

GENDER ROLES, LEADERSHIP AND  
PUBLIC RELATIONS

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by  
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The undersigned, appointed by the dean of the Graduate School, have examined the thesis GENDER ROLES, LEADERSHIP AND PUBLIC RELATIONS, presented by Jacqueline M. Janus, a candidate for the degree of or master of arts, and hereby certify that, in their opinion, it is worthy of acceptance.

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## **Dedication**

From countless hours spent helping me late in the night on school projects to driving me to all of those early morning soccer practices, thank you. From helping me study for weekly Spanish quizzes to helping me come up with the extra cash for rent when I was a little short, thank you. From sending me thoughtful gifts to cheer me up when I was far away, to giving me daily reminders to get going on this thesis, thank you. Thank you Mom and Dad for sacrificing so much so that I could have a life full of opportunities.

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*“We've got a generation now who were born with semi equality. They don't know how it was before, so they think, this isn't too bad. We're working. We have our attaché' cases and our three-piece suits. I get very disgusted with the younger generation of women. We had a torch to pass, and they are just sitting there. They don't realize it can be taken away. Things are going to have to get worse before they join in fighting the battle.”*

- Erma Bombeck

## Gender, Leadership and Public Relations

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### Abstract

Women dominate public relations, making up 70 percent of its work force; however, women only fill 20 percent of the top leadership roles in major agencies. The issue of gender and leadership in public relations needs to shift toward those women who are leaders, examining the factors that make them successful (Aldoory, 2005). To better understand how gender affects leadership within public relations, this research applies feminist theory to a case study at an international public relations firm located in the Midwest, MW. Twelve in-depth interviews with subordinates and managers yielded thick descriptions regarding gender's influence on leadership styles, personnel decisions, mentoring abilities, work-life balance perceptions and thoughts on equality in the work place. Findings show that the many factors of the employee's overall social location (class, race, etc) trumps gender when it comes to leadership styles, mentoring relationships, gender disparity, work-life balance and hiring/promoting. Thus, according to the feminist theory of intersectionality, gender is just part of the domination matrix that contributes to a lack of women in public relations leadership.

## **Chapter 1**

### **Introduction**

Looking at the numbers, it would appear that women dominate public relations. Looking at the numbers, it would appear that public relations is a profession that gives women professional opportunities not found in other industries. Looking at the numbers, it would appear women could lead and succeed in public relations. Well the numbers do show that women dominate public relations because they fill 70 percent of the positions in the profession (Aldoory & Toth, 2002). And public relations provide women great professional opportunities to work in a fast-paced business, to travel internationally and to earn high salaries. But we should examine the meaning of another number. The number 20. Women hold just 20 percent of the top leadership spots in major firms. While women do have many opportunities in public relations, they are not on par with men when it comes to management (Aldoory & Toth, 2002). Of course, this is not unique to the public relations profession and it is not a new phenomenon.

In 1986, the International Association of Business Communicators (IABC) published the “Velvet Ghetto Summary” as a result of the growing feminization of the public relations field (Hon, 1995). This report identified public relations as an increasingly feminized field that pigeonholed women in subordinate roles. It also examined how the public perceived a female-dominated field and stated that because of this the profession would never reach professional status and even might lose prestige. Some felt that the feminization of public relations would lower the status of the profession as a management

function and salaries would drop based on comparing histories of other feminized professions like nursing, education and social work (Wilcox & Cameron, 2006). In other words, anything that dominated by women was “women’s work” and not taken as seriously as male-dominated professions like law and medicine.

Other discourse related to the feminization of public relations involves talk of the glass ceiling--an unofficial but acknowledged barrier to advancement in a profession, especially affecting women and ethnic minorities. Being that it is informally acknowledged, there are no identified factors creating the barrier, just propositions. For example, O’Neil (2003) suggests that the hierarchical organizational structure prevents women from advancement. Wrigley (2002) identifies the concept of the “queen bee syndrome,” where the few female leaders impose a glass ceiling in order to ensure they remain the token female leader (there are many male bees, but only one queen bee of the hive). Baimforth and Gardner (2006) point out that the perception of women struggling to maintain work-life balance might make them a less attractive candidate for a promotion. Both men and women feel that women cannot devote the time needed to be in a leadership role if they are also responsible for children and a home. The significance of the glass ceiling in public relations shows how women can dominate a field in numbers on the one hand, and on the other hand that same field can still discriminate against women’s opportunities for advancement.

Perhaps the topic comes up as an interest in academic and professional writing because public relations is an industry that uses transformational (charismatic, democratic,

feminine) techniques to make connections through communication in a transactional realm (competitive, masculine, i.e. the corporations they represent) (Aldoory & Toth, 2002). The public relations technician role is deferred to women, who can act more transformational (using two-way communication styles) and make connections with the press and public. Wilcox and Cameron (2006) state:

Women are segregated into the lower-level technician roles, spending time on routine activities such as writing, editing, and handling media relations. Conversely, more men are promoted into the more powerful managerial role, engaging in such activities as counseling senior management, and making key policy decisions (p. 35).

Key decision-makers give the more competitive leadership roles within the agency to men because men possess a more competitive style of interaction, jockeying for a position on a hierarchy of competitive accomplishment. Thus, women are thought to be more suited toward the transformational aspects of public relations (communication) while men are left to handle clients and management issues that take on a hard-nosed approach thought to be characteristic of the corporate world. But what happens to the woman who breaks the glass ceiling and immerses herself in what is traditionally a transactional/masculine role? What does her leadership style look like? How do other leaders and subordinates perceive her gender affecting management capabilities?

With 70 percent of public relations roles filled by women, and only 20 percent of the top leadership in major firms filled by women, researchers need to carefully look at women who are leaders, examining what makes them successful (Aldoory, 2005). Learning from the experiences of female leaders, male leaders, and subordinates from a top public relations firm will help us understand the main research question: “What are the factors

that influence how women achieve equality with men in leadership roles at a major public relations firm?”

The purpose of this research is to strengthen theory building about public relations leadership; something that researchers say is desperately needed (Aldoory & Toth, 2002). This study examines what it takes to become leader at a successful public relations firm. Thus, researching perceptions about gender, leadership and public relations will add to the literature in public relations leadership.

In addition, better understanding how gender affects (or is perceived to affect) leadership opportunities in public relations will contribute to the industry itself. This research will shed light on how gender affects leadership at a global public relations agency that touts a supportive environment for female leadership. While a blue chip company like MW works in a masculine business culture, it claims to maintain a progressive company culture that transcends traditional gender roles. At MW, women do not serve coffee to male bosses and are not confined to traditional technician roles. At MW women sit alongside men and are key players in major strategic decision-making.

Aldoory & Toth (2002) says there is a disparity in the gender representation of public relations leadership roles and the thoughts from industry experts on how women can break the glass ceiling will bring valuable feminist insights to public relations research.

## **Chapter 2 Literature Review**

The literature review is presented in four main subject areas. To understand the theoretical approaches to the literature, defining the feminist theory and its applications to communications research is a necessary first step. Then, applying feminist perspectives to public relations will provide a deeper understanding as to how definitions of feminist theory relate to the general occupation of public relations. A third topic is gender and management; this will help identify key components of leadership styles, perceptions, characteristics and challenges in relation to gender. Finally, the researcher will apply these definitions of feminist theory to public relations and management to form a better understanding of female leadership in public relations.

### **Feminist Perspectives & Definitions**

#### ***Clarification: Feminist approaches to communication***

One critique of communications research that addresses feminist perspectives and gender roles is that large parts of the scholarship are missing or distorted. Gender roles are "the set of arrangements by which a society transforms biological sexuality into products of human activity, and in which these transformed needs are satisfied" (Reiter, 1975). In other words, society sets a standard where the type work we do is based on biology. Women perform certain activities based on their sex. Men perform certain activities based on the fact that they are men.

Communication research needs to integrate theory and research as if “others,” including women, matter (Rush & Grub Swetnam, 1996). Therefore, it is important to outline feminist approaches to communication and clarify distorted perceptions about feminist perspectives. For example, Hill Collins (2000) describes the scholastic and epistemological distortion of the black woman’s experience in America: Because elite white men control Western structures of knowledge validation, their interests pervade the themes, paradigms, and epistemologies of traditional scholarship. As a result, black women’s experiences...have been routinely distorted within or excluded from what counts as knowledge (p. 251).

