. For most of the rest, the rewards seemed not worth the risks" (Morrison, et.al., 1987, pp. 140-141). In other words, this research suggested that, for most women, barriers to top-level positions were largely internally imposed.

Do women simply choose to opt out of senior management or are they held back by organizational factors beyond their control? Inquiry into barriers to women's leadership has focused on the presence of "the glass ceiling"—an invisible, yet powerful obstruction to women who seek top-level positions in their organizations. Hard work and talent are not potent enough to shatter the glass ceiling, where informal organizational factors, such as the exclusion of women from informal mentoring and informal channels of communication, come into play.

One theory of women's leadership attainment, the "pipeline theory," has asserted that the problem of women's access to leadership positions would be solved by the simple passage of time. In other words, once the presence of women reached a critical mass, the process of equitable promotion would remedy the unequal distribution of leaders on the basis of gender. Now that women have entered nearly all professions in significant numbers, the validity

*What can organizations do to ensure that they are fully tapping the entire talent pool for future leaders?*

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of the pipeline theory is challenged by the limited change in the number of women at the top. Many executive men, however, continue to support the pipeline premise. In a 1996 Catalyst survey, 64% of the male CEO's expressed the belief that more women have not advanced to corporate leadership because "women have not been in the pipeline long enough"; only 29% of the executive women surveyed agreed with this premise (Catalyst, 1996).

A 1994 survey of 502 executive women conducted by *Working Woman* revealed that women believe the number one obstacle to their advancement is "a male-dominated corporate culture" (Lawlor, 1994). In the Catalyst survey, women identified the following factors as most significant in preventing women from advancement to leadership posts: male stereotypes about women, exclusion from informal networks of communication, and lack of general and line management experience (Catalyst, 1996). Another 1996 study, of 325 executive women, echoed these findings with the following list of factors most responsible for gender inequity in the workplace: the "old boys" network, attitudes of senior management, and the unwritten rules of work. While 73% of the women reported that their organizations had taken formal action to prohibit gender bias, 62% said that they had experienced gender bias in their current positions, again suggesting that mandated policies have been largely ineffective in eradicating the deeply-embedded organizational norms that inhibit a woman's access to leadership positions (Swiss, 1996).

Several studies have addressed the issue of how significant a role luck and timing play in the level of success a woman achieves (Catalyst, 1996; Korn/Ferry, 1993). Consistent with this research, 87% of the women in this study indicated that "being in the right place at the right time" was key to their success, although focus group participants felt this probably reflected conscious strategic planning as much as luck. A viable explanation for this finding is offered in the Center for Creative Leadership's report: "If there is a difference between women and men, it may be that women need more luck (along with more ability) to get ahead because of the barriers they confront" (Morrison, et. al., 1987, p. 136).

Gender assumptions about women as leaders have also been highlighted in this area of research. On the question of gender differences in leadership style, Rosabeth Moss Kanter's seminal *Men and Women of the Corporation* suggested that the differences are not significant: "Theories saying that women handle power differently from men, that men are instrumental leaders, oriented toward competition and domination through nature or childhood training, also do not match the realities of adult life in organizations" (Kanter, 1977, p. 199). Kanter concludes that the differences are in perceptions about men and women rather than the reality. Because women do not represent a "masculine ethic", they are thrust into a token and outsider status in the way they are viewed and treated within their organizations (Kanter, 1977).

In 1990, Judy Rosner's *Harvard Business Review* article "Ways Women Lead" ignited a storm of controversy by posing the question: Is there a female style of leadership? The controversy erupted largely because this is a question unlikely to be asked of male executives. Leadership style continues to be an issue that receives close scrutiny for women leaders. In the Catalyst 1996 study of women executives, both the male CEO's and the women surveyed agreed that a key factor in a woman's success was her ability to develop a style with which male managers were comfortable.

Previous research has raised the issue of whether women feel pressure to conform to stereotypical male models of leadership. More recently, the work of Sally Helgesen has focused on the question of whether female leaders exhibit differences in style and approach from male

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leaders that may provide a better fit for current organizational agendas. Helgesen suggests that: “As a result, the female view that one strengthens oneself by strengthening others is finding greater acceptance, and female values of inclusion and connection are emerging as valuable leadership qualities” (Helgesen, 1990, p. 233).

As women enter positions of leadership in greater numbers, a shift is occurring in the questions posed about women and leadership potential. Instead of asking the question “How can women learn to fit the standards set by what have been traditionally male cultures?” the question may now be, “What can organizations do to ensure that they are fully tapping the entire talent pool for future leaders?”

#### PROJECT SCOPE

The women in leadership project began as an outgrowth of discussions between members of The Boston Club and the Radcliffe Public Policy Institute (RPPI) about women’s leadership issues. The Boston Club is Boston’s largest organization of senior executive and professional women. The Radcliffe Public Policy Institute is a research institute at Radcliffe College that works to engage women and men as equal partners in shaping policy on important national economic, social, and political issues.

Both Radcliffe College and The Boston Club have an established record in developing strategies to promote the entry of women into leadership positions in their organizations and on business and civic boards. With an increase in the number of women entering the executive ranks in both the business and non-profit sector, there was strong interest in exploring:

- how women defined themselves as leaders;
- factors key to women’s leadership development;
- support systems for women’s access to leadership;
- barriers to women as leaders; and
- unique challenges faced by women who lead.

