



# Advancing Women in Leadership

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*Full Length Research Paper*

## **The Role of Empathy in Strategic Thinking: Women Leaders Championing Change and Cultivating the Next Generation of Leaders**

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**Women leaders are often credited with demonstrating empathy, nurture, and compassion during a crisis (Vongas & Al Hajj, 2015). Empathy is considered an added value that women leaders offer the workplace; however, it is worth exploring their strategic abilities. Strategy is a skill historically linked to masculinity (Laurie, 2015). A more inclusive understanding of both leadership practices for women is necessary. Strategic thinking and empathy are essential in stabilizing and creating future opportunities during an economic crisis (Beilstein et al., 2021; Khaund, 2023; Yorke, 2023). I provided a phenomenological analysis to gain insight into how women leaders engage both skills, develop future leaders, and practice resiliency through change. An exploration linking empathetic leadership and strategic thinking prompts leaders to reimagine the evolving marketplace needs and address ongoing organizational issues. The study was guided by the following research questions: (a) how do empathy and strategic thinking present in women leaders' abilities to manage crisis, and (b) how do empathy and strategic thinking present in women leaders' ability to develop emerging leaders? An interpretative phenomenological analysis study was framed in social capital theory (SCT), and cognitive and affective empathy was used to interview 10 women leading in different industries. Women leaders shared their experiences, highlighting advocacy, accountability, decisiveness, creativity, commitment, and community, resulting in the creation of a leadership development model.**

**Keywords:** women leaders, empowerment, empathy, strategic thinking, emerging leaders

Organizations can benefit from leaders who equip their teams with competencies to embrace fortitude under pressure preparing them to lead through crisis (Koh, 2023). When considering the array of competencies concerning women leaders, it is necessary to explore how empathy and strategy have been practiced and contextualized. Historically, women leaders have been credited with empathy as their main capability (Diehl, 2014; Mashele & Alagidede 2022). Specifically, women leaders are often credited with demonstrating empathetic concern, nurture, and compassion during a crisis (Vongas & Al Hajj, 2015). Empathy is valuable when dealing with critical situations in the workplace (Dolamore et al., 2021). It is a widespread notion that women leaders are too emotional and therefore may be unable to strategically face problems within their careers (Hornak et al., 2023). Arguably, a woman's emotional intelligence assists with conducting a quick assessment regarding the needs of the organization and the people (Vongas & Al Hajj, 2015). While it is necessary to acknowledge the value of emotion management in leadership positions (Choudhary et al., 2017), part of emotion management is learning to effectively utilize empathetic competency when making difficult decisions (Huy, 2005; Saha et al., 2023; Vuori & Huy, 2022). Leading with empathy has heightened a focus on people-centered leadership (Safuan, 2025).

To cultivate the next generation of leaders, the experiences of current leaders can inform talent development by fostering trust, empathy, and teaching conflict management skills (Yeager & Callahan, 2016). Women leaders can offer emerging leaders their social capital to progress their careers while championing change. Emerging leaders in this study are defined as those with less than five years of career experience. A review of the literature helped to frame the assertion that women engage in both empathy and strategic thinking when leading during a crisis and while developing emerging leaders.

### **Literature Review**

Although women's leadership discussions about empathy and equity are plentiful (Christov-Moore et al., 2014; Hanold, 2011; Vongas & Al Hajj, 2015), there is a deficiency in the literature exploring how women demonstrate and conceptualize strategic leadership (Chikwe et al., 2024; Zhang et al., 2022). Furthermore, there is a growing need to study empathetic and mindful leadership skills to better support organizational resilience (Purser et al., 2018; Wibowo & Paramita, 2022). This research distinguished the difference in affirming one's emotions through understanding versus being mindful of one's internal state, heightened emotional reactions of others, and taking control of complex situations in the workplace. It is necessary to

reframe the paradigm society holds about women leaders and their leadership capacity (Fernandez et al., 2019). Thus, insight on women leaders' strategic decision-making and their approach to cultivating emerging leaders may add value to future societal constructs.