This control over knowledge does not just apply to black women, but all women and minorities. In order to proactively include the feminist voice without distortion, Rush and Grub Swetnam (1996), suggest researching with these feminist approaches: 1) Feminism is a perspective, not a research method. 2) Feminists use many research methods. 3) Feminist research involves an ongoing criticism of nonfeminist scholarship. 4) Feminist research is guided by feminist theory. 5) Feminist research may combine several disciplines. 6) Feminist research strives for social change. 7) Feminist research strives to represent human diversity. 8) Feminist research frequently includes the researcher as a person. 9) Feminist research frequently attempts to develop special relations with the subjects; in other words, it involves interactive research. 10) Feminist research defines a special relationship with the reader (p. 500).

While many of these themes will apply to this research, the most important theme is “feminist research strives for social change.” Feminism strives for the equality of the sexes and this research will explore how to accomplish that for a specific industry: public relations. For example, public relations leadership does not exemplify progression in terms of gender equality. This research will look at how we can achieve social change and identify ways to bring more women into key leadership roles.

***The Big 3: liberal feminism, radical feminism & socialist feminism***

Building upon the 10 themes above, the researcher must define the different feminist perspectives, beginning with the three perspectives at the foundation of early feminist thought: liberal feminism, Marxist/social feminism and radical feminism.

Liberal feminist theory stems from liberal political philosophy, viewing laws and politics as the way in which women can achieve equality. This perspective argues that all humans possess natural rights, but only men have been granted these rights. Liberal feminists question equality in organizations and use this as a frame from which they critique the system (Wanaca-Thibault & Tompkins, 1998). Liberal feminists offer a two-fold solution towards achieving equality: women should enter the male-dominated work force and secure positions of power.

Marxist/social feminists focus on class. For example, key concepts like the reproduction of labor and the economic value of domestic labor are said to be indispensable for the maintenance of capitalism. Since this is unpaid work, the profit margins in capitalism maintain large gaps, which oppress women economically. Socialist feminism recently

acknowledged other social divisions as part of the oppressed, including race, sexual orientation, age and physical ability. This caveat makes social feminism one of the more favored perspectives because it contains more inclusive language (Van Zoonen, 1996). Radical feminists describe women's oppression as being grounded in reproduction and sexuality. They call for women to remove themselves from men so they can realize their full potential (Wanaca-Thibault & Tompkins, 1998). Psychoanalytic feminists argue women's nature is socially constructed. More recent perspectives include postmodern, existential, women of color, and cultural feminists. These more recent perspectives examine how the "other," not just women, face unequal treatment.

***Reexamining feminist perspectives with intersectionality.***

The most valuable perspective to apply to gender orientation in communication management is almost a combination of the three previous perspectives. The idea of intersectionality attempts to understand which factors and to what extent they oppress. Intersectionality, according to Crenshaw (1991), looks at the interconnected relations between oppression. This perspective acknowledges that there are many systems, not just sexism at play. "Intersectional paradigms remind us that oppression cannot be reduced to one fundamental type, and that oppressions work together in producing injustice," (Hill Collins, 2000, p.18). In *Black Feminist Thought*, Patricia Hill Collins makes the case that it is more than just racism, or sexism or capitalism that oppresses black women in the U.S. It is the combination of various domination matrices that are more appropriate when analyzing black women's experiences, just as there is a combination of domination matrices that affect women in public relations.

Though the field of public relations has made advancements toward equality between the sexes, the field has failed to acquire a substantial number of female executives compared with the overall numbers of women in lower-level positions (Hon, 1995). That is not to say that women in public relations do not fill any leadership roles, but that women do not hold nearly as many high-ranking positions as would be expected when they make up 70 percent of the public relations industry (Aldoory & Toth, 2002). Intersectionality looks at various systems (sexism, racism, ageism, heterosexism, economic oppression, etc) to demonstrate the complexity of oppression, examining the many factors contributing to disparity.

Adding to intersectionality, social role theory is an interesting layer to apply. Social role theory is the principle that men and women behave differently in social situations and take on different roles due to society's expectations (Eagly & Johnson, 1990). Society's expectations, along with sexism, are an intersecting form of oppression. Hon (1995) believed that women have been taught the tools to enter into the workplace, but past feminist perspectives like liberal feminism have not attempted to prescribe ways in which women can get beyond the social roles they are expected to assume once working. Hon (1995) goes on to say the liberal feminist perspective marginalizes and takes value from feminine traits that women possess in leadership. For example, Wrigley (2002) believed liberal feminism advocates that women should display more masculine traits (i.e. aggressiveness, competitiveness, authoritarian leadership style, etc.) to succeed in the male-dominated workplace. Once women make it to the top, they began acting more like men as an adaptation strategy (Wrigley, 2002). An alternative to the liberal perspective is

transforming the workplace by placing value on feminine leadership styles (i.e. compassion, egalitarian structure and charisma). This Marxist approach advocates for a transformation in the workplace structure. It examines how a patriarchal, capitalist society devalues women's work and creates a system where women do not have a chance to lead. Marxist feminism combats the idea that women are considered second-class citizens whose work is not properly compensated. Marxist feminism will help look at an interlocking system of oppression that goes beyond the individual. While liberal and Marxist feminism look at the same issue from two separate perspectives, intersectionality provides a more inclusive look to all the factors involved. Two systems, capitalism and sexism, intersect to cause oppression. By understanding that oppression is multi-faceted, solutions for equality will come about with greater ease.

## **Feminist Perspectives In Public Relations**

### ***The early days of women in public relations***

In light of the rising number of women in the field today, it is important to understand the strides made by public relations' female pioneers (Gower, 2001). Gower says women were initially accepted into the profession because it was a new field with few entry barriers. One reason for this trend was that the field did not have the same institutional barriers as other professions, such as law and medicine (only men were allowed in law and medical schools). To offer further context, the feminization of public relations is credited to World War II. Public relations was a new field that developed during wartime. With men off at war, unable to shape and fill the majority of public relations jobs, women had greater access to positions in the field (Gower, 2001). As the profession matured,

however, top management positions became male-dominated, despite a growing number of women in the field. While public relations developed into a feminized field, it continues to resemble the typical social hegemony of male leadership. But how did this happen?

***Gender discrepancies in a gendered profession — how it came to be***

Today, women make up nearly 70 percent of the public relations workforce; however, it is men who are often favored for hiring, salary increases and promotions (Aldoory & Toth, 2002). In other disciplines, such as business and marketing, researchers have developed theories to help explain gender disparities. According to Hon (1995) and Aldoory & Toth (2002), theory building about gender differences in public relations has been minimal.

Hon (1995) attempts to explain why gender disparities exist through a number of factors: marginalization of public relations work as “fluff,” the marginalization of women in the field, male bias in promotions, women’s “balancing act” between career and family, and gender stereotypes.

Aldoory and Toth (2002) extrapolate Hon’s foundational work to further understand gender disparities. In a survey of 4,000 public relations professionals, their research revealed distinct factors that help explain gender discrepancies and lead toward an appropriate theory for public relations. Sex discrimination and sexism, biological determinism, and the socialization of males all contribute to the possible marginalization

of public relations (in terms of salary, professional prestige, and respect) if the field becomes entirely feminized (Aldoory & Toth, 2002). Therefore, as the number of men in public relations begins to decrease, the effort to hire and retain male employees increases — by both male and female executives. This is one justification for giving salary raises and promotions to men. Also, as attention and grooming for higher positions turns to men, young women are left to fill the technician roles. In addition to this factor, women’s socialization suggests they avoid aggressive behavior or fail to demand change. The result is a feminized field in which women are trapped beneath the proverbial glass ceiling and are constrained to lower-ranking, lesser-paying positions. If a greater number of equal opportunities existed, women would no longer feel as if they will be hurt themselves and their profession by helping another woman climb the corporate ladder. What results is a “queen bee syndrome” where women leaders (subconsciously and consciously) keep other women from top management positions in order to protect their own position (Wrigley, 2002).

In light of the “queen bee syndrome,” and other literature explaining gender discrimination, this proposition suggests gender does affect personnel decisions. Proposition 1: Issues like work-life balance and the “queen bee syndrome” are two examples of how gender might filter decisions. Specifically, both women and men will tend to favor male candidates for promotions and hiring due to this type of mental filtering.

O'Neil (2003) asserts that feminist public relations scholars suggested the organizational environment may be to blame for the powerlessness of some female public relations practitioners in terms of advancement and pay. O'Neil conducted a study to evaluate the cause of this powerlessness. By applying feminist theory and a structural framework, O'Neil's study tested whether the perceived influence of men and women in corporate public relations was related to (1) formal structural power, (2) relationship power, or (3) gender. The findings show women have less structural power than men, but there were no differences in relationship power. This was consistent with traditional feminist hypothesizing and the structural framework. The public relations practitioner's influence was related to both their formal structural power and relationship power — but not gender. In recognition of this formal structural powerlessness, women can only achieve equality in public relations by changing the system's structure and creating an entirely new vision for the field of public relations (Hon, 1996).