#### STUDY METHODOLOGY

Funded by Fidelity Investments, this study used both survey research and focus group analyses to understand the challenges, styles, sacrifices, realities and workplace experiences of senior-level women leaders. As part of the study, over 700 professional women were identified. Half were members of The Boston Club and half were Radcliffe alumnae chosen on the basis of their professional or career demographics. A 12-page survey was mailed in the spring of 1998, with a follow-up mailing in August.

From these two mailings, 453 women leaders (or 64.7% of those mailed) completed and returned the survey. The survey asked a variety of questions regarding workforce experience, type of leadership service, leadership styles, rewards and barriers to leadership access, job security, comfort with technology, and general demographic information. Respondents were asked their opinion on their opportunities for advancement compared to male counterparts and to women of other racial and ethnic backgrounds. The survey asked both discrete and open-ended questions. The open-ended responses were analyzed as integral components of the data analysis process and appear in the report as unattributed comments.

In addition to the survey data, two focus groups were run in order to gain further insight into the survey answers. A focus group protocol, based on the initial results of the survey data, was developed and used to guide the focus group discussions. Focus group participants were selected through a random sample of those who completed the survey and said that they would be interested in participating in a group. Focus group sessions were tape recorded and

transcripts were analyzed. Focus group comments are included in this report, but they also are unattributed.

#### DEMOGRAPHICS OF THE SAMPLE

Surveys were mailed in equal numbers to members of The Boston Club and to a sample of Radcliffe alumnae. The Boston Club, founded in 1974, is a group of over 400 senior executive and professional women. Forty percent of its members are senior corporate executives; 35% are entrepreneurs; and 20% are legal, medical, and financial professionals.

Among women who responded to the survey, 59% were members of The Boston Club and 48% were Radcliffe alumnae, with some overlap between the two groups. The majority of the women surveyed ranged in age from 35 to 59. Women of color represented 9% of the sample. Sixty-nine percent of the women were married and 71% were mothers; 40% of the women had children under the age of 18.

Among those with children, 56% shared parental responsibility with a spouse or partner while 32% assumed primary caregiving responsibility. Thirteen percent of the women had direct caregiving responsibility for an older parent. Table 1 provides demographic information about the survey respondents.

The senior level of the women who participated in this study is reflected in the workplace and leadership service characteristics of the survey respondents. Table 2 provides information about the workplace characteristics of the survey respondents. Sixty-six percent of the sample were employed in the for-profit sector, with 34% working in non-profit organizations. Professions represented included: business services, finance and banking, health services, education, and legal services. Thirty percent of the women occupied positions as an executive, administrator, or manager; 10% were lawyers or judges; 8% were physicians; 7% were in marketing, advertising, or public relations; 5.5% taught at a college or university; and 5% were financial managers. The fact that 25% worked in organizations with fewer than ten people reflects the proportion of women in the survey who were self-employed (27%). Twenty-one percent worked in organizations with more than 3,000 employees.

The survey respondents had spent an average of 23.3 years in the workforce, with 91%

TABLE 1. *General Demographic Characteristics of Survey Respondents*

Membership Affiliation	Boston Club Membership: Radcliffe Alumnae:	59% 48%
Age	Median Age Range: 45-49 years of age Between 35 and 59 years of age:	82.8%
Race/Ethnicity	White, non Hispanic: Black, non Hispanic: Asian: All Others:	90.7% 3.4% 3.4% 2.5%
Marital Status	Married: Single, never married: Single, divorced: Unmarried partnership: All Others:	69.2% 13.0% 11.4% 3.1% 3.3%
Dependents	Dependents: Children under the age of 18: Care for elder parent:	71% 40% 13%

having at least 11 years of experience. They had worked, on average, ten years in their current organizations. Sixty percent of those surveyed earned over \$100,000 per year, and nearly 60% of the women worked more than 45 hours per week (49 hours per week was the average).

Forty-nine percent of the survey respondents described themselves as senior level leaders in the workplace and 29% identified themselves as senior leaders in community or professional organizations. These women leaders demonstrated a high level of involvement in board membership: 57% served on educational and non-profit boards, 43% sat on civic or community boards, while 20% were members of business boards. Among this group, 54% served in leadership capacities on these boards. Many women served on more than one board.

## DEFINITIONS OF LEADERSHIP AND LEADERSHIP STYLES

### DEFINING LEADERSHIP

After completing basic demographic questions, respondents were asked: “When you envision a true leader, what traits come to mind?” Later in the survey, women were asked to define the strengths they brought to their leadership roles. Respondents identified areas nearly identical to those defined for an ideal leader. The qualities most frequently cited as critical to their leadership effectiveness were:

- Vision (96%)
- Ability to influence others (93%)
- Strategic thinking (92%)
- Communication skills (95%)
- Ability to make difficult decisions (94%)
- Self-confidence (93%)
- Hiring a strong staff (89%)

TABLE 2 . *Workplace Characteristics of Survey Respondents*

Years in the workforce	Average years spent in the workforce: 23.3 years	
Years with current workplace	Average years spent in current workplace: 9.9 years	
Hours spent at work per week (Average=49 hours/week)	1 to 15 hours/week:	.2%
	16 to 35 hrs./week:	12.1%
	36 to 45 hrs./week:	21.0%
	46 to 60 hrs./week:	47.9%
	More than 61 hrs./week:	10.2%
Annual Salary (60% earned over \$100,000)	Under \$50,000:	13.3%
	\$50,000 to \$99,000:	26.8%
	\$100,000 to \$149,000:	20.9%
	\$150,000 to \$199,000:	12.7%
	\$200,000+:	26.3%
Self-employment	Self-employed:	27.3%
Non-profit	Work in non-profit organization:	33.7%