While it is oftentimes perceived that leaders are either strategic and competitive (masculine) or empathetic (feminine), together empathy and strategic thinking are competencies that produce competitive advantage for businesses and leaders who are emotionally intelligent (Ghezzi, 2022). Previous studies about empathy and strategy have focused on either the competitive edge, working with customers, or creating collaborative work environments (Goleman et al., 2017; Zaki, 2019). Discussions on empathy are progressing, highlighting its role and strategic importance within organizations, where empathy can help alleviate workplace disruptions during times of crisis. (Dolamore et al., 2021; Halevy, 2020). Notably, Ghezzi (2022) explained that leading through a crisis, whether operational, environmental, or cultural, will require a different leadership approach by reshaping the practice of empathy. Leaders and their interpersonal relationships can guide how employees develop and process information (Longmire & Harrison, 2018; Yeager & Callahan, 2016). Specifically, emerging leaders desire emotionally balanced and agentic leaders (Vongalis-Macrow, 2016). Thus, women leaders can leverage social capital to cultivate agency, empower emerging leaders, and thrive during change.

### **Women Leaders' Social Capital**

Women leaders' social capital has been contextualized by scholars as supportive networks where empowering behaviors raise consciousness to fight for one's well-being, economic status, and access to resources (Ety, 2024; Ganapati, 2012). This means that women are empowered through social and collaborative networks that encourage their overall societal success. Furthermore, Yeager and Callahan (2016) explained that achievement, personal power, and sociability were essential components in developing emerging leaders' identities in the workplace. The authors highlighted that follower influence helps promote emerging leaders' personal leadership power. Ganapati (2012) explained that social interaction with others provides a community of support where individuals continuously discover their unique talents.

Experienced leaders may offer emerging leaders their social networks, opportunities, and resources, empowering them through crisis and inspiring commitment to goal achievement (Northouse, 2016; Yeager & Callahan, 2016). This study addresses how women leaders experienced empathy and strategic thinking in their organizations during organizational turbulence and how they developed emerging leaders.

### **Strategic Thinking and Crisis Leadership**

Strategic thinking refers to the cognitive ability to process how an individual's actions, the actions of others, or situational circumstances (crisis) impact outcomes (Halevy, 2020; Smriti et

al., 2021). Furthermore, Amanah et al. (2022) described strategic thinking as a problem-solving process that helps individuals make decisions and implement strategies for organizational success. Strategic thinking is crucial for leaders who will engage in strategic planning in their careers, manage change, and address critical problems. Asobee (2021) highlighted a brief overview of strategic thinking, it is based on one's ability to engage in creativity, mental processing, thinking critically, inquiry, and testing. Considering an appropriate definition for this paper, strategic thinking prepares leaders to strategize about the future, to be responsive, and to act quickly with sound empathetic judgment.

Emerging studies relative to women leaders versus male leaders have focused on the glass cliff; senior leaders who move women into higher roles or critical assignments that ultimately lead them to unfortunate outcomes (Vongas & Al Hajj, 2015; Ryan et al., 2011). This emergence moves beyond the glass ceiling experience, where women now occupy leadership but remain at a disempowering disadvantage. Vongas and Al Hajj (2015) explained that women are unfairly positioned on this glass cliff because inevitably the situation is already beyond repair, thus, positioning the woman leader to fail. Women are given these opportunities to lead because they are perceived to have the desired nurturing and supportive traits to manage highly emotional situations during a crisis (Haslam & Ryan 2008; Krishnan & Szczepura, 2021). However, women leaders offer more than empathetic understanding during a crisis.

Women are rarely acknowledged at executive levels as being forerunners who manage change and drive innovative business decisions; typically, women are dismissed, unheard, or spoken over by their male counterparts (Hornak et al., 2023). If women are considered forerunners during a crisis, it is usually when their empathetic leadership is desired (Vongas & Al Hajj, 2015). It is imperative to explore women's leadership experiences during a crisis to hear their voices and highlight their strategic agility. Women's shared experiences can create an inclusive space to support leadership development and lead through critical change. Thus, showcasing how they demonstrate and conceptualize empathetic and strategic skills.

The pandemic (COVID-19), most recently experienced—is one crisis where leaders were consistently required to think through problem-solving strategies while demonstrating empathetic and caring behaviors (Beilstein et al. 2021). Human well-being is a rising concern regarding the impact of trauma on stakeholders in the workplace (McNamara & Elue, 2024). These and ongoing societal issues are a call for leaders to consider how to champion change leading through crisis and developing emerging leaders.

### **Theoretical and Conceptual Framework**

Social capital theory (SCT), cognitive and affective empathy were used to frame this study. SCT is defined as social networks and resources that may be leveraged by a community of people who can develop and encourage others (Hafiz et al., 2023). Social capital involves individuals who have trust, shared values,

and work together for the benefit of achieving a common goal—especially personal development (Dudwick et al., 2006).