## **Gender and Management**

### ***Perceptions***

Lumsden (1995) used autobiographies, oral histories and articles written by 10 “front-page gals” between 1920 and 1940 to analyze how gender affected these women's journalism careers. The author concluded these women “lost their femininity” to succeed in a male-dominated field. This is another example of an adaptation strategy (Wrigley 2002).

More recently, Dennis and Kunkel (2004) studied whether women are perceived as possessing attributes associated with the highest levels of corporate achievement. The research examined whether those who hold such male-biased views differ with regard to their own gender identities. The results revealed that people continue to perceive males and managers to have innately different characteristics than females. The sample as a whole — especially those identified as masculine, androgynous and undifferentiated — perceived males to be more qualified than females, regardless of professional achievement labels. Competence, assertiveness, stability, independence, rationality and less concern for the well being of others were listed as the advantages of being a male in corporate America. The most interesting finding, however, was that individuals of both sexes with feminine characteristics believe males and females do not differ with respect to crucial leadership qualities.

### *Leadership values*

Moving beyond perceptions, Hare, Koenings and Hare's (1997) research provides evidence of a relationship between expected values female and male managers should exhibit and the actual values observed. The researchers surveyed 700 managers who rated themselves based on a value questionnaire. The study found women managers possessed more feminine characteristics in their leadership style while men demonstrated more masculine behavior; thus, the role of manager may not necessarily alter characteristics of gender roles. The most interesting aspect of the study was that employees preferred friendliness to a task-oriented leadership style (Hare, Koenings & Hare, 1997). Friendliness is traditionally characterized as a feminine characteristic, and employees

avored this attribute in a male-influenced structure. This finding demonstrates that a role does not necessarily define leadership values. It would be beneficial to do further research and identify the values that management looks for when promoting employees, especially in a male-dominated setting.

In addition to friendliness, females typically demonstrate transformational leadership styles desired in managers (Careless, 1998). Leadership styles are categorized as transformational or transactional (Aldoory, 2002). Transformational leadership is defined as charismatic, democratic, egalitarian (feminine). Transactional leadership is defined as authoritarian and hierarchical (masculine). Styles can be measured by language (how the leader refers to themselves in comparison to subordinates), interaction (orders vs. asks), decision-making (calls the shots vs. asks for input), etc.

Transformational leadership places an emphasis on vision, development of the individual, empowerment and challenging traditional assumptions. Evidence shows this leadership style contributes to a leader's effectiveness (Careless, 1998). Careless' research sampled employees (i.e. superiors, managers, and subordinates) of an international bank in Australia. The findings indicated superiors, who were mostly male, evaluated female managers as more transformational than male managers. Female managers rated themselves as more transformational, but at a specific behavior level of analysis (rating themselves highly for interpersonal and feminine behaviors). Subordinates evaluated their female and male leaders equally (Careless, 1998).

Where Careless (1998) and Hare, Koenings, and Hare (1997) found gender differences in leadership, Eagly and Johnson (1990) found both the presence and absence of differences between genders. Three different kinds of studies were used to assess leadership styles:

(1) organizational studies that observed the leaders in their own environment, (2) laboratory experiments, and (3) assessment studies. The last two studies were defined as research that assessed the leadership styles of people not selected for leadership roles. In the organizational studies, men and women did not differ, contrasting the gender-stereotypical expectation that men lead in a task-oriented way and women lead in an interpersonal-oriented way; this finding differs from Hare, Koenings, and Hare (2003). In the laboratory and assessment studies, the researchers found women lead in an interpersonal way and men lead in a task-oriented way. In all three studies, there was evidence that women had the tendency to lead more democratically, whereas men lead autocratically. These findings were interpreted through social role theory. As mentioned earlier, social role theory is the principle that men and women behave differently in social situations and take on different roles due to society's expectations. Thus, the organizational study offers more validity when studying the nature of gender and leadership. One of the key components of the study is women lead in a more democratic way. Democratic leadership is a characteristic of transformational style of leadership that Careless (1998) says women more commonly display.

Based on the literature about gender and leadership, the researcher developed a proposition that will establish a framework for analyzing the value of female leadership. Proposition 2: Female leaders will conduct their leadership role in a more transformational way whereas men will lead in a transactional manner.

Using this proposition to analyze valued leadership styles, we can assess if women are perceived as having a desired leadership style and thus disproving biological determinism (the idea that women just don't have what it takes to lead) as a barrier to advancement. Fondas (1997) further shows us that the leadership styles women traditionally display *are* a desired style of management. In her research, Fondas (1997) described a mechanism known as management writing, used to disseminate and legitimate a management idea. It examines the nature of the language used in management writings and the implication of failing to label the idea by its name: feminization. Fondas (1997) looked at three ideas that writers have recently explored to help improve an organization's effectiveness: (1) managing for excellence, (2) working in teams, and (3) re-engineering. Books and articles describing these ideas provide suggestions for managers to implement such ideas. A common thread among these writings recommends a style of management that is traditionally feminine. The feminist perspective known as "women's voice" and a poststructuralist feminist perspective critique these writings. These two perspectives demonstrate that management theory is not gender-neutral and there are distinct differences.

### ***Barriers from the top***

Literature on leadership values indicates women have amiable leadership traits and commonly lead in a democratic and transformational way. Why, then, is there a perceived glass ceiling that prevents women from reaching the top? There are two main barriers based on selection and self-selection. According to the perspective of selection, women are less attracted to management jobs because of their weaker masculine culture

preferences — that is, women do not have the same competitive edge as men (Fagenson, 1990). The second barrier stems from the desire to maintain a work-life balance, protecting their home life from the stress and time that management-level positions require. Scholars acknowledge that 21st century work patterns that contribute to a tug-of-war between work-life balance include increasing numbers of women in the workforce (Baimforth & Gardner 2006). Since women are traditionally primary caretakers and have biological ties to children (pregnancy, nursing, etc), striking the desired balance between work and home poses challenge, especially when leadership roles require an intense dedication to work. For example, providing lactation rooms for nursing mothers or refrigerators to store breast milk are a few examples of supporting women with families. Glass & Estes (1997) state that women's entrance in the labor force in large numbers has exacerbated incompatibilities between work and family.

The sexual division of labor spawned by the development of industrial capitalism in the nineteenth century has given way to a new demographic reality – one in which the responsibilities of workers to provide primary physical care to their dependents are no longer segregated from their responsibilities to provide financially for their families (p. 289).

According to a 2000 *Worklife* article, managers have a crucial role in supporting a work-life balance and need to find ways to encourage balanced behavior without employees feeling guilty. Restructuring the work-force and implementing more progressive policies (on-site day care, flex-time, etc.) will allow both men and women to succeed in the home and in the workplace, showing dedication to both spheres. Through redesigning work processes, shifting organizational culture or integrating work-life initiatives with business

strategies and human resource systems, management can support work-life balance (Jacobson & Kaye, 1993).

As long as company policies emphasize the need to sacrifice home life for the job through a rigid organizational structure and inflexible policies, women will continue to be a minority at the top (Glass & Estes, 1997). Flexplace and flextime, a concept that gives control over to the employee regarding the time and place work is done are structural solutions that will prevent women from exiting the workforce (Hill, Hawkins, Ferris, & Weitzman, 2001). Besides these larger structural policies, programs like assistance with daycare or providing lactation rooms would easily address common problems for working families. While women are responsible for their own advancement, they are also victims of a discriminating organizational structure that discourages them from management positions (Van Vianen & Fisher, 2002). Intersectionality perspectives would say it is this patriarchal capitalist structure that prevents equal opportunities for women in the workplace.

This work-life balance literature brings us to another proposition regarding the way female and male leaders perceive work-life balance.

Proposition 3: Both male and female leaders will perceive work-life balance as a positive, but will not necessarily see themselves having a crucial role in supporting that behavior.

This proposition suggests that while managers do support the *idea* of work-life balance, their organization's policies does not foster a supportive work-life culture that make it possible for women with families to have it all.

## **Female Leadership In Public Relations**

### ***Building a theory in public relations leadership***

Previous studies build toward a leadership theory for female public relations practitioners. First, public leadership works within a worldview of transactional, or authoritarian, leadership, but it functions on a situational level that favors transformational, or charismatic, leadership (Aldoory & Toth, 2002). Careless (1998) contends that women may be more suited to leadership roles in public relations because of similarities in feminine traits and transformational leadership styles. Yet organizational culture, socialized gender stereotypes, and business and economic environments may prevent many women from taking on leadership roles.