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## LEADERSHIP STYLES

Survey respondents were given a lengthy list of traits describing various leadership styles and were asked to select those traits that were self-descriptive. Women identified the following characteristics most frequently in describing their leadership style:

- Collaborative (99%)
- Flexible (98%)
- Inclusive (98%)
- Participative (98%)
- Supportive (98%)
- Assertive (96%)
- Decisive (96%)
- Team-oriented (96%)
- Strong (94%)
- Committed to racial/ethnic diversity (94%)
- Informal (91%)

Many of these traits represent extremes in what are considered traditional “masculine” as opposed to traditional “feminine” qualities: “flexible” and “decisive”, “collaborative” and “strong.” The respondents clearly defied traditional stereotyping in terms of their leadership styles. Not only did they represent a wide range of styles collectively, but it was also apparent from the data that most of the women surveyed embodied a wide range of styles individually as well.

The focus group discussions reinforced the idea that many women had developed a palette of different leadership styles. This group of women leaders had learned to be flexible, adapting their style to the needs and tone of the situation and the constituency. As one focus group participant put it, “Women adapt to the culture better than men. I think men come in with their own, [and] create the culture, whereas women are much more oriented towards adapting to the culture.”

Despite this flexibility, some women saw a continuing dilemma for women in developing a style that is comfortable for them and effective within their organizations. For some women, the expectation that women must exhibit an approach that is “soft”, “nurturing”, and “conciliatory” is at odds with their inclination toward what is viewed as a more typically masculine style. One focus group participant observed, “There’s a basic expectation that a woman is going to be the comfortable, team-building, soft, forgiving type—all motherly and family-oriented words.” Another woman said, “...the thing that really drives me crazy as a leader is I don’t want to be perceived as a nurturing, motherly type of leader, and I tend to [be].”

At the other end of the style spectrum, one woman commented: “I think there is a real penalty for a women who behaves like a man. The men don’t like her and the women don’t either.” While a woman may be penalized for “behaving like a man,” she walks a delicate tightrope in asserting a style that fosters respect and that allows her to be true to herself. These are questions with which women grapple as they ascend the executive ladder. One woman summarized the sentiment expressed by many women leaders: “We had to make our own rules about what leadership is.”

## PERCEIVED STRENGTHS AND WEAKNESSES

While generally there is inconclusive research data in the literature comparing the relative leadership styles of men and women, the focus groups provided considerable insight into this topic. In both focus groups, the issue of self-promotion emerged spontaneously. Women were

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seen as being “more oriented towards getting the job done, and men are more oriented toward self-promotion,” according to one participant. Another said, “Men’s egos drive their ... mode of operation.” A third comment along this line was “I’ve noticed a lot of strutting with the guys, you know. It doesn’t matter what they say as long as everybody looks. And they’re trying to sound very profound, but they need to be noticed.”

This is not to imply that women leaders are self-effacing. As another participant put it, “Women have egos, and it’s important to them personally to feed that. But...the pattern has been that they do it in the spirit of the group.” These issues were summed up by another participant, who said, “I think women keep score differently than men...For a man the bottom line is pretty clear cut. It’s whatever he’s to be rewarded on...whether the financial bottom line or promoting himself bottom line. I think men define their identity by what they do, and women have a much broader sense of their identity, really about who they are. And so I think that distinction makes them look at their successes in a different light...and the bottom line for them is not just financial. It can be a lot of other qualities in terms of...are they creating their vision and are they...supporting their people and a whole range of other aspects.”

A recurring theme in the surveys and focus groups was the perception of communication as a particular strength of many women leaders. As one woman put it, “Women intrinsically can communicate. They’re not afraid of saying they’re wrong, and I think that has an enormous impact on a company you’re running, if you’re willing to admit you may not be right. You may not have the answer. You would like feedback from around the table.”

When asked about their greatest weaknesses as leaders, the most frequently listed responses were a lack of self-confidence, discomfort with power, a desire to please everyone, and an inability to make difficult decisions and delegate responsibility. Many women pointed to aspects of a traditional culture that can foster self-doubt on the basis of gender. One focus group participant spoke of “developing leadership as I fought for survival.” She went on to say, “I got what I needed by stepping forward. Otherwise, you get lost in the masses.” Because self-confidence and comfort with power are so highly contextual, it is not surprising that the women who were self-employed felt significantly more comfortable exerting power as leaders than those who worked in more traditional organizations.

While not perceived as an overwhelming obstacle, a number of women felt that they did not delegate responsibility well. One woman said, “...my experience is that women tend to not delegate well because they’re multi-tasked...They’re more likely to just go over the bounds a little bit and take up a little bit more of the responsibility.”

## INCENTIVES AND BARRIERS TO LEADERSHIP OPPORTUNITIES

### THE ROLE OF WORKPLACE CULTURE

Leadership is defined by both the individual and by the unspoken expectations from the organization itself. The women who defined themselves as leaders (the majority of those surveyed) indicated a high degree of comfort with the demands, expectations, and realities associated with senior level responsibilities. The challenges to their opportunities to develop as leaders, they stated, remain deeply entrenched within the culture of work.