SCT involves participatory networks like associations, philanthropic organizations, and other inclusive spaces where others may advance their purpose (Ety, 2024). Women leaders collaborate and make inclusive decisions by utilizing social capital as a leadership strategy (Swanson et al., 2020). SCT aligns well with the study to support how women leaders utilize their social capital to develop emerging leaders and navigate crises. A leader's social capital can involve their leadership skills, professional networks, identity, and experiences (Ganapati, 2012; Hafiz et al., 2023). SCT and empathy can be applied to the decision-making strengths of women leaders. It is imperative to also contextualize both cognitive and affective empathy.

Revisiting cognitive and affective empathy, Cuff et al. (2016) explicated that empathy remains ambiguous when trying to interpret its meaning. Similarly, other scholars have attempted to demystify the term empathy (Besel & Yuille, 2010; M. Davis, 1996), but it remains a difficult social construct to understand. In part, because empathy has recently been defined as having multi-functions. Cuff et al. (2016) explained that empathy can serve as affective, perceptive, or cognitive. This means that the affective approach is an emotional response or reaction, while the perception approach is directly experienced or imagined. Finally, the cognitive approach is someone's own understanding of the emotion.

Understanding empathy is pivotal when exploring how women leaders engage empathy and strategic thinking within organizations during critical times. Furthermore, researchers have considered empathy and perspective-taking by delineating their differences (Gregory et al., 2011; Longmire & Harrison, 2018). When examining empathy and perspective-taking, organizational leaders consider whether or not it is better to identify with the emotions of others or assess different thought approaches during problem-solving. Perspective-taking is closely related to the cognitive approach, the focus is to see someone else's point of view. However, H. Davis (1980) described empathy as feeling the emotions of others.

“Perspective-taking and empathic concern are often touted as trainable and mutable orientations that might improve joint outcomes at work” (Longmire & Harrison, 2018, p. 894). For example, perspective-taking has been found to be essential when employees execute tasks by offering differing viewpoints. On the other hand, affective empathy is most useful when dealing with social relationships or individual needs in the workplace (Gregory et al., 2011). There are adverse outcomes of both orientations. Perspective-taking could orient a person towards manipulation for personal gain, and affective empathy could orient a person towards partiality in the workplace (Blader & Rothman, 2014; Epley et al., 2006), which could exhibit inequity, possibly impacting team synergy. Therefore, it is important to understand how empathy is both perceived and applied. This study explores both cognitive and affective

concepts. Affective and cognitive empathy can inform how women leaders experience empathy. Social capital, cognitive, and affective empathy were appropriate paradigms used to frame the study and research questions. To help advance women leaders and aid in the thematic findings of the study, a conceptual framework is proposed.

A conceptual framework was developed to consider an empowering leadership model that identifies empathy as an informative component of carrying out strategic thinking. The proposed conceptual framework applies SCT, which supports the benefits of community and network building to develop leaders. Further, the framework includes 4 components to empower leaders through change. The conceptual framework is called the Empowered H.I.G.H.

Dudwick's et al.'s (2006) analysis of the social capital framework applied in this study, stated “the social capital dimension of empowerment and political action explores the sense of satisfaction, personal efficacy, and capacity of network and group members to influence both local events and broader political outcomes” (p. 25). Additionally, developing cognitive and affective methods to express care and consideration for others at an organizational level is imperative to empower leaders (Vongalis-Macrow, 2016). Women leaders can leverage strategic thinking and empathy to harness social capital in organizations by applying the Empowered H.I.G.H concept. The framework has 4 major components:

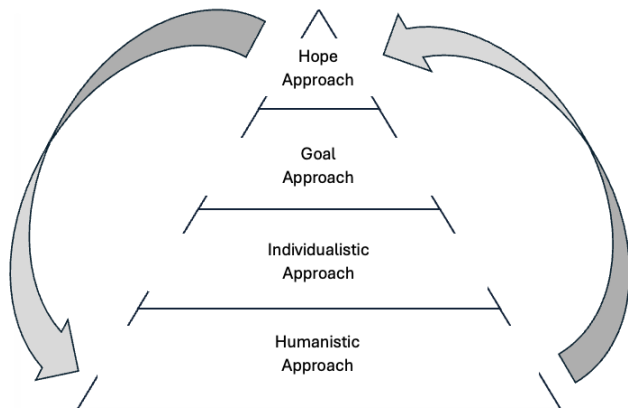
1. Humanistic Approach – consideration of others, collaboration with others, effectively communicating with others. Being culturally sensitive, responsive, and being committed to serving people.
2. Individualistic Approach – exercising self-awareness, understanding personal strengths and weaknesses, and understanding passion and purpose to set the vision.
3. Goal Approach – identifying problems, identifying solutions, identifying organizational goals, effective goal setting to develop and execute strategy.
4. Hope Approach – empowering and inspiring others, encouraging others' development, driving change, and stabilizing organizations through turbulent circumstances.