A comparative analysis of survey responses of Public Relations Student Society of America members, conducted in 1979 and 1991, found that patterns of gender salary discrimination and gender role segregation might be declining in public relations. Dozier and Broom (1995) credit the U.S. feminist movement for this evolution. They also found that female public relations professionals who broke through the glass ceiling are now making monetary gains. Dozier and Broom (1995) noted this progress does not detect gender parity. An influx of women in the field will put pressure on the organizational structure to promote more women to leadership roles (Dozier & Broom, 1995).

### *How women in public relations lead*

Women in public relations leadership roles demonstrate a combination of masculine and feminine characteristics: assertiveness, empathy for subordinates, and use of logical rather than emotional arguments (Aldoory, 1998). Findings show these leaders demonstrate a mix of two-way (i.e. a more transformational/democratic style) and one-way (i.e. autocratic) communication when responding to staff. Public relations educators tend to use more two-way communications and often find compromise to resolve conflicts (Aldoory, 1998).

An important part of female leadership is the mentor-protégé relationship because it lends valuable information to the way women lead as mentors and how that mentoring affects career advancements and opportunities for women (Pompper & Adams, 2006). From a survey of 40 public relations practitioners, Pompper and Adams (2006) found mentoring reflects and perpetuates gendered social roles. For example, females offered high levels of psychosocial support (i.e. friendship, counseling, acceptance and confirmation) to each other, while males offered their fellow males greater levels of career support (i.e. sponsorship, exposure, visibility, coaching and challenging assignments).

Interestingly, men offered women subordinates psychological support and women leaders offered male subordinates career support. This indicates that women leaders are just as capable of offering helpful career advice as male leaders, but only do so for junior level men. For women of color, the problem is not the quality of mentoring they receive, but a

lack of mentorship. In a survey asking women of color which of the following do you perceive as potential barriers to professional advancement, 47 percent indicated not having a mentor was a barrier, (Wilson, Guitierrez & Chao, 2003). This supports the importance of mentoring in public relations management and the how women leaders mentor subordinates.

The literature suggested female practitioners should offer the same amount and same quality of career mentoring that males receive in order to reach the highest levels of public relations management (Pompper & Adams, 2006). Based on this, the researcher developed a fourth proposition that could explain why women and men are not equal in public relations leadership.

Proposition 4: It is the gender of the subordinate, not the mentor, that affects what kind of mentoring an employee receives.

### ***Future Professionals' Perceptions of Women in Public Relations***

A recent study involving members of the Public Relations Student Society of America found future practitioners are uncertain about issues related to gender and work-life balance. These findings suggest female students perceive women in the field are paid less than men for comparable work. On the other hand, men tend to believe gender discrimination in public relations has been eradicated. These findings are particularly significant because they apply to the field's future practitioners (Sha & Toth, 2005).

Based on this study, and other literature, the final proposition provides a framework for attitudes about gender discrimination.

Proposition 5: Women in the industry will have stronger opinions about gender discrimination, whereas men will be less likely to acknowledge that there is a problem.

Such perceptions could lead to automatic disadvantages for women by causing insecurity and a lack of motivation for women (Fagenson, 1990). In addition, successful women might be more inclined to hire and promote men because women hold societal attitudes that they are not as career-motivated. If the increasingly feminized public relations profession is to change, it needs to start with educational tools that public relations faculty can use in preparing students to enter the public relations field with solutions (Sha & Toth, 2005).

### **Literature Summary**

In short, this literature review provides a summary of the research and a coherent understanding of how gender orientation affects leadership styles in public relations.

Applying feminist theory to public relations management, one sees that liberal feminist perspectives attempt to achieve equality by encouraging equal representation in the work force (Van Zoonen, 1996). Going beyond equal representation, the liberal feminist perspective pushes women to assume matching leadership styles to masculine counterparts to achieve equality in leadership roles. While this perspective allows some women to break through the glass ceiling, it devalues feminine leadership styles (Hon,

1995). Rather than adapt to the current system, Hon (1995) believes researchers should develop a feminist perspective specifically tailored to public relations—one that restructures the organizational system in such a way that “the feminine” is valued in management.

Research conducted in management and gender-valued leadership traits are those that are feminine and mostly women possess feminine traits (i.e. democratic, egalitarian, transformational, charismatic and empathetic) (Dennis & Kunkel, 2004; Hare, Koenings, & Hare, 1997). Nevertheless, these are only perceptions, and perceptions do not lead to promotions (Hon, 1995). For example, even female managers perceive other women as having struggles with work-life balance, and are just as likely as male managers to give promotions to male employees instead of female employees (Careless, 1998). Another reason for women to opt for male hires and promotions is to diversify the predominantly feminine workplace and gain more prestige for the industry (Aldoory, 2002).

Female public relations leaders usually combine both masculine and feminine characteristics in managing their subordinates, but their leadership style tends to be more transformational than their male counterparts (Aldoory 1998). In regards to protégés, women leaders extend more of a friendly mentorship role to other women (Pompper & Adams 2006). Male leaders in public relations, on the other hand, offer advice about advancement and career success (Pompper & Adams, 2006). Wrigley (2003) says this has to do with the “Queen Bees” that emerge and feel threatened by helping another woman move up the career ladder for fear of hurting themselves and their profession.

While there has been a wealth of research on the glass ceiling and reasons women do not fill leadership roles in business professions, there needs to be more research tailored towards the lack of women leaders in public relations, a highly feminized profession (Aldoory & Toth, 2002). In addition to learning from previous studies, the researcher must look at the leadership traits of women who broke the glass ceiling and assess whether female public relations leaders are leading the way for other women to break the glass ceiling.

### **Chapter 3**

#### **Research Question**

“ What are the perceptions of female leadership roles at a major PR firm?”

The overarching research question will help test the following propositions introduced in the literature review:

Proposition 1: Issues like work-life balance and the “queen bee syndrome” are two examples of how gender might filter decisions. Specifically, both women and men will tend to favor men for promotions and hiring due to this filtering.

Proposition 2: Female leaders will conduct their leadership role in a more transformational way whereas men will lead in a transactional manner.

Proposition 3: Both male and female leaders will perceive work-life balance as a positive, but will not necessarily see themselves having a crucial role in supporting that behavior.

Proposition 4: It is the gender of the subordinate, not the mentor, that affects the mentoring relationship .

Proposition 5: Women in the industry will have stronger opinions about gender discrimination, whereas men will be less likely to acknowledge that there is a problem.

## **Chapter 4**

### **Methodology**

The best method for this project was a case study. Since the research question examines perceptions, rich detail and thick description from 12 in-depth interviews and a participant observation is the most appropriate. To protect the identity and interests of the firm, this study replaced all names and refers to the firm as MW.

The study took place between October 15, 2007 through April 9, 2008 at a top five public relations agency located in the Midwest (the dates reflect time of initial contact to actual interviews). Based on the *Holmes Report* and trade publications like *Ad Age*, a major advertising or public relations agency has billing power of 100-million plus. MW fits that requirement and is also highly ranked in trade publications based on size (largest communications firm in the world), global capabilities (80 offices world-wide), prestige (consistent winner of the highest awards in the industry, like the Silver Anvil), Fortune 500 clients and number of employees (the headquarters claims more than 400 employees). The study looked at MW's headquarters and flagship office, home to its CEO and other major leadership.

Besides choosing a major player in the public relations industry, this is an environment with professionals who had varied experiences leading up to MW. Thus, even though the

researcher focused on employees at one firm, these employees provided perspectives about an entire career beyond just one agency.

Another reason for choosing this particular agency stems from the company culture. Its Web site, trade magazines and consumer magazines rate it as a progressive company with domestic partnership benefits, paid parent leave, paid sabbaticals and other attractive incentives. These incentives create a family-friendly culture that reduces barriers most women face in other corporate environments. These values demonstrate a consciousness about gender issues, which will hopefully provide more salient and interesting research about this subject. These incentives and the culture is why *Working Mother* magazine rated it as one of the best places to work.

By doing a case study at a company that is a leader in the industry and offers woman-friendly benefits, we will have an interesting analysis of how gender affects a major public relations agency's leadership.

### ***In-depth Interviews***

According to Stacks (2002) in-depth interviews are best for answering questions of definition, value, and policy. Also, this method is best when the researcher has identified people whose knowledge or experience in an event will shed significant light on the specific research topic (Stacks 2002). Researching about experiences in a career is not suited toward experiments in a sterile lab, but requires face-to-face interaction in order to achieve authenticity and elaboration. One-on-one interviews will allow respondents to

reflect on their own experiences, yielding rich, contextual information to help answer the “why factor” in the research question (Pompper & Adams 2006). Hon (1995) suggests that using long-interviews gives women the opportunity to speak freely and for themselves about gender issues, making this a better method than focus groups which could elicit group think (Broom & Dozier 1990). Using depth interviews is a perfect fit for researching how public relations professionals see gender affecting leadership.