“While men create the culture, women adapt to it,” said one focus group participant. As women move up the corporate ladder, “fit” becomes more of an issue, with the expectation that they must align themselves with a predominantly male group of colleagues in order to succeed.

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Because of the paucity of female leaders as colleagues, attaining leadership may be a more isolated journey for women than it is for many men. In defining obstacles to developing their leadership skills, women pointed to “a lack of women in comparable positions to form work relationships with and share experiences” and “[finding it] hard to find people to talk to, being cut off from women friends who have no experience with this.” One woman commented, “I learned the hard way. I developed leadership by just doing it myself.”

Women working in non-profit organizations, 34% of the sample, were much less likely than those employed in business to define their leadership styles in terms traditionally associated with male leaders, such as “command and control”, “powerful”, “tough”, and “competitive.” Self-employed women placed a higher value on mandated government policies as a source of support for their access to leadership positions. Not having enough time for families was cited less frequently as an issue by women in non-profits than by women in corporate settings.

#### ATTAINING LEADERSHIP

On the whole, government policies related to non-discrimination, affirmative action, and family leave were seen as offering little support for this group’s access to leadership positions. Similarly, employee-sponsored mentoring programs were viewed as having less impact than workplace culture on leadership development. More important than policies on paper, to the respondents, were the unwritten rules of work, particularly in areas related to access to career-enhancing opportunities. The women surveyed identified the following organizational factors as beneficial to their leadership development:

- Support from colleagues (87%)
- Support from bosses (86%)
- Access to informal channels of communication (82%)
- Access to key assignments (82%)
- Access to key players in the organization (82%)
- Informal mentoring (70%)
- Informal networking (78%)

The absence of these factors was identified as a barrier to women’s leadership, particularly absence of support from a boss, lack of access to key assignments, and lack of access to informal channels of communication. In other words, organizational conditions are a strong determinant in whether or not a woman has access to leadership opportunities.

Personal factors women rated as important to accessing leadership positions were:

- Personal drive (90.2%)
- Belief in myself (81%)
- My spouse or partner (70%)
- Ability to balance all aspects of my life (68%)

The role of parents, and of fathers in particular, came up repeatedly in the survey’s open-ended questions and in the focus groups. One woman recalled the early and powerful influence of her father: “My father truly was my mentor. He took me everywhere with him, introduced me to everyone and would say, ‘You need to meet my daughter. She’s special.’ And that really gave me the feeling that I can do anything...” Another woman commented, “I was taught at an early age that I needed to think for myself.” One woman, in describing how leaders were made, contributed, “Character was the piece laid down by my family. This gave me my foundation.”

Focus group participants emphasized the role that taking risks and being willing to “step up to the plate” had played in their movement into leadership positions. One woman put it this way: “I think the way I have ultimately developed my leadership skills is by not being

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afraid to fail...to make mistakes and learn from them. I've always guarded zealously two things: my reputation...and my privacy. But when I go out there... people know they can trust [I'm] going to do the best possible, and if I can't make it work, then there's some exterior environmental problem. But [it's] not being afraid to put yourself on the line."

From an organizational perspective, women viewed the following as "helping to a great extent" in their development as leaders:

- Being in the right place at the right time (87%)
- Access to high visibility assignments (79%)
- A positive climate for women (79%)
- Informal networking (78%)
- The tone from the top (73%)
- Informal mentoring relationships (70%)

The women in the focus groups clearly felt that "being in the right place at the right time" was not necessarily a reliance on luck. One participant said, "I...grew up not eliminating anything, trying to do it all, and just...realizing that the more I could learn...very diverse things ultimately would serve me well. And I realized after having done that...that you can get things done by being very strategic." Another participant put it this way: "You can have all the opportunities in the world, but if you don't have the judgment to pick where you move and when, and seeing that's an opportunity, then you're not really that sharp. I think an aware person and a potential leader knows when the variables are correct for movement."

#### LEADERSHIP INCENTIVES AND REWARDS

Women responding to the survey identified the same rewards to leadership as those cited by male leaders in other studies; a sense of achievement, the ability to affect change, doing work that they enjoy, personal fulfillment, and intellectual achievement (Kouzes and Posner, 1987).

Focus group participants cited a number of rewards involved in being leaders. Among these were the possibility of serving as a role model, having control of one's destiny, serving as a catalyst for change, and being able to make things happen. One participant put it this way: "I have to make very hard decisions, and I have to make a lot of them. And I have to live with the consequences, and I'm very proud of being able to do that." Another said, "I like the feeling of being a role model...It's sort of giving back what I've learned to society in some fashion for people around me or my daughter or my daughter's friends. It's a gift. It's fun." A third said, "At some point...you're standing out front as being different...When everyone comes along with you...and they all came along to where you are, that's a rush."

#### BARRIERS TO LEADERSHIP

Women have perhaps reached a critical turning point in assessing what it will take to ensure fuller representation in leadership positions. Gender was not viewed by the women in this survey as impeding their ability to lead. Only 16% of the women surveyed reported that "being a woman" was a very difficult aspect of leadership. Access to opportunity rather than a lack of ambition or skills emerged as a key barrier for women who aspire to leadership positions.