Empowered H.I.G.H can be used by women leaders to develop emerging leaders and manage change. In Figure 1 the first level, the Humanistic Approach, is to understand and serve the people in the organization. People-centered leadership is necessary to empower others, this means understanding and supporting the humanistic needs of stakeholders (Dolamore et al., 2021; Gregory et al., 2011; Safuan, 2025). The second level, the Individualistic Approach, is to fully understand oneself, personal strengths, and unique gifts (Huy, 2005; Yeager & Callahan, 2016). Self-awareness is intricately important to leaders' ability to define their personal value in an organization and create impactful change (Huy, 2005; Wibowo, & Paramita, 2022).

The third level, Goal Approach, helps leaders establish appropriate goals for organizational problems faced and to strategically prepare for internal and external organizational change by leveraging networks and resources (Amanah et al., 2022; Jia et al., 2020). Finally, level 4, the Hope Approach, encourages leaders to motivate, empower, and inspire themselves and the team. Actively pursuing hope can help leaders stabilize the organization during crises (Fry & Egel, 2021; Mashele & Alagidede, 2022). By employing hope, leaders strategically and empathetically motivate others, whether in times of crisis or daily duties implementing vision and driving change. Organizational leaders may experience different climates across decades. This framework is a cycle of continuously analyzing and evaluating personal and organizational needs to empower leaders and emerging leaders.

Figure 1

*Empowered H.I.G.H framework conceptual model.*



### Purpose of the Study

The purpose of this phenomenological interpretative analysis is to explore women leaders' experiences engaging empathy and strategic thinking during a crisis and when developing emerging leaders in the workplace. The following research questions were addressed.

1. RQ: How do empathy and strategic thinking present in women leaders' ability to manage crisis?
2. RQ: How do empathy and strategic thinking present in women leaders' ability to develop emerging leaders?

### Methods

An interpretative phenomenological analysis study was designed to describe the lived experiences of women leaders demonstrating and conceptualizing empathy and strategy. Martin Heidegger (1889 – 1976) viewed phenomenology as an interpretation of experience and the ability to derive meaning of

being (Horrigan-Kelly et al., 2016). Similarly, Moustakas (1998) viewed hermeneutic (interpretive) phenomenology as a valuable method when seeking to understand the lived experiences and meanings that individuals apply to a phenomenon experienced. "In simple terms, phenomenology is about understanding phenomena, or "things," as they appear to, or are experienced by, others" (Farrell, 2020, p. 2). The phenomenon demonstrating and conceptualizing empathy and strategic thinking through crisis while developing emerging leaders was explored.

### Research Design

Hermeneutic phenomenological design was applied based on principles identified by Moustakas (1994), which emphasized the value of using an iterative process contextualizing the lived experience based on the participants' attributed meaning. People are naturally self-interpretive, they describe their life experiences relating through stories, events, and objects, to examine this process, "IPA draws upon the fundamental principle of phenomenology, hermeneutics, and ideography" (Noon, 2018, p. 75). IPA involves double hermeneutics, which means the participants and the researcher co-construct meaning (Smith 1996). To this end, interpretive phenomenology was applied using the qualitative interview experience.

The research questions allowed room for interpretation, inviting participants to reflect deeply on their individual experiences and derive meaning. This enabled me to engage interpretatively with their experiences relative to the research questions. The first set of questions focused on personal development and organizational behavior experienced through SCT. The second set of questions focused on how participants contextualized empathy, and the final set of questions focused on how participants experienced empathy.

Semi-structured interview questions were designed. I developed 12 social capital questions, seven cognitive empathy questions, and seven affective empathy questions. The questions were adapted from previous studies, which focused on SCT, cognitive, and affective empathy. Zoll and Enz (2010) research was used to build affective and cognitive-related interview questions, while social capital questions stemmed from Dudwick et al.'s (2006) qualitative methods guide. Utilizing affective empathy questions helped to explore behavioral phenomena such as mood, emotion, and feelings, while cognitive questions helped inform how those behaviors are perceived (Fox, 2018). Social capital questions were developed to explore how individuals experienced their networks, connections, resources, and cognitive capital (Jia et al., 2020). The research questions align with IPA because participants were able to reflect and develop meaning about their lived experiences engaging empathy and strategic thinking. IPA also supports individual interpretive strategies to understand each participant's voice.