Hon (1995) points out that a limitation to this method is that there is a possibility of “misinterpretation of cultural differences and observer effects.” Hon suggests collaborating with participants while writing up the findings to ensure there is no distortion of meaning. Another consideration worth noting is the sensitivity of this research and how it might constrain responses (Denzin & Lincoln, 2003). Denzin (1998) explains “gender filters knowledge;” that is the sex of the interviewer and respondent do make a difference, “as the interview takes place within the cultural boundaries of a paternalistic social system in which masculine identities are differentiated from feminine ones.” Thus, if time and costs permit, it would be advantageous to match the sex of the interviewer with the sex of the interview subject. This strategy will hopefully elicit more open and forthcoming responses without fear of seeming prejudiced.

The interview subjects will consist of 12 MW public relations counselors. Six subordinates and six managers will provide the insights to views on management and further breaking down the groups to three men and three women for each experience level will help us discover how gender plays a role. The six subordinates will be people

with three-five years of experience in public relations. The managers will have at least 10-15 years of experience and fulfill roles no lower than a vice president position.

After conducting preparatory work (identifying who at MW the researcher should interview), the next steps included setting the location, creating the interview schedule and analyzing the data (Stacks 2002).

The interview schedule, or list of questions consisted of a few close-ended topical questions (moving from one set of prepared questions to the next) and a majority of probe questions to follow-up the topical questions. Using probe questions took the interview into different areas and often provided extremely rich information (which is the goal of this research project) (Stacks 2002).

Stacks (2002) suggest interviewing in the subject's home or office. Since the researcher is working out of another city, the researcher conducted phone interviews during office hours. (Pompper & Adams 2006). This will provide a comfortable setting for the subject. The 12 interviews consisted of 60 minutes with 6 subordinates and 6 executives. The question topics for subordinates are: 1) job information, 2) mentoring experiences, 3) perceptions, about leadership styles, 4) work-life balance, 5) gender discrimination, 6) diversity in the workplace.

The question topics for managers were 1) job information, 2) mentoring, 3) perceptions about leadership styles 4) work-life balance 5) consideration for personnel decisions 6) gender discrimination 7) diversity in the workplace.

For specific questions, please see Appendix A and Appendix B.

The interviewer recorded the responses (with the subject's consent) and transcribed for analysis. The analysis helped identify common themes and "shared mental categories among participants," (Hon 1995).

### ***Design Limitations***

Generalizing these results is not possible and cannot apply to every public relations agency or every public relations professional; however, the intentions of the research are not to generalize, but to develop a foundational understanding of why certain perceptions exist. From this, future research can take place and use quantitative methods to generalize.

Another limitation is the sensitivity of the topic. Asking professionals to discuss how their gender has affected their leadership and how that has fit in with their company's culture provides challenges when it comes to explicit details and true feelings on the matter. To counter this, the researcher will give the subjects anonymity. Pompper & Adams (2006) applied this practice to their interviews.

A limitation to conducting phone interviews is that the researcher will not have face to face interaction that Stacks (2002) says will provide non-verbal information about the subject: how they decorate the office, the number of gatekeepers they use to keep others away (receptionists, lack of communication devices, etc), where they chose to sit in

relation to you, facial expressions, etc. While this information is not completely pertinent, it could provide additional and telling insights that a phone interview cannot.

Another limitation is time and money. To effectively carry out this research, it would be best if someone besides the researcher carried out the interviews for two reasons. The first reason is it is touchy ground for someone who was an intern to interview past coworkers about sensitive issues that could reflect poorly on the company or other employees. Secondly, if the subject is male, more honest answers might come forth with another male interviewing the subject. Despite these issues, the research will achieve a detailed explanation of the sought after “why,” providing a solid stage for further research.

### ***Design Overview***

By conducting a case study with in-depth interviews at one of the premiere public relations agencies in the world, we had a unique opportunity to explore the perceptions and attitudes industry professionals have about gender’s effects in public relations management. Using qualitative research methods provides rich detail about the “why” in this issue that typically utilized quantitative methods. We can go beyond simply knowing that gender affects leadership by learning “how,” “in what ways” and “why.” In short, this research hopes to do more than simply add to academia- it hopes to significantly contribute to industry policies by shedding light on how gender affects leadership in public relations.

## Chapter 5 Results

The researcher conducted 12 in-depth phone interviews with MW public relations counselors of varying levels (account supervisors through senior vice presidents and senior partners) and diverse professional backgrounds (journalism, public relations, marketing, politics, etc). The interviews presented the counselors with an opportunity to elaborate on their experiences and to add qualitative data to an area that has been dominated with quantitative research. In particular, emphasis was given to collecting deep incites from respondents and eliciting their reactions. The responses have been separated by topic and include the most revealing quotes.

The topics for all interview subjects include: 1) mentoring relationships 2) perceptions about leadership styles 3) work-life balance 4) gender discrimination and 5) diversity in the workplace. One additional topic explored with the managers include: 6) consideration for personnel decisions (hiring and promoting).

### ***Mentoring Relationships: Friendships vs. Mentorship***

The group of subordinates expressed that there was no formal mentoring program established and that they sought out mentors that had similar career paths as a primary characteristic and similar personalities as a secondary characteristic.

One interesting finding that emerged from questions about mentoring is that the junior level women desired nurturing mentors whereas men sought out mentors that they respected for their work.

One woman said this when asked about her mentors:

It's important to not only ask me about my personal life, but also share about their lives. Peggy was a great mentor because she would vent to me about work-life balance; but we were in it together. She was a real person, not just a role model.

Another woman said,

When I first started at the Cardinals, there was a woman who was basically an admin for media relations. It was my first job, and she taught me about work and life. It wasn't just about work-related things and getting ahead. It was about being a grown-up, having a balanced life. She was a mentor in a comprehensive way.

A male counterpart's response was much more work-related than personal when it came to mentoring relationships:

Over the last year, I developed a relationship with a colleague in New York. I worked very closely with her since she had media experience (CBS news producer). I learned how producers react to pitches and learned about their mentality.

This was the trend among the men's responses. They discussed how they valued their mentors work-experience and professional guidance. Many of the women looked towards the men in their groups as people with whom they could discuss their careers and work-life balance issues. The men did the same (though they would not necessarily discuss work-life balance issues regardless of the mentor's gender – a finding that supports the 2006 Pompper and Adams study). What trumped gender were similar career paths, goals and family life. For example, one woman who was married and wanted to one day have

children thought it was important to seek out a mentor who led that path. Based on the biographical information provided during the interviews, the single and childless counselors did not care about a mentor's personal life as much as their career path when seeking out mentors.

When asked about the mentoring roles the managers served, all stated that mentoring should come out of natural relationships, not formal programs. One of the male senior vice presidents and partners said, "I think being a mentor has to happen naturally. If someone was to assign me to a mentor position, I think that would be uncomfortable. A great composite of a great manager and leader is a great mentor. I relish and enjoy mentoring, but I don't give a designated 30 minutes of mentoring to someone. It just happens naturally." A female senior vice president and partner stated, "I can't say that there has been any formal situations. The best mentoring relationships are ones that happen naturally."

Most of the managers commented that they mentored both men and women. The women typically were sought out more heavily by other young women whereas the men were sought out equally among young men and women; however, young fathers were typically sought out by other men who were fathers. One female senior partner and vice president made an interesting comment regarding mentoring men. "I found that when mentoring somebody of the opposite gender, you have to be more focused on it, because it isn't as natural. It kills me to say that, but I think it is true."

As far as the kind of advice and guidance the managers would offer, men said it was mostly about career and not so much personal. The women said they give a mix of personal and career advice. One interesting note is that the childless female managers' responses indicate more of a focus on the career vs. the personal whereas the women with children emphasized more of the personal in their advice.

***Perceptions about Leadership Styles: Personality makes all the difference***

Overall, the subordinates appreciated transformational leaders who gave them autonomy, but were still available for help and guidance when needed. "I appreciate a manager that would give me the opportunity to own something from top to bottom. When I work an inch deep and a mile wide I am not as effective. But when I can put my arms around it, I can do well."

"I see it as a leader of people, not projects...have to let some of the work they do go. They have to be such a good teacher that they can teach those to do work to their standards and can delegate and pass the baton so you can rise up to be a leader yourself one day."

Another key attribute according to the junior level counselors was relatability: "A down to earth person, someone that doesn't take position of leadership and let it go to their head. Someone I see who treats me not as an underling, but as a colleague who I can have a beer with after work. Those are the people I think we stay loyal to. There are several people I will bend over backwards for because they have those traits."

