The development of women leadership competences. Key elements for a LLL high-quality training program.

La costruzione delle competenze di leadership al femminile. Elementi chiave per un programma formativo LLL di qualità.

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ABSTRACT ITALIANO

Lo sviluppo delle competenze di leadership al femminile è un aspetto cruciale per promuovere l'uguaglianza di genere e aumentare la partecipazione delle donne nei ruoli apicali in vari settori. Un approccio di Long Life Learning (LLL) è essenziale per plasmare e rafforzare questo tipo di competenze: l'educazione continua e lo sviluppo personale contribuiscono a dare potere alle donne consentendo loro di affrontare le sfide della leadership in un mondo in rapido cambiamento. Attraverso l'analisi di un modello formativo, verrà sottolineata l'importanza di creare ambienti di apprendimento per la crescita delle leader evidenziando i benefici di mentoring, networking e sviluppo professionale continuo come parti integranti del percorso di leadership per le donne. La promozione di iniziative di LLL su misura per le esigenze specifiche delle donne contribuisce al loro avanzamento professionale e al più ampio obiettivo di raggiungere la parità di genere nella leadership.

ENGLISH ABSTRACT

The development of female leadership skills is a crucial aspect of fostering gender equality and enhancing women's participation in leadership roles across various sectors. This article explores the role of Life Long Learning (LLL) in shaping and strengthening women's leadership competencies. It highlights how continuous education and personal development contribute to empowering women, enabling them to navigate the challenges of leadership in a rapidly changing world. Through the analysis of a training model and learning experiences, the paper emphasizes the importance of creating inclusive learning environments for the growth of female leaders. Additionally, it discusses the benefits of mentoring, networking, and ongoing professional development as integral parts of the leadership journey for women. The promotion of LLL initiatives tailored to the specific needs of women contributes to their professional advancement and the broader goal of achieving gender parity in leadership.

Women and work in Italy: a gender gap issue

In today's cultural context, where diversity is often seen as a problem rather than an asset, holding leadership positions presents a significant challenge for women (Cavaletto, & Olagnero, 2015; Kiamba, 2009). This challenge can be so demanding that many women opt to step away from their professional development and, in some cases, leave the workforce. Others, when they do reach top positions, feel compelled to adopt non-authentic behaviors, aligning themselves with the dominant leadership style, which is more autocratic and task-focused, rather than participatory and relationship-oriented (De Paola et al., 2022).

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The current challenge for women is to become leaders by embracing their unique talents and authenticity, valuing their specific way of being and perceiving the world (Dewalt, 2017). The goal is not to create an antagonistic management model or debate which approach—male or female—is better, but rather to enhance the existing models with new options, possibilities, and perspectives for the benefit of society as a whole. There is no single path to leadership for women; it is essential to consider the diversity of contexts and avoid uncritically applying solutions from other environments or approaches. Additionally, it is important to take into account one's personal and professional history, desires, and goals. Key steps for many women on this journey include recognizing their own value, identifying their desires and corresponding professional goals, and creating a coherent action plan to achieve them (Sethi et al., 2022). Finally, promoting oneself, finding support, and building alliances within their network are crucial (Debebe et al. 2016). It's important to remember that this challenge is not only individual but also collective, as it affects the majority of women in today's working places: recognizing the opportunity to create alliances, collaborate, and build strong networks is key (Eagly & Carli, 2009).

In Italy, women in managerial positions are severely under-represented. In 2022, although increasing compared to previous years, only 21% of workers holding leadership rank are women compared to 79% of men. The opposite occurs among clerical figures, where women are more present: 58% than 41.6% of men (INPS, 2024). Moreover, there are significant differences in pay levels even when looking at male and female workers with the same professional qualification, a gap which increase (instead of decreasing as common sense would suggests) in leadership positions:

> …women with an office-level qualification, in 2022, received on average €10 thousand less per year than men (a difference that has remained stable over the years). Greater differences are highlighted, however, when comparing the pay levels of male managers with those of women with the same job position. In fact, the latter receive on average €35 thousand less than male managers… (INPS, 2024, p. 22)

Regarding the pay levels, the OECD report on "Education at a glance" states that in Italy a graduated women receive the 58% of salary compared to that of a man (OECD, 2024). A little more than a half of a man's salary…and part of this is due to lower levels of work position.

According to a recent survey conducted by the EY – SWG in 2023, "Female Leadership in the Workplace" (1) on a sample of over 700 working women and managers examining the role of women within Italian companies, there has been a significant increase in the number of working women who believe there is a gender pay gap in their companies. 55% of respondents identified this disparity, reflecting a 7% rise compared to the previous year. Additionally, 61% (+9% from 2022) feel that there is a gap between men and women in terms of career opportunities. The major barriers to the growth of female leadership, according to 86% of the women surveyed, are related to the difficulty of balancing work and family life, while 74% cite the limited space men allow women in the professional sphere. According to INPS, in general:

the main factors contributing to this gap include wage disparities and career paths, contractual differences and greater job instability, the uneven distribution of caregiving responsibilities within families, and the resulting impact of all these elements on pension benefits (INPS, 2024, p. 3).