### Participants

The participants were chosen through criterion sampling (Palinkas et al., 2015), seeking women leaders who have directly experienced leading during a crisis and while developing

employees. Ten women leaders with at least three years of work experience and those who have held leadership roles for a minimum of three years were interviewed. Women who work across sectors were selected from higher education institutions, nonprofit organizations, and corporate organizations. This criteria was selected to build upon the experiences of women leaders, who may have lived through the recent crisis (e.g., COVID-19). These leaders varied in age and were dominantly women of color. There were 8 Black females and 2 Indian females who held mid-to-senior level roles. There were 2 participants in the corporate sector, 4 in higher education, and 4 in nonprofit management.

A flyer was shared on LinkedIn, Facebook, and via email for potential participants working in the state of Georgia. Participants interested in the study were directed to complete a Microsoft Form, I reviewed the form to ensure participants met the study's criteria. The participants were emailed the informed consent to sign and return by email by the deadline. Participant selection took place September 18, 2023 through October 1, 2023. Interviews were scheduled between the months of October and November of 2023.

### **Data Collection**

Semi-structured interviews were conducted through Microsoft Teams password protected recorded meeting room. Participants were asked to choose a pseudonym to protect their privacy (Zahle, 2017). This pseudonym is based on how they saw themselves as women leaders by identifying their leadership capacity in one word as noted in the results section. Participants were interviewed for one to two hours. I explained to participants through the interview protocol the purpose of the study. I began all interviews by first discussing my goal to expand research on women leaders to help provide a sense of comfort for participants. I then explained the selected frameworks that I used to contextualize how the questions were developed. I identified the key terms used to provide clarity. I created a safe environment before asking participants to recall their experiences by encouraging participants to engage in storytelling. Establishing comfort can help participants reduce stress when recalling difficult experiences (Dempsey et al., 2016). I guided participants to do the Microsoft Teams interview in a private and comfortable setting, preferably not a professional setting, to obtain the most authentic shared experiences. The study was reviewed and approved through Troy University's IRB board.

### **Data Analysis**

The data were transcribed through Microsoft Teams transcription software and later reviewed for accuracy by comparing the transcription to field notes. IPA coding was completed utilizing emergent themes and developing experiential themes to contextualize the participants' experiences (Smith et al., 2021). Participants also attributed meaning behind those experiences. Specifically, I followed the IPA steps to include: (a) reading and re-reading each transcript, (b) initial

noting (coding), I listened to audio recordings again, (c) developed emerging themes by circling and highlighting key words from the transcripts line by line and then grouped those codes into larger themes, (d) I mapped the overarching themes by connecting the patterns from the emergent themes to create clusters, (e) I repeated these steps for each individual transcript.

This was conducted by focusing on descriptive, linguistic, and conceptual content. Descriptive coding is related adjectives, linguistic coding is related to language that the participants used. Finally, contextual coding is related to the meaning and examples that participants provided. Descriptive, linguistic, and contextual coding are specific methods used to analyze participant transcripts in IPA (Smith et al., 2021). After completing coding for all participants, I grouped each under these categories and assigned broad themes. I then reduced the overlapping words or meaning into smaller themes to create the final thematic emphasis for five themes related to the three sections of the interview protocol.

This study is trustworthy and credible because I asked participants during the interview to confirm the reinterpretation of statements that I called back out to them to confirm accuracy of thought and meaning. Participants were also given the opportunity to review meaningful statements to clarify their intended meaning. The following section includes findings with key statements and words demonstrating a connection to the experiential themes. The themes align with the methodological research design by grouping SCT related experiences into themes and grouping affective and cognitive empathy experiences into themes.