The junior counselors inferred that these traits could be seen in both the men and women that manage at MW. One woman mentioned that though these favorable qualities are in both men and women, the less favorable qualities are more associated with women, “There are a few women at MW who are seen by both men and women as someone who could be kind of bitch, but then you get past that and they are just like any other leader.”

The managers interviewed embodied the sort of quality leadership described by their junior team members. The leaders described themselves as transformational. One of the male managers responded that, “I’m pretty collaborative. I work peer to peer. I roll up my sleeves and work with you, not a top down sort of person. I also approach serious problems with a sense of humor.” A female manager responded with “I would hope I lead by example, but also leading as a member of a team as opposed to directing a team.” Another woman said, “I am pretty laid back. It is funny because I don’t think of myself as a senior vice-president. I think of myself as in the trenches still. But I like to give people opportunities to own thing. I really try not to micromanage... love to get people’s opinions. I don’t want to be a dictator. I like collaboration so everyone feels involved in the process.”

Though the managers are self-reporting and possibly feeding the researcher answers that shed a positive light on them, these descriptions were further reinforced by the mentions made during the subordinates’ interviews. When asked about examples of good leaders, time and time again the subordinates mentioned managers the researcher interviewed. Thus, these leaders truly live and breath transformational leadership.

But these shining examples of leadership are just some of managers described. It was clear that this agency does not necessarily breed prototypes of leaders. There is great variation. A male manager mentioned, “I am probably a little more collegial. I would be one of the more friendly ones, with more patience. But that’s just my personality. We are what we are.” This manager said he thinks leadership style is attributed to personalities rather than gender.

***Work-life balance: Personal choice or in the hands of the agency?***

While this study cannot conclude that the demands of agency life makes women less susceptible to taking on key leadership roles in an agency (head of a practice group, etc), it does point out the concern among the interview subjects. For example, the junior level men did not mention work-life balance issues deterring them from advancing through the company. The married junior level women did mention that they had concerns.

If you look at the senior leadership, there were situations where the women with children had to adjust their work schedules (going part-time) around their families whereas the men did not. After having her first child at 31, a 34-year-old senior vice president found a flexible work schedule that allowed her to give her daughter the care she required while maintaining a fulfilling career. “I had a daughter about three years ago and decided to work a reduced schedule. So I talk to a lot of women about finding that balance and how to achieve that. I have a lot of people stop in my office seeking out advice about feeling buried.” Her statement indicates that even for high-ranking leaders at a top agency,

childcare ultimately falls on the shoulders of the mother. This responsibility puts pressure on women to find a balance between home and work.

To be fair, the managers and subordinates mentioned that they are seeing more of a trend among younger men to take a larger part in childcare. A senior vice president and partner was 40 when he had his first child and desired a big part in his daughter's early life.

“When my first child was born, I took a month off of work. That raised a few eyebrows. I was only a vice president and was a man. But the agency didn't fail and clients didn't fold. I had a great team. I did it again when my second child came. Men don't get paternity leave in most industries. I had a value set and the company was supportive.”

While it worked out well for the managers in this study who adjusted their schedules, they were able to do so once they were already managers. Most worked at the agency for more than 10 years and had children. “It is age and having a child that helps me go home,” said another female manager.

Though she would like to one day have kids when she has time, one female subordinate said kids shouldn't be the only reason to offer flexibility.

I have felt that because I don't have kids, my time is looked at differently. One time I was very adamant that I had a personal appointment to go to. I stated at the very beginning that I had a function when we were making plans for a meeting. Both supervisors had to cancel previous meetings because of a prior personal commitment involving their kids and then expected me to come to the third rescheduled meeting, which would cause me to miss my function. Clout and seniority was the issue. They were basically saying their personal life is more important than mine. I feel that as long as you prove yourself at work, you don't need to prove yourself by giving anything up.

Though flexible policies will help people with children continue working and advance, these policies would also help to retain talented childless young men and women who want more than just a heavy workload.

I can't speak for other agencies, but from the way I see it, it is a generational x & y thing. More emphasis needs to be put on a work-life balance. I will say to my parents that I should take all the vacation days I get, whereas my parents don't see it that way. I think that's a younger profession thing.

Besides offering flexibility for parents, one male subordinate notes that the agency is improving in its flexibility in other areas. "You can just tell by how the agency is dealing with road closures. We have been given license to have a more flexible work schedule. I am not sure if that would have happened in the past."

Another subordinate without children sees that there are situations in which the agency supports work-life balance.

My direct supervisor has always been good about it. He never contacts me when I am off. I e-mailed him about taking off additional time for a funeral after already taking off three days. It wasn't a problem. No questions asked. That is an example of flexibility. There are people who don't have that same experience...so it depends on your supervisor, who you are working for. But for me, people are pretty flexible."

### ***Gender discrimination: Sexism or Strategy?***

When asked questions about gender as a barrier in public relations, subordinates and managers responded "Not here," pointing to the examples of leadership.

I don't think I have really seen that. Looking around the agency, there are more women than men in PR. I don't think it is a drastic difference. But there are plenty of women here. A woman is the general manager. She is right here in the corporate headquarters at an international company.

But gender was a factor when working on certain clients or assignments.

“I don’t think they give me tasks based on my gender if it is not for strategic purposes. One time I was put on a project for a client that involved jewelry; but I was a girl who was engaged, I had some strategic part to play.”

Another female subordinate had similar experiences.

I was sought out for brainstorming for a jewelry client. The target demographic was women, and at times we needed to use our internal people to help pick up on what our target demographic would find interesting. I was also pulled in on an account with a woman contraceptive. There was not one male on the account or in the brainstorm. I don’t know if having male perspective would matter. It was about getting women to ask their doctors about the drug and how to trigger them.

Despite working on gender-specific accounts with all women, this same counselor is now working on something for prostate cancer, even though she is a woman.

Women were not the only ones targeted for assignments based on gender. One of the male subordinates said he was part of a “targeted e-mail” invitation to a brainstorm about paintball because he was a guy.

The counselors explained it is all strategy when they are asked to contribute to a project because of gender, race, ethnicity, etc. The company wants to be sure they are getting an accurate picture of the demographic and its perspectives.

***Diversity in the Workplace: “Diversity is a strategic weapon”***

All employees suggested the need for diversity within this field because “we have to be all things to all people,” said one of the female managers. A female subordinate said, “Frankly, there are certain people that focus on numbers, certain focus on emotions, and different personalities can win over a campaign.”

A diverse agency also provides a competitive edge in the marketplace.

It is a strategic weapon – the best thinking from different perspectives. It will help you attract the best talent. And it can be a competitive weapon when a client approaches you with a multi-cultural target. We no longer are creating programs for homogenous audiences.

The counselors mentioned that while they feel there is gender equity in public relations, racial and ethnic minorities are few in numbers. But with practice groups that target African-Americans, Asian Americans and Hispanics, MW hopes to attract diverse and talented counselors to provide guidance in those groups.

***Personnel Decisions: Talent, Big Thinking and Collaborative Spirit***

For questions revolving around personnel decisions, managers all said foundational skills like writing and excellent communication are paramount. But beyond those skills, intangible qualities also had a high place along requirements for hiring and promoting.

For example, one female manager said visionary thinking is key to advancement.

If you are really good at an industry specific task, that's good, but big picture thinking will take you pretty far. Right now, it's all about going digital. People who have been cognizant of this movement from the get-go have been going far here.

Another manager mentioned that you have to demonstrate a personal commitment to MW. Understanding the industry and embodying client service were two other popular responses.

We look for people who understand that we are in the customer service and sales business. We are a premium shop in customer service. Have to get a buzz out of serving.

One of the most important qualities is collaboration. The managers described MW as an agency with a collaborative spirit. Everything is done in teams and lone wolves just won't cut it.

## Chapter 6 Discussion

After analyzing the general patterns and trends expressed during the interviews, this section addresses how those trends fit in the five propositions set forth to help us answer our research question: “What are the perceptions of female leadership roles at a major public relations firm?”

**Proposition 1: Issues like work-life balance, “queen bee syndrome” are two examples of how gender might filter decisions. Specifically, both women and men will tend to favor men for promotions and hiring due to this filtering.**

Based on the interviews, these issues did not come into play for hiring and promotion decisions. In fact, subjects reported that as far as moving ahead in the company, it was more of a personal decision of the employee vs. the manager. The interview subjects reported that it is a certain understanding that working at a public relations agency requires a certain sacrifice and the higher up you go, the more of a sacrifice you make. Thus, a lot of people suggested that you couldn’t necessarily have both (at least right away). Those managers that climbed the corporate ladder despite family obligations established themselves first, allowing them the “right” to make time for family.