From a social perspective, the reasons behind the challenges women face in the workplace, particularly in their career paths, are attributed to

a patriarchal culture that still influences family and societal dynamics, a work organization and schedule often regulated by criteria that make it difficult to balance personal life and work, and a lack of local services that do not adequately support families, particularly regarding childcare and services for the non-self-sufficient. (INPS, 2024, p. 3)

In this context, in which "simply" working becomes for women an obstacle course, pursuing a career aiming to apical positions requires to develop not only high professional skills but also strategies to deal with the daily battle with organizational issues and the dominant culture in the workplace, family, and society.

Key features of four high-quality Life Long Learning programs for women's leadership development

The challenge for well-prepared and ambitious women arises from the very first steps in the workplace as they strive to reach leadership roles, often hindered by the well-known "glass ceiling". However, this issue persists throughout their careers, even when they attain these coveted positions, as structural barriers and biases remain present (Hryniewicz & Vianna, 2018). For this reason, support programs must adopt a Life Long Learning approach to ensure continuous development and empowerment. For this study, we examined various career development programs offered by four prestigious universities: the London Business School, the Harvard Division of Continuing Education, the École des Hautes Études Commerciales of Paris (HEC) and the Oxford School of Business (SAID) Women's Leadership Development Program to identify their key features (2). In particular, we will focus on those specific aspects of the programs as they encapsulates the main characteristics we observed across their training approaches.

All these programs were designed to support the careers of women who aspire to top positions, or are already in such positions, in order to first of all recognize their personal characteristics and the leadership style that best suits them. The common premise is that it is not necessary to distort one's characteristics as women and as single individuals but, on the contrary, to strengthen them and make them more responsive to the work context (Cuomo & Raffaglio, 2017). In particular, it is therefore a question of dismantling visions inherited from a male chauvinist culture that often hinder women in asserting their rights and in requesting economic treatment and due career advancements on a par with men (3). The programs approach leadership as a relentless reflective practice addressing the gender biases that female leaders daily encounter in the workplace and it is built around three core themes: self-acceptance, self-management, and self-development. A basic assumption of those paths is that diversity increases effectiveness and productivity, rather

than hindering it, but only if it is valued. For this reason, both teachers (mainly women) and learning groups are made up of people who come from different cultural, social, educational and professional backgrounds and who can also serve as examples for the women attending the program. As a participant stated:

> Learning from a diverse group of women was really beneficial to me personally, not just from reading the materials and watching the video testimonials from other leaders, but also from the class discussions. The discussions really helped me to get a sense that I was not alone in my self-doubt and that there were many things that we as women need to do, including sharing more and being more open with our needs and desires in order for us all to raise the bar. I gained such a lot of self-confidence and knowledge during these past six weeks, and I will absolutely be using some of the tools, resources and learnings from this course to make a difference in my career going forward. (Marcelle Porteous, SAID Business School, Oxford) (4)

Understanding the context in which a leader have to operate is of course essential to effective leadership both for male and female and this requires insight into the macro shifts and their effects. But moreover, leaders must also be aware of the gender and cultural complexities within their organizations and understand the specific issues they face. This involves assessing the demands, constraints, and choices inherent in their roles and adapting their approach accordingly. For these reasons, both the gender and intersectional approaches have to be taken into consideration not only to reach leadership rank as a woman but also to successfully fulfill this apical role. For instance, it is crucial to be aware of the different styles in negotiations, which are influenced by cultural dimensions and gender issues.

The programs are conceived as a Long life Learning course not only because it is addressed to adult women, in many cases already in managerial roles, but also because they promote a never ending process of improvement and empowerment, in particular supporting networking activities among women during and after the end of the training program. In fact, they provides constant tutoring and continuous occasions for focused conversations on specific topic within discussion groups, but also provides indications on how to identify mentors and/or promoters in their own contexts who can effectively support women in their career path.

Key-elements to plan a high-quality women leadership training program

From the comparison of key elements in these professional development and female leadership programs, several distinctive traits emerge. Some of these are absent from programs designed for men, while others, though present, are tailored in a way that emphasizes diversity and acknowledges the specific challenges women face in balancing work, family, and social life. According to our analysis, a high-quality training LLL program for female leadership development could include the following key components:

1. **Initial Assessment and Personalized Learning Plan**: The program begins with an assessment of the participant's leadership skills, professional experience, and goals. Based on this assessment, a personalized learning plan is created to address specific areas of development. In this phase, it can be useful to reflect on previous led experiences and build/accept a vision of themselves as leaders (Smith & Suby-Long, 2019).