### **Findings**

The study was guided by the research questions, (a) how do empathy and strategic thinking present in women leaders' abilities to manage crisis, and (b) how do empathy and strategic thinking present in women leaders' ability to develop emerging leaders. The results were organized by experiential thematic findings followed by participant significant statements. Participant statements are presented with their selected pseudonyms. The findings revealed 5 major themes (see Table 1):

**Table 1***Experiential Themes from Interpretive Phenomenological Analysis*

<b>Experiential Themes</b>	<b>Personal Experiential Themes</b>	<b>Keywords</b>
Theme 1: Accountability and Advocacy	Set the expectation Consistent for everybody Perspectives heard Cause it's gonna affect them I specifically stood up one time To be heard and give grace Reflection of the culture	Accountability Standards Advocacy Acknowledging Voice Example
Theme 2: Encouraging Community	Relational, building camaraderie What they needed was community Mentorship opportunities Connections with others Open relationship with supervisors It's less hierarchical	Communication Community Mentoring Collaborative Sharing
Theme 3: Communication, Commitment, and Control	Active listening Transparency was lacking Thoughtful and decisive Challenge others for solutions Not having hysteria Don't panic, evaluate emergency Detail oriented Navigating, strategic conversations	Listening Transparency Commitment Decisive Stability Steady Navigating
Theme 4: Creativity and Forever- learning	Intentional steps forward Confident, don't hesitate Take time to learn Open to continuous learning Creativity, critical thinking Past experiences Open to mistakes Care about development	Planning Confidence Learning Creativity Versatility Innovative Caring
Theme 5: Awareness and Action	A seat at the table Motherhood can affect work Multi-generational female support Women seen in higher roles Toxic image of women needs	Change Visibility Support Equality Competing

The first three themes presented are accountability and advocacy, communication, commitment and control, and encouraging community. These themes aligned with the SCT framework, which focused on organizational behavior and professional development. The following research question was addressed:

RQ 1: How do empathy and strategic thinking present in women leaders' ability to manage crisis?

### **Accountability and Advocacy**

Advocacy and accountability were found to be a consistent themes among the participants. Women leaders shared that advocating for one another as well as emerging leaders during a crisis was pivotal. When discussing organizational behavior, women leaders also shared that it was important to demonstrate accountability as leaders and to ensure that their leadership was exemplary of what they expected within the organization.

*The Empowered Leader* shared an experience where she felt the need to voice her concerns for an injustice she witnessed. Further, she contextualized the injustice based on what behaviors had been acceptable for male counterparts to do versus female counterparts.

I've also seen where it's permissible for a man to just start spewing out sometimes umm, you know, cursing and things like that in a work environment. But a woman generally has not done that when they're talking to another employee... And I think that's something that needs to change.

*The Supportive Leader* described advocating for fairness across the team regardless of team members' different home lives and responsibilities. Specifically, she outlined the need for consistency within a work hybrid work schedule.

I think the difference was that one of my team members had children, the others did not. So kind of still making the schedule fair that if we are doing a hybrid schedule, once we were kind of coming back into the office, how does that look for everybody and how consistent is that for everybody?

*The Visionary Leader* discussed accountable leadership. She explained that it is important for emerging leaders to have a leader who practices the expectations they set for the team. She explained that using buzz words like transparency is not enough when actions fail to demonstrate proclaimed expectations.

You know the silent quitting and things like that just being around the young people I think has helped me to have a better understanding of what is going on behind their mind, which comes up a lot. Well, if you're telling me to clock in at 8:00 o'clock, but you come in at 8:02 and there's, there's no accountability, which you, even though you're saying, you know, I'm transparent and this and that, you know, if I don't see you coming in at

8:00 o'clock, like you want me to clock in, so why would you? Why would I honor that?

### **Encouraging Community**

Building a sense of community was important to the participants. Specifically, women desired more community in predominantly male-dominated leadership roles. Women envisioned themselves as conduits to generate a level playing field creating a team-oriented and collaborative work environment.

*The Intentional Leader* shared that there is a need for community within leadership teams, most importantly at the executive leadership level.

So going back to that [women's leadership development], I saw both the administrative and academic side right and the commonality of what they needed was community. And so, I would like to see, because it's very lonely at the top and it's very quiet at the top, right? So at this level, there's not many colleagues that I can like, we're not confiding, you see what I'm saying because I know where the bones are buried. I know the announcements that haven't hit. There's a lack of community. So I would like to see a level of, you know, if not, maybe within their institutions, but across the country, those type of women having resources to navigate and collaborate together because it is very hard, you know, and even in those spaces, there's still gonna be people buttoned up, there's still not gonna have a lot of, you know, conversation. Like, are you continuing to keep your resume up to date? Are you continuing to road map your career?

*The Collegial Leader* shared her experience focusing on relationship building. She felt it was important not to simply make decisions just because she could as a leader but to create a team who felt apart of those decisions.

I will also say just being relational, um and trying to build some sort of camaraderie with individuals and groups on your teams. It's really essential as well and it's something I try to bring to the table. So really, that relationship building piece is a big part of how I try to lead.