When I came back from maternity leave, I decided to have a reduced schedule with my daughter. That has been great. A lot of agencies are doing this because people are capital. And it fosters that diverse and collaborative work place. And more are doing this. It helps me be a better employee. But you also have to remember I was a VP at that time.

The claim that getting ahead and surviving at an agency is based on personality or a personal decision is hard to believe. Intersectionality would show us that a person's social location enhances opportunities for some and oppresses others. Thus, according to intersectionality, age and seniority played a part in the above woman's balance. The subject mentioned she was a vice president at the time, acknowledging that she had the seniority to take advantage of a reduced schedule. Also, her upper-middle class status made it easier to find balance than a working class woman depending on her job for necessary income. The woman interviewed did not have to worry about what a reduced work schedule would do to her monthly income because she is a salaried employee with a husband also earning an income. Thus, her age and class made it easier to stay, succeed and advance at her job more so than her personality or a personal decision to commit to the MW.

Despite the reports that it takes a certain personality to advance, the quote from the woman taking advantage of a family-friendly policy explores the idea that the firm's structure has a big part to play and managers need to acknowledge that. Corporate America must also acknowledge that traditional policies and structures are not suiting the modern employee. The researcher believes that with more and more women in high-level roles in corporate America (like the woman who took advantage of a reduced schedule), there will be a shift in attitude toward employees and policies that will help them succeed at work. For example, employers must understand that that employees want a life outside of work and will demand flexibility from their employer. If those demands are not met, they will either move on to another company or leave the industry and enter a field/sector

that fosters work-life balance. Some will leave work entirely to be home with their children. In a field dominated by women, we have to be especially mindful of that possibility and attempt to retain counselors by offering a working situation that meshes cohesively with the demands at home. A firm will lose valuable and talented employees if they do not meet the demands imposed upon them.

As far as the “queen bee syndrome,” that was not expressed by any of the interviewers. If a manager had that personality type, they interacted with both men and women that way, not just women.

**Proposition 2: Female leaders will conduct their leadership role in a more transformational way whereas men will lead in a transactional manner.**

At MW, both men and women were transactional and transformational. The leaders interviewed (who were also mentioned as outstanding leaders in the subordinate interviews) described their style as fitting in the transformational category. Many responded that personality trumped gender. This is a step away from past research that leaned towards an “either/or” point-of-view; however, it is a claim that is, again, hard to believe. Looking at this through intersectionality provides better context. It makes sense that gender is not the lone factor dictating leadership styles. How could it be when people are so much more than just their gender? People’s behavior is a composite of their gender, race, ethnicity, class, age, religion, sexuality, family life, education, childhood, etc. This composite makes up a person’s total self and shapes their personality.

Intersectionality looks at how all of these factors interplay. The researcher believes it is more than personality, as the interview subjects responded. The company culture fosters a

certain leadership style. Thus, the culture of corporate American is more of a factor than simply looking at personality. For example, corporate America has been up until the last few decades shaped by white men and a place where white men still find themselves in more leadership roles than other groups (women, ethnic minorities, etc). This culture allows men to adapt easier and advance faster. While the public relations work force is predominately women, it works within corporate America and serves corporate clients that are still very much male-dominated. Intersectionality puts the idea that “certain personalities survive here.” Well, it seems that certain social locations is what really determines success in corporate culture. From finding like-mentors to feeling comfortable with the people you work with, factors beyond personality shape work experiences and leadership styles.

**Proposition 3: Both male and female leaders will perceive work-life balance as a positive, but will not necessarily see themselves having a crucial role in supporting that behavior.**

The managers said it was important to have work-life balance and find it easier to achieve now than when they were more junior. Despite the importance that the managers place on it, they see work-life balance as a personal decision. The subordinates felt that work-life balance was hard to achieve when the agency requires at least 50 hours a week and to be constantly connected. So while there is a mentality and a personality naturally driven to the agency life, subordinates felt that the agency leadership could do more to encourage balance by allowing people to work at home more often or giving everyone a PDA.

One female vice president who sought out a reduced work schedule mentioned: “Agency life is a bit of a grind. Some are built for it and some are not.” But it isn’t so black and white. Her own actions show that it isn’t as simple as being built for it or not. Her lifestyle did not fit into the constructs of the agency world, so she changed her agency world so she could fit her personal life within new constructs. If agencies truly encouraged and fostered a flexible work environment for all employees (not just senior management), then this attitude that “agency life is a grind” and “you are either built for it or not” might change and allow room for talented professionals with personal lives. One junior-level counselor said that while any job in any industry could put strains on a personal life, it is especially hard to maintain work-life balance working 50-60 hours a week at the minimum (and with 80-90 hour weeks during high-demand periods, it is almost impossible to maintain balance).

Perhaps we will see more structural changes as more and more women come into senior leadership positions and have the power to make changes. The women interviewed had stronger opinions about work-life balance and intersectionality provides a good framework for understanding this difference. All interview subjects were upper-middle class. For the men, their class made it possible for their wives to stay home and take care of their children, relieving the men from an additional strain of managing daycare issues. The upper-middle class MW women interviewed did not give up their careers when they had children and felt the pressure of finding daycare solutions and balance with a two-income household. For the men, their class benefited their domestic division of labor. For the women, class did not provide the same benefits because their education and career put

them in a place of professional success that they wanted to continue. Also, the women still maintained their social location at home (primary caretaker), providing additional challenges for them at work. The researcher believes that as more women assume major leadership roles, work-life balance policies will be more prevalent and widespread throughout the firm.

While there will always be those workaholics who you have to pry from their computers, an organization with flexible hours can be a big help for both men and women pursuing leadership opportunities.

**Proposition 4: It is the gender of the subordinate, not the mentor, that affects the mentoring relationship.**

As shown in the Pompper and Adams study (2006), when the mentoring relationship is two women, there is a focus on personal issues. When the relationship is mixed, then it is the gender of the manager (not the subordinate) that dictates the kind of advice given (however, that could be because the protégée seeking advice goes to a certain mentor knowing that their advice is skewed in a certain direction). When it is two men, there is a focus on the career, an insight that again supports the Pompper and Adams results.

Overall, the junior-level women are interested in a personal relationship with their mentor that delves into personal issues. The women mentors seemed to expect that is what they are there for, in addition to career advice. Male mentors expressed that they are sought out more for strict career advice first and foremost. Intersectionality helps explain this finding. Because of their location within a masculine, capitalist society, women feel they

are faced with additional challenges and felt more of a pressure to resolve personal issues at home that will affect work. For example, the women with children had husbands who also worked and had to find daycare for their children while the men interviewed had wives that stayed at home and watched their children. In order to succeed at work, the women at all levels felt the need to find solutions that allowed them to be both caretaker and professional in corporate America. It would be best to evaluate the motives for wanting this personal advice. By looking into those motives, the firm could better serve the needs of these employees by adjusting their policies that cause distress.

**Proposition 5: Women in the industry will have stronger opinions about gender discrimination, whereas men will be less likely to acknowledge that there is a problem.**

Surprisingly, both men and women of all levels did not acknowledge that there is any disparity or discrimination at their agency. A reason for that could be that women hold many of the key leadership positions in the practice groups and accounts. These are the people that have the most contact with the employees. One subordinate put it like this:

I don't think men are discriminated against by any means, or women...from the perspective my day-to-day interactions don't come with the CEO, my interactions come with Melissa Allison, Mary Anne and Kate. For me, the women that I interact with on a daily basis that I look to as role models are the individuals doing the PR work. The CEO and CFO are doing a lot of behind the scenes stuff. Though they are the leaders of the agency, I don't look at them as much as leaders as I do the account team leaders. I don't feel like it is an old boys club.

Perhaps it is because the managers and subordinates do not encounter the head leadership at the agency is the reason why they do not see a disparity throughout the industry.

Nevertheless, it is interesting that there are so many examples of women leaders noted and praised during the interviews. When discussing the composition of leadership, one manager said that while the industry in general has a large percentage of male leaders compared to the percentage of subordinates, “MW bucks that system. There are examples all throughout the network. Who is the GM in Chicago? Who is the GM and regional manager at the corporate headquarters at the world’s largest and most decorated agency? Who just became GM in Kansas City? Who is New York’s GM? Women. This agency is the best, and I’m thrilled that MW does such a great job recruiting and giving women opportunities to lead.”

MW does a great job recruiting and giving women opportunities because its senior leadership truly values its employees. It demonstrates this by working with employees and their career paths to ensure both sides are getting what they want out of a situation. If someone is unhappy because they are not spending enough time at home, MW’s leadership will support that employee and give them flexibility. On the flip side, it does want people to work hard and give it their all every day. But the only way to ensure that positive outcome, the firm must keep employees happy. And judging from the interview responses, these counselors have a great pride in their company. They have good days, and they have plenty of bad days. But they come back day after day because they enjoy what they do, they are good at what they do, and they respect the company they do it for. This positive culture and flexibility is attractive to high-achieving women that crave this partnership with their employer. With their social location as upper middle class women

in a dual income relationship, many women do not need to work at MW. They want to work at MW.