If organizations reflect the values of their leaders, it is perhaps not surprising that the context in which leadership is practiced remains the greatest challenge to a woman's leadership development. Among the organizational factors cited as hindering women's access to leadership positions were:

- A male dominated work culture (66.5%)
- Lack of support from my boss (56%)

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- Lack of a mentor (56%)
  - Lack of access to informal channels of communication (53%)
  - Lack of organizational support (49%)
  - The old boys network (48%)
  - Lack of access to key assignments (43%)

In addition, age discrimination was identified as one of the more subtle forms of discrimination against women. As one woman observed: “Age works against women more than men. Women over 40 are now vulnerable.” And another commented: “My belief is that advancement is more difficult now—based on age—not the status, of women.”

While 54% of the women believed they had had the same opportunities to advance as their male counterparts, 36% believed they had not. Similarly, while 58% believed they had had the same access to key assignments as their male colleagues, 31% believed they had not. Only 8% of the women reported having to work harder and longer than men to reach a leadership position. This represents a different and more encouraging finding than has been reported in past research on women leaders. Previous studies have revealed that women were essentially held to a higher standard in expectations for workload and performance (Catalyst, 1996; Swiss, 1996).

For women of color, the barriers to leadership positions extended beyond those identified by non-minority women. As outsiders to senior level positions, on the basis of both race and gender, a much higher percentage of women of color (41.2%) than non-minority women (6%) indicated that they had to work harder and longer than their male counterparts to reach a leadership position. While 36% of the overall sample viewed stereotypes about women as a hindrance to their leadership, 57% of the women of color saw racial stereotyping as a barrier and 60% viewed a white-dominated culture as a blocking their advancement. Women of color were also more likely to cite professional associations as a point of access to leadership positions, reflecting their need to develop skills outside their workplace to foster credibility from within.

Among the most difficult aspects of leadership for women were: not having enough time for themselves (64.8%), stress on the job (59.5%), and not having enough time for family (59.2%). Women who had been in the workforce for the shortest period of time were the

*A much higher percentage of women of color... indicated that they had to work harder and longer than their male counterparts.*

most likely to report stress on the job as a difficult part of leadership, 65% for women who had worked 15 years or less versus 33% for those with 26-35 years of experience. Not having enough time for family and friends was a problem most acutely felt by women under 40 years of age. Open-ended responses concerning difficult aspects of being a leader also pointed to an absence of colleagues at their level and to stress in achieving life balance.

While media stories about women executives have highlighted the work/life dilemma as a primary barrier to reaching top leadership posts, this research tells a different story. While nearly 70% of the women surveyed reported that an absence of workplace flexibility had no effect on their access to leadership positions, 60% indicated that workplace flexibility had “helped to a great extent” in their path to leadership. While these findings may appear contradictory, they suggest that while flexibility certainly alleviated stress (particularly for the primary caregiver), it was not a critical factor in determining whether or not this particular group of women attained leadership positions.

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Focus group participants emphasized that while responsibility for children remained primarily a woman's domain, these responsibilities were difficult, but not a derailment to their careers. Societal expectations continued to place a different set of standards on mothers. As one woman observed, "Career and family life have been harder to mesh since I became a parent. Male counterparts do not have to make the work decisions and sacrifices that I do even though they are parents too."

One woman summarized a theme expressed by many women: "It's a major problem for women, because ultimately the buck stops with us." Another woman offered this advice: "It's OK to set different priorities at different stages of your life. You can 'have it all' but probably not all at once." One person offered words of caution in how choices about life balance are considered: "Be careful about choices and tradeoffs. I made tradeoffs to prove things to other people—who really didn't even care or recognize these sacrifices."

New technologies may make work/life balance issues easier to manage. Nearly 80% of the respondents indicated that technology had helped them to manage work/life balance, with nearly 70% indicating that they were fully comfortable with the use of new technologies.

## JOB SECURITY, RISK, AND SELF-EMPLOYMENT

### JOB SECURITY AND RISK

Perception of job security can have a significant impact on the professional aspirations and career decisions of women leaders. The lack of job security may influence how confident women feel about taking the risks associated with serving in leadership positions and may be an important deterrent or catalyst for self-employment among professional women. This survey asked women about their levels of job security, the extent to which it affected their ability to take risks, and their perceptions of their effectiveness as leaders. In a related set of questions, the survey asked the women leaders to indicate how they felt about their prospects for advancement in the current economy and to compare their opportunities for advancement today with those women will have 15 years from now.

It is clear from the responses to these questions that most of these senior-level managerial and professional women felt very secure in their jobs and were generally confident about their prospects for professional advancement. More than 75% of the survey respondents said they felt secure in their current jobs and 84% said they were optimistic about their prospects for advancement. Women employed in larger companies indicated the highest level of concern about economic job security. Self-employed women felt more secure about their jobs than those who were not.

Women in the highest income brackets felt the most optimistic about prospects for advancement within the current economy. This optimism undoubtedly stemmed from having already "made it" in terms of career success and from having a longer history in the workforce. As might be expected, survey respondents who felt more uncertain about the security and stability of their jobs had been employed with their current employers for shorter periods of time (less than 10 years) than others. Women who felt most secure about their jobs also reported feeling as comfortable with the use of power as their male counterparts.

Survey respondents clearly articulated connections between job security and their ability to be more effective leaders. More than 71% felt that having job security enhanced their ability to take risks and to balance all aspects of their lives. Survey respondents not only acknowl-

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edged the importance of job security for themselves in terms of taking risks and being effective leaders, but also acknowledged the importance of job security in terms of how it helped them to encourage others to take risks. One respondent said that having job security made her more “willing to take more chances, voice opinions, and take on challenges. I’m not afraid of failing and can encourage team members to also feel comfortable taking risks.”