*The Compassionate Leader* shared her experience approaching leadership communicatively with understanding and compassion for the intersectional identities everyone carries into the workplace.

People are not monolithic and they wear so many different hats and you might come in here and be a raging psychopath one day, but having the understanding to know that there's much more to the spaces and the identities that we all carry and we're juggling them all.

## Communication, Commitment and Control

Communicating openly, being decisive, detail-oriented, and exercising control during crisis were described as necessary strategies to lead during turbulent situations. Women leaders described the need for transparency and honesty. Women leaders expressed concern and discomfort in work environments that lacked transparency and hid the reality of what was occurring. Women expressed being able to face and make tough decisions that were emotional while also remaining in control.

*The Discerning Leader* recalled what it was like leading during a crisis (the COVID-19 Pandemic) and she identified decisiveness as a key strategy that helped her guide the direction of a nonprofit during major uncertainty.

Active listening, um being thoughtful and being decisive. There was a lot of uncertainty at that time and I think that, umm, you know those in leadership positions more than ever needed to be that steady. Be willing to make the decision...

*The Intentional Leader* spoke about having leaders who can face challenges with commitment. She shared that today we need leaders who stay the course and demonstrate tenacity.

I think there has to be a level of stick to it right? There's a level of, you know, it's, you have fair-weather leaders now. You know, you have to come in and then they leave and it's not working. But I have to have a level of tenacity about me that sticks with it.

*The Empowered Leader* shared her experience with emerging leaders within the changing workforce climate. She has witnessed new career professionals being decisive about what they expected from employers, however, lacking initiative.

Now what I'm going to say is probably not going to be a popular opinion, but I feel I would really like to see people who have less than five years experience take initiative. I'm having to follow up a lot and and I might have spoken to you about this. But I'll tell you what they are, those with less experience. When I say within the first five years of the workforce, what they're good at, is making the demands of what they want, you know, and when I hear it, I'm like, wow. It's, you know, that entitlement is there.

The final two themes presented are creativity and forever-learning, and awareness and action. These themes aligned with affective and cognitive empathy, which focused on how women leaders applied empathy and understood empathy. The following themes addressed the research question: RQ2: How do empathy and strategic thinking present in women leaders' ability to develop emerging leaders?

## Creativity and Forever-Learning

Creativity, confidence, empathy, and forever learning were found as strategies women engaged in their leadership capacity. Women reflected on their diverse roles and life experiences, showcasing their strength as leaders through the application of care. Women defined their contributions to organizational cultures relative to learned experiences, learning from others, and awareness of other's needs.

*The Innovative Leader* discussed that her experience has provided confidence and a knowledgeable lens to consider the past, present, and strategize about creating the future.

I've been here a long time, so I have the history of where we were and where we are now. And I think that's very valuable to my team as we continue to grow learning from past mistakes to where we are now, but also being innovative you can't keep doing the same old thing and expecting to get a different outcome. When you're dealing with different groups of students and different types of learners, you just really have to be innovative.

*The Visionary Leader* believed that it is important to provide a flexible work culture where people can focus on their wellness, creatively solving problems, and meet their deadlines. She provided imagery of what flexibility means.

You can show emotions and there's nothing wrong with that. I think normalizing a lot of those qualities of women in the workplace, we make a difference as well in changing the narrative of how women in leadership are viewed. You know, in an ideal world in the future, actually, right now we do it. We have remote days and then we have office days. I definitely see, you know, some days virtual or some days in person giving people that flexibility, having a workspace that is full of joy and you know, I envision not a workout space like almost like a studio. I envision something similar to a screaming room, but not a screaming room, for us to scream out, but more of a space where people can go in and just take a moment. I really would appreciate a work environment where you know, your mental health is a priority.

## Awareness and Action

Women leaders described issues with a historical narrative woman have faced in the workplace. Participants shared that such narratives must change going forward. It was important for women leaders to dispel ideals that women are not emotionally stable and that demonstrating empathy means being weak or less capable. Findings showed a disconnect between verbalizing support and taking appropriate action.

*The Compassionate Leader* spoke about important changes that she would like to see going forward concerning issues with women. Her current institution has been very supportive of motherhood, unlike a prior job she held. She spoke about supporting mothers in the workplace.