## **Chapter 7**

### **Limitations and Future Research**

#### ***Limitations***

There were a number of limitations to this study that provide opportunities for future research. For transparency purposes, the researcher has a previous relationship with the firm. She interned at the specific profit-center for one summer and worked at another profit-center while conducting the interviews. Some of the subjects she never met. She did have a limited relationship with a handful of the subjects (three of the junior-level employees, to be specific).

Another limitation concerns the meaning behind the data. The researcher cannot generalize the data because the findings came from twelve interviews. These interviews were from one agency in one region. Take a different agency or a different region and you have a totally different set of attitudes and perspectives about these issues. Also, due to the constraints set forth from the agency, MW hand-selected the twelve interview subjects. The general manager and administrative assistant identified the individuals and the researcher recruited them through an email.

This research addresses a complex subject when it discusses sensitive and personal issues like gender discrimination. Naturally, many people are hesitant to discuss such things with a complete stranger. This could hinder subjects from relaying how they truly feel.

#### ***Future Research***

The study's limitations provide an opportunity for future research. The study could be expanded to include quantitative data. This would require looking at a variety of agencies across the nation.

Also, one interview subject mentioned that while the company and the industry is good at attracting women, it fails in recruiting ethnic minorities. Future research using intersectionality as frame to understand why there are not many black women (as one example) in public relations would be a fitting study that would add value to the literature on this subject.

Judging from the interview responses, examining how family situations play into leadership would lead to a definitive relationship between career advancement differences for men and women with children and groups of leaders without children. An idea coming from this research is to look at the relationships between work-life balance and employees with children vs. employees without and how that affects career satisfaction and advancement.

## **Chapter 8 Conclusion**

The goal of this research was to examine defining characteristics of female leadership and identify the factors that influence how women achieve equality with men in public relations leadership, looking through the lens of feminist theory. Using intersectionality as a lens, the researcher took the approach that there are many factors that contribute to disparity; however, the research did not explicitly dig deep into key factors like race and class, but was able to elicit responses that could be interpreted as factors to explain the propositions. There is room for future research that further explores class, race and sexual preference.

The research contributed to the theory by finding additional factors that can cause disparity that are not commonly discussed. The 12 depth interviews with public relations professionals at a top agency found:

1) A lack of acknowledgement that there is disparity between men and women in leadership roles among men and women of all levels. This lack of knowledge has potential to hinder women's advancement. If people do not acknowledge that there is a disparity, nothing will be done to correct it.

2) Leadership styles depend on individual personalities made up of a composite of experiences and factors rather than just gender; thus, women are just as likely to garner

positive attention and accolades for dynamic leadership as men.

3) There is an acceptance of long work hours that restricts advancement of people with family commitments. This acceptance was internalized as a personal choice rather than enforced agency practice. Being that this is seen as a personal choice, instead of pushing back and thinking of creative solutions like working part-time, working from home, etc., the junior female counselors see that they have to make a choice between leadership and a personal life.

4) The “queen-bee syndrome” and work-life balance issues were not factors for management’s decisions for hiring and promoting; however, work-life balance was mentioned as a factor influencing junior level counselor’s decisions to pursue leadership positions in the first place.

5) For women, mentoring was a time to vent, discuss personal issues and how those intersect with work. For men, mentoring was a time to discuss career opportunities. While it seems that women are receiving less career-related advice, they said they relish opportunities to discuss how to overcome personal issues that other women have faced because those were life lessons that helped them cope with issues at work. Perhaps professionals should not evaluate the type of advice and mentoring given to protégées, but evaluate what it is that motivates the mentoring. If women are struggling with work-life balance and look to mentors to help deal with these issues, perhaps the agency should evaluate how it approaches this issue for junior employees.

The study found that the two largest factors that negatively affect the way women achieve equality with men in public relations leadership is work-life balance and a lack of knowledge or awareness that disparity exists throughout the industry. At MW, the CEO and other top leaders are male, but interview subjects expressed that there was equality in leadership overall. To establish a definitive relationship between these factors and whether they truly influence how women achieve equality with men in public relations opens up opportunities for further research, including quantitative studies that will generalize the insights to a larger population.

The study also gave a hopeful look to the future with a move toward improving work-life balance attitudes, a sense of discrimination-free atmosphere and many positive examples of respected female leaders that embody admirable leadership qualities.

MW wasn't perfect. Though some of the managers boasted of positive policies, many subordinates did not feel that the agency promotes work-life balance. But other than the demands from its employees, this agency radiated a sense of collaboration; transformational leadership, discrimination-free environment and other factors that positively influence the way women achieve leadership with men in public relations. In that respect, MW was a shining example of strong, powerful and talented women leaders. In the words of one male manager, "We are the best in our industry. We are the most decorated, have the highest retention rate of clients, have above industry average of churn rate and have some of the most talented women in the business. I derive great satisfaction to being a part of that. That is freakin' cool.



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## **Appendix A**

### **Questions for Subordinates**

#### **Questions**

- 1) How long have you been working for MW?
- 2) What are your main responsibilities?
- 3) Where did you work before MW?
- 4) Describe any experiences with mentoring programs (informal or formal).
- 5) What makes a good mentor?
- 6) Describe a person in your experience who has been a good mentor?
- 7) What do you feel makes a good leader in public relations? Why?
- 8) Are there any examples from your experience of a person who is a good leader in public relations? What qualities did they possess? Describe their leadership style.
- 9) Describe your ideal manager. What qualities would they possess that would make you most comfortable working for them?
- 10) What qualities lead to competence in public relations? How?
- 11) Do you feel a career in public relations allows for work-life balance?
- 12) Do you feel managers support a work-life balance culture? How?
- 13) Describe a manager in your experience who has supported a work-life balance? What did they do to encourage and support that balance?
- 14) Describe a manager in your experience who did not support a work-life balance? What did they do to that made them unsupportive?

- 15) Do you feel that managers make assumptions about your willingness to take on challenges based on your gender?
- 16) Do you feel that managers give you tasks and assignments based on your gender?
- 17) Do you think that there are barriers based on gender in public relations? If so, how do you get past those barriers?
- 18) What do you think leads to equality between gender in public relations?
- 19) Why is it good to have a diverse workplace?
- 20) Any other thoughts?

**Biographical:**

Job title:

Age:

Marital Status:

Children:

Hometown (town you spent your most formidable years):

## **Appendix B**

### **Questions for Managers**

#### **Questions:**

- 1) How long have you worked at MW?
- 2) What are your main responsibilities?
- 3) What sort of tasks do you do each day?
- 4) Where did you work prior to MW?
- 5) What do you think makes a competent public relations professional?
- 6) Describe your ideal employee.
- 7) In your experience, when making hiring decisions, what are your main considerations?
- 8) In your experience, when making promoting decisions, what are your main considerations?
- 9) What is the best part about being a manager?
- 10) What is the worst part about being a manger?
- 11) Describe your personal leadership style.
- 12) Do you think your leadership style differs from other managers in public relations? If so, how?
- 13) Describe your experiences as a mentor (either formal or informal)?
- 14) What sort of advice would you offer your protégés?
- 15) Describe your most promising protégés.
- 16) Describe what you like to do with your free time.

- 17) Do you feel that as a leader in public relations you can achieve work-life balance? How?
- 18) Do you feel it easier for some leaders to achieve work-life balance than others? Why?
- 19) How do you feel about employees who prioritize family over career?
- 20) How do you feel about employees who prioritize career over family?
- 21) Should people who prioritize family over their career receive the same opportunities for advancement? Why or why not?
- 22) Do you think that there are barriers based on gender in public relations? If so, how do you get past those barriers?
- 23) Has your gender been an obstacle in your career? If so, how?
- 24) Has your gender provided any benefits in your career? If so, how?
- 25) Do you find people of the same sex to be an ally in your current work environment? Why?
- 26) Do you find people of the opposite sex to be an ally in your current work environment? Why?
- 27) What sort of advice would you give to women entering public relations?
- 28) What sort of advice would you give a man entering public relations?
- 29) What do you think creates equality between genders in public relations?
- 30) Why is it good to have a diverse work place?
- 31) Any other thoughts or comments you would like to add?

**Biographical:**

Job Title:

Years of Industry Experience:

Age:

Marital Status:

Number of children:

Hometown (town you spent your most formidable years):

## VITA

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