

EMPLOYEES' PERCEPTION ON LEADERSHIP EFFECTIVENESS OF FEMALE LEADERS IN WORK ORGANISATIONS

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ABSTRACT

It has been long argued that female leaders exhibit a distinctive and effective leadership style. However, the insignificant percentage of female managers at senior management level has raised questions of what defines an effective female leader in the employees' perspectives.

This study adopts a qualitative approach using in-depth interviews to solicit employees' perception of leadership effectiveness of female leaders. Farey's (1993) Transactional and Transformational Leadership were used to infer the leadership styles and behaviour of these leaders. Results revealed that effective female leaders in Malaysia are more likely to exhibit transformational leadership styles and have high concern for both production and people. The research also shows that different work contexts do influence employees' perceptions