When asked what prevented them from taking risks, however, survey respondents clearly indicated that job security, financial support, and family demands were most often key determinants. As one respondent put it, “Well, you can take risks if the downside of taking the risk is not the loss of a position or loss of income or loss of something, unless you have resources that can sustain you during that time. So, the incentive might be a spouse who will say, ‘I will support you on this, both financially and emotionally.’”

Respondents also shared the difficult tradeoffs they had to make between caring for their families and taking risks leading to professional advancement. At numerous points in the survey, women leaders shared experiences similar to this respondent: “Hard to balance all the demands. Had to resign from [a hospital board].”

While most respondents acknowledged the difficulty of taking risks when there is little job security, many expressed more complex views about job security issues. Take the comments of this respondent, for example: “The mark of a leader is taking necessary risks regardless of security of position. If the risk-taking is effective, security increases. If no risks are taken, security may decline as a result of non-performance.”

Perhaps the most interesting finding about the impact of job security was its correlation to women’s perception of themselves in relationship to others in the workplace. Survey respondents who were more secure about job stability were less likely to believe that their work experiences had been different from their male counterparts in terms of opportunities for advancement, access to key assignments, pay and performance standards. More job secure respondents were also more likely to be as comfortable with power as their male counterparts. Additionally, job secure respondents were more likely to say that stereotypes about women leaders had no effect on their access to leadership positions. This suggests that job security not only has a major impact on how managerial and professional women see their own experiences, but also has implications for how comfortable they feel taking the risks associated with leadership roles. Job secure survey respondents ranked access to key assignments, support from bosses, support from staff, organizational support, and workplace flexibility as the most important factors in helping them to access leadership positions. This strongly suggests that the work environment itself contributes significantly to how job secure women leaders perceive themselves to be. As one woman put it, “In a highly political environment, I feel less free to take risks. You are only as good as your most recent success; failure pollutes everything.”

The work environment also remains an important part of a woman’s decisions about whether and when to become self-employed. The fact that so many of our survey respondents were self-employed, which entails explicit professional and personal risks, allows valid comparisons to be drawn. Eighty-one percent of the self-employed women in the survey felt secure about their jobs, as opposed to only 76% of those who were not self-employed, in spite of the risk involved.

Both job secure and insecure respondents were nonetheless generally optimistic about their own job prospects and prospects for women in the current economy. More than 84% of survey respondents said that they felt optimistic about their job prospects. Consistent with this notion, 85% of survey respondents felt that women’s prospects for professional advancement generally have gotten much better than they were 15 years ago. Although the reasons are not

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readily apparent, 42% felt that they currently enjoy much better prospects than women will face 15 years from now.

#### SELF-EMPLOYMENT

Prior research on entrepreneurial women has indicated that women seek self-employment primarily as a means to exert control over their work environment (RPPI, 1999). The following findings, from the survey respondents who were self-employed, support the premise that culture is a powerful determinant in how a woman views her ability to lead:

- Self-employed women were almost 10% more likely to say they were just as comfortable with power as their male counterparts, compared to those who were not self-employed. In addition, self-employed women were 15% more likely to describe their own leadership style as “powerful” than were women who were not self-employed;
- Self-employed women were more likely to feel positive about their job prospects, including their job security, than other women. Ninety-eight percent of the self-employed women surveyed reported feeling secure or very secure about their jobs, compared to 89% of the other respondents;
- Self-employed women were more likely to see a positive correlation between employer policies and women’s access to leadership positions;
- Self-employed women were more likely to see themselves as community leaders and to sit on civic or community boards than other women. Almost 60% of the self-employed women in the survey reported serving on civic or community boards, compared to 40% of all other respondents;
- Only 33% of those who were self-employed had children under the age of 18. This may be reflective of the point in their careers when women are likely to enter self-employment, as well as the time and risk factors involved. It may be that women are less willing to put their young children at financial risk or to shift the focus from family to the development of a business.

Self-employed women were more likely to use what are considered traditionally male characteristics to describe their leadership styles, such as: “authoritarian”, “command and control”, “decisive”, “powerful”, and “strong.” It may be the case that women with these traits had self-selected self-employment as a career, or it may reflect the fact that they developed these traits as a necessity to succeeding on their own.

## CONCLUSION

Women leaders have long struggled under the burden of stereotypes. With women comprising only 5% of the senior-level executive positions in American business today, it is understandable that leadership has traditionally been defined in male terms. Earlier research showed that a traditional “male” style of leading was the norm against which women were measured and that women’s success as leaders was largely related to their ability to minimize their variations from that style. Stereotypes of “male” and “female” leadership styles encouraged the notion that there were profound differences between the prevailing “male” style of leadership and the approach women took.

This study has shown, however, that as women continue to bring a unique stamp of leadership to their organizations, they are demonstrating comfort in being themselves—in the style of leadership they exert, in their commitment to civic and community organizations, and

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in the way they have carved out new definitions for what it means to have a balanced life and a successful career. The survey results indicated that this group of women often defied the stereotypes and possessed a wide range of leadership styles. There is a strong indication from the project results that, for many women, this range of styles was acquired in response to work cultures that were less than supportive of them as leaders.