2. **Build a tools box to read and interpret the (intercultural) context the context both in its current form and in its potential future evolutions:** It means acquiring the skills needed to fully understand the environment in which they operate, identify emerging trends and anticipate changes. As leaders, women must be able to analyze the present with objectivity and foresight, foreseeing the challenges and opportunities that may emerge, so as to make strategic decisions and lead change with awareness. This tool box should include a specific focus on intercultural and diversity studies in order to facilitate the transition to more inclusive work places and society (Girdauskiene & Eyvazzade, 2015).

3. **Workshops and Seminars on Core Leadership Skills with a gender approach**: The training offers a series of interactive workshops focused on essential leadership skills such as decision-making, conflict resolution, strategic thinking, and emotional intelligence taking into consideration the specificities of biases and obstacle for women both in work and in society. These workshops are led by experienced professionals, with particular reference to women who can, at the same time, share their knowledge and be inspiring examples. Important to include practical exercises and real-world case studies especially focused on diversity management always adopting a gender and intercultural perspective (Miller, 2016).

4. **Understand cultural dimensions in order to negotiate effectively.** For future women leaders, this point highlights the importance of viewing negotiation as an essential leadership practice. It means that effective negotiation is not just about reaching agreements, but also involves understanding the cultural dimensions that influence interactions and relationships. Leaders must develop cross-cultural sensitivity, recognizing how values, norms, and expectations vary across cultural contexts. This allows them to adapt their negotiating style, create deeper connections, and build trust, resulting in agreements that respect cultural differences and promote mutual success (Oplatka & Hertz-Lazarowitz, 2006; Toosi et al., 2020).

5. **Mentoring and Coaching**: Each participant is paired with a mentor, typically a senior leader from the same or a related field. Regular one-on-one coaching sessions are provided to offer guidance, feedback, and support for professional growth. The choice of mentor should fall on a person who is sensitive to diversity and gender, capable of understanding the specific difficulties that women encounter in first conquering and then exercising their role as leaders (Russell and al., 2023).

6. **Networking Opportunities**: The program includes opportunities to build professional networks through events, conferences, and peer-to-peer networking sessions based on a gender sensitive perspective. This helps participants expand their contacts and create meaningful relationships with other professional women in

leadership roles with whom sharing their experience and expand their range of action (Bhatti & Ali 2021).

7. **Ongoing Support and Continuous Learning in an gender approach**: After completing the initial training, participants have access to additional resources for continuous learning, such as online courses, leadership forums, and women alumni groups. This ensures that learning and growth continue long after women Leadership program ends. Professional development should provide continuous support and learning opportunities tailored to gender-specific needs. In this context, a "gender approach" means recognizing and addressing the unique challenges and barriers that different genders, particularly women, may face in the workplace and society. This involves creating learning environments and support systems that not only promote skill development but also focus on overcoming gender biases, facilitating work-life balance, and fostering leadership growth in a way that is inclusive and empowering for all genders. (English et al., 2021).

Conclusion

By combining these elements, the training programs offer a comprehensive and practical pathway for women to develop their leadership skills in a supportive and empowering environment. In conclusion, the comparison of these programs highlights the importance of a gender-sensitive approach in leadership development for women. A high-quality Life Long Learning (LLL) program must address not only the general competencies required for leadership but also the unique challenges women face in professional and personal spheres. Key components such as personalized learning plans, intercultural awareness, targeted leadership workshops, and ongoing support ensure that female leaders are equipped with the tools to navigate complex environments and overcome structural barriers. Mentoring and networking further enhance the potential for growth by providing role models and professional connections that are vital for long-term success. Ultimately, these programs are not just about training leaders but fostering a more inclusive and diverse leadership landscape, promoting equity, and empowering women to thrive in all areas of life.

Notes

(1) EY – Building a better working world https://www.ey.com/it_it/la-leadership-al-femminile-nel-mondo-del-lavoro For official researches and statistics, see for instance INPS 2024, OECD 2024, ISTAT 2024.

(2) London Business School Women in Leadership, the Harvard Division of Continuing Education Women Leaders: Advancing Together, a Multi-Week Leadership Program, the École des hautes Études Commerciales of Paris Women Leadership Program and the Oxford School of Business (SAID) Women's Leadership Development Program.

(3) As examples of main leadership styles: Transformational leaders inspire and motivate their teams toward a shared vision. Transactional leaders focus on structure, rules, and rewards. Servant leaders prioritize the needs of team members, while situational leaders adapt their

style based on the context. Very often, women who adopt a personal approach tend to combine elements from different leadership styles.

(4) Oxford SAID School of Business Women Leadership Program (2024). https://oxford-onlineprogrammes.getsmarter.com/presentations/lp/oxford-women-leadership-programme/

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