I'm triggered by new motherhood, it's not just that hat of being mom now, of being a mother. It's where is the ripple effect as to how that is manifesting now when I'm in my workspace? So for me, here's what I've told myself my mantra is where my feet are planted. That's where I am present. That will make sure to compartmentalize that, but to a certain extent, that's just my framework. That's impossible, because I'm exhausted, which means I could be forgetful. One day my kid could be, like last night, she was awake until 4:00 O'clock in the morning and my alarm goes off at 6. So how does that then affect my performance when I come into the office? And so, if I need, I'll just say time or grace, this is a new space and a new season of my life. So, I want to see organizationally where there are initiatives whether run by HR or an office manager to support that.

*The Visionary Leader* shared a change that she desires to see concerning issues that women face in the workplace. She explained the narrative that women must take on a masculine leadership style should change.

Let the men work the way they work and let women work the way they work, because then that way we reduce the best part of us and I think that also promotes the narrative that you see. Sometimes when you see the boss lady, she's in a suit. You hardly see a picture of a boss lady with a flowy, flowery dress, which is part of why, you know some of the logo with our brand is showcasing the diversity of women who have dreams, that you don't have to be in a suit to show that you are boss lady, right? And I feel that that's one of the critical places to change the narrative is that idea that, you know, women need to be masculine to show leadership.

*The Empowered Leader* shared her perspective concerning misconceptions professionals hold about empathy. She expressed that empathy is not just about emotion, but it's apart of decision-making.

Maybe that empathy means that you're going to focus only on the emotion. Because that's where they're like, well, don't base this on emotions. This is purely like we just talked about, don't base [the decision] on emotions. This is purely strategic. Well, no emotion is a part of it, and strategy is the major part of it that it's ok for it to be combined.

### **Discussion**

Women explained that empathy is not merely an emotion of understanding or acknowledging someone's experience; empathy is a tool for decision-making. The interpretation of the collected data revealed that women engage empathy in their strategic thinking process by assessing both a critical situation and the emotional state of the organization. Women leading during crisis viewed empathy and strategic thinking as strengths in their ability to be supportive, understanding, compassionate,

decisive, and steady. Women perceived themselves as a pillar of strength to maintain control and to be the voice of hope and reason.

The conceptual framework can be applied to the thematic findings. Empowered H.I.G.H, The humanistic approach aligns well with the theme accountability and advocacy to support emerging leaders and to practice advocating for people-centered leadership. For example, women recalled behaviors that were socially acceptable for men yet not for women, hence creating unfair working climates. Additionally, women discussed consideration for their unique circumstances like motherhood in the workplace. Consideration for others' well-being is a core value in people-centered leadership (Safuan, 2025).

The next step in the conceptual framework is the individualistic approach, which aligns with the theme awareness and action. Women who embrace their unique strengths through awareness and learn the strengths of their teams, can strategically create visionary change. When leaders have an awareness of self, their leadership identity increases their visionary power (Yeager & Callahan, 2016). The third component of the framework, goal approach, can be applied to the communication, commitment, and control thematic emphasis. Women highlighted their ability to be decisive, assess critical situations, and effectively communicate. Critical thinking, coordination, and control are necessary skills to effectively set strategic goals (Asobee, 2021). Additionally, women leaders believed that it was their duty to help mentor emerging leaders, provide direction, and encourage commitment. It is pivotal for emerging leaders to take ownership of their personal and professional development by learning and establishing goals. The final component of the framework, hope approach, which aligns with two themes, the first, creativity and forever learning. Women acknowledge that creativity, confidence, and empathy are essential to their leadership. To enact hope leaders should remain optimistic about the future, commit to the path, and deliver unwavering support through their social networks (Fry & Egel, 2021). Finally, women described the best work environment as a community to embrace knowledge-sharing, understanding, collaborative environments that are less hierarchical to achieve goals, which aligns with the theme encouraging community.

### **Limitations and Recommendations for Future Research**

A limitation of the study was due to perspectives of primarily women of color. Moving forward it would be interesting to compare women leaders' experiences to the experiences of emerging leaders to gather a better understanding of what each group desires in terms of leadership support and development within organizations. It would also be interesting to have a more diverse pool of participants.

### **Conclusion**

There has been great progress in positioning women leaders, for some industries there has even been considerable attention given to women's leadership development. However, to continue to advance women leaders, empowering action-oriented steps are

needed to embrace their unique approach demonstrating and conceptualizing empathy and strategic thinking. Women leaders as well as emerging leaders require an empowering community that builds upon social networks, empathy, and strategic agility. Women leaders may empower their teams by striving for humanistic support, individual power, strategic goal setting, and leveraging hope in times of uncertainty. There is a need to discover the perspectives of the next generation of women leaders.

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