For organizations committed to tapping the broadest possible pool of leadership talent, the challenge thus lies in revising the unwritten rules of work that limit a woman's access to leadership opportunities. For individual women who aspire to leadership positions, the challenge lies in finding supportive places of employment—and in finding one's own way of advancing.

The women involved in this study were asked what advice they would give to potential leaders. Many of the suggestions given are modern homilies, yet no single path to successful leadership emerges. When it comes to the development of leadership skills, women are suiting themselves:

- Follow your own curiosity and passion, then be strategic. Keep your values, including moral and family, clear and central.
- Feel free to create and pursue alternate routes to career success and satisfaction. Don't just accept the traditional ones.
- Do not listen to those who tell you cannot have it all. Get as much education as possible as early as possible. Change jobs frequently and take difficult and foreign assignments early in your career. Do not sacrifice family or relationships for work, ever, you don't have to.
- You really can't have it all. Set your goal for what is most important to you and makes your life happy, but realize that something has got to give.
- Form strong networks. Don't try to be superwoman. 30-40 years provides time for both family and a career. Try several different careers.
- You can have it all but not at the same time. Have your kids early and move up as they grow up.
- Be realistic about the challenges you will face, especially in balancing the demands of work and family. Be optimistic that you will have impact in making your workplace more accommodating to the needs of individual women and families.
- Be who you were created to be. Don't mitigate your womanhood, but learn to balance emotion and intuition with rational thinking and logic.
- Work hard, network, and build relationships with both men and women who can help educate you in the workplace as well as in school.
- Educate yourself; choose a career path that fulfills you, the person, not just the career woman; join professional organizations for idea sharing and networking; don't try to be a man in a man's world- be a strong woman in the world and in your life.

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## APPENDICES

### *Factors That Help Entry into Leadership Positions*

	<i>Number Reporting</i>	<i>Percent Reporting</i>	
		<i>Helps a great extent to some extent</i>	<i>Helps little to not at all</i>
Employer diversity policies:	348	48.0	52.0
Government sexual harassment policies:	322	23.0	77.0
Government anti-discrimination policies (gender, race/ethnicity, age, disability):	327	32.1	67.9
Government affirmative action and equal employment opportunity policies:	331	30.5	69.5
Government family leave policy:	331	27.5	72.5
Equal pay/comparable worth policies:	329	44.7	55.3
Employer-sponsored mentorship programs:	249	31.3	68.7
Informal mentoring relationships:	363	70.2	29.8
Employer-sponsored networking programs:	229	28.8	71.2
Informal networking:	380	78.4	21.6
A positive climate for women:	394	79.2	20.8
Succession planning:	288	48.3	51.7
The tone from the top:	385	73.0	27.0
Access to high visibility assignments:	377	79.3	20.7
Family friendly benefits:	356	52.0	48.0
Being in the right place at the right time:	393	87.3	12.7
Preponderance of women in senior management positions:	296	67.6	32.4
Commitment from top management to racial and ethnic diversity:	338	58.3	41.7

### *Important Rewards of Being a Leader*

	<i>Number Reporting</i>	<i>Very Important</i>	<i>Percent Reporting</i>			
			<i>Important</i>	<i>Not Very Important</i>	<i>Not at All Important</i>	<i>N/A</i>
Being my own boss:	430	53.3	28.8	8.6	2.6	6.7
Autonomy to make decisions:	430	60.0	32.3	4.4	0.7	2.6
Intellectual stimulation:	431	68.0	27.8	3.0	0.2	0.9
The ability to effect change:	432	72.7	24.3	1.6	0.2	1.2
A sense of achievement:	433	80.6	18.2	0.7	0.0	0.5
Level of compensation:	429	33.8	44.1	16.8	1.9	3.5
Doing work that I enjoy:	428	72.7	26.4	0.5	0.0	0.5
Personal fulfillment:	426	71.6	24.4	3.5	0.0	0.5
Bringing the voice of others to the table:	424	36.6	40.3	16.0	2.4	4.7

*Importance of Traits in Determining a Leader's Effectiveness*

	<i>Number Reporting</i>	<i>Percent Reporting</i>		
		<i>Very Important</i>	<i>Important</i>	<i>Not Important</i>
Vision:	443	96.0	1.8	2.2
Discipline:	435	75.9	16.6	3.5
Ability to influence others:	437	93.4	2.9	.2
Intelligence:	440	80.8	15.2	1.1
Creativity:	439	78.4	15.7	2.9
Strategic thinking:	441	91.8	4.9	.7
Stamina:	442	81.9	13.7	2.0
Drive:	442	86.3	9.9	1.3
Hiring a strong staff:	442	89.2	7.7	.7
Ability to manage people:	440	85.4	10.2	1.5
Negotiation skills:	441	84.8	11.3	1.3
Communication skills:	442	95.1	2.4	2.5
Ability to make difficult decisions:	439	94.3	2.6	3.1
Self-confidence:	441	92.5	4.2	.7
Ability to delegate:	440	86.8	10.2	.2
Comfort with power:	440	83.0	11.7	2.4
Comfort with risk:	441	86.1	9.5	1.8
Ability to foster loyalty:	439	85.7	9.9	1.3
Relationship-building:	442	88.3	7.3	2.0
Charisma:	439	65.6	23.8	7.5
Maintaining a sense of humor:	442	76.4	18.3	2.9
Ethical behavior:	440	86.3	8.2	2.6
Ability to generate new business:	426	69.1	17.7	7.3
Financial acumen;	432	60.9	26.7	7.7
Political acumen;	441	75.3	17.4	4.6
Ability to solve problems:	441	87.0	8.6	1.8
Ability to build strong teams:	440	88.1	7.3	1.8
Ability to work with individuals from diverse backgrounds:	441	73.7	17.2	6.4

*Factors that Affect Access to Leadership Positions (continued on p.21)*

	<i>Number Reporting</i>	<i>Percent Reporting</i>		
		<i>Great Help</i>	<i>No Effect</i>	<i>Hindered</i>
Stereotypes about women as leaders:	359	4.2	38.6	36.4
Racial/ethnic-based stereotypes about leadership:	301	2.3	78.4	19.3
Belief in myself:	413	81.1	3.9	15.0
Ability to balance all aspects of my life:	405	67.7	13.3	19.0
Women's groups and professional associations:	385	46.0	52.7	1.3
Racial/ethnic based groups and professional associations:	295	15.6	80.7	3.7
Other professional associations:	371	47.7	50.7	1.6
Membership on a board:	340	41.5	55.9	2.6
The "old boys" network:	380	22.6	28.9	48.4
Women's informal networking:	392	63.5	35.5	1.0
A male-dominated work culture:	358	7.5	26.0	66.5
A white-dominated work culture:	320	15.3	68.4	16.3
Commitment to family:	385	19.2	40.8	40.0
My mother:	367	43.3	44.4	12.3
My father:	363	49.9	41.9	8.3
My spouse or partner:	360	71.1	20.8	8.1
Access to key players in the organization:	377	81.2	12.5	6.4
Personal drive:	418	90.2	3.1	6.7
Access to key assignments:	372	82.3	15.1	2.7
Lack of access to key assignments:	237	4.3	52.9	42.8
Organizational support:	354	64.1	28.0	7.9
Lack of organizational support:	289	1.4	49.5	49.1
Workplace flexibility:	365	57.5	34.2	8.2
Lack of workplace flexibility:	257	1.6	66.9	31.5
Support from my boss(es):	331	86.1	10.3	3.6
Lack of support from my boss(es):	219	5.0	38.8	56.2
Support from my staff:	350	83.1	14.9	2.0
Lack of support from my staff:	195	1.5	61.5	36.9
Support from colleagues:	395	87.1	12.4	.5
Lack of support from colleagues:	239	2.1	55.6	42.3
A mentor:	302	67.5	30.1	2.3
Lack of a mentor:	244	-	47.5	52.5

*Factors that Affect Access to Leadership Positions (continued from p.20)*

	<i>Number Reporting</i>	<i>Percent Reporting</i>		
		<i>Great Help</i>	<i>No Effect</i>	<i>Hindered</i>
Access to informal channels of communication:	372	82.8	14.5	2.7
Lack of access to informal channels of communication:	236	3.4	44.1	52.5
Educational training	388	83.2	15.7	1.0
Lack of educational training:	172	1.7	70.9	27.3
On-the-job training:	352	76.1	23.3	.6
Lack of on-the-job training:	184	.5	68.5	31.0
Executive education:	249	45.4	51.8	2.8
Lack of executive education:	201	.5	63.2	36.3

*Most Difficult Aspects of Being a Leader*

	<i>Number Reporting</i>	<i>Percent Reporting</i>		
		<i>Very Difficult</i>	<i>Difficult</i>	<i>Not at All Difficult</i>
Making difficult decisions:	420	42.6	26.7	30.7
Being a woman:	417	15.8	26.6	57.6
Being a minority woman:	70	34.3	18.6	47.1
Leading or supervising men:	392	10.5	20.2	69.4
Leading or supervising other women:	415	7.2	15.7	77.1
Working long hours:	419	40.3	28.2	31.5
Stress on the job:	424	53.5	28.3	18.2
Not enough time for friends:	420	49.3	28.8	21.9
Not enough time for family:	12	59.2	21.8	18.9
Not enough time for myself:	423	64.8	20.6	14.7
Isolation:	380	39.5	23.7	36.8
Living up to expectations:	407	43.0	23.3	33.7

*Opinion of the Following Statements*

	<i>Number Reporting</i>	<i>Percent Reporting</i>		
		<i>Agree</i>	<i>Neither Agree or Disagree</i>	<i>Disagree</i>
I have the same opportunities to advance as my male counterparts:	399	53.9	10.5	35.6
I have the same access to key assignments as my male counterparts:	391	57.8	11.5	30.7
I have had to work harder and longer than my male counterparts to reach a leadership position.:	362	7.9	20.8	51.2
I am paid less than my male counterparts at the same level:	386	40.4	19.7	39.9
I have the same opportunities to advance as women of other racial/ethnic backgrounds:	386	72.3	12.4	15.3
I have the same access to key assignments as women of other racial/ethnic backgrounds:	372	71.0	13.7	15.3
I have had to work harder and longer than women of other racial/ethnic backgrounds to reach a leadership position:	362	9.9	26.0	64.1
I am paid less than women of other racial/ethnic backgrounds at the same level:	357	5.6	21.8	72.5
I am just as comfortable with risk-taking as my male counterparts:	422	66.8	11.4	21.8
I am just as comfortable with the power associated with leadership as my male counterparts:	418	68.9	8.4	22.7
I have had to make greater personal sacrifices than my male counterparts:	412	65.3	18.2	16.5
My career plays a major role in my self-definition:	431	87.9	4.4	7.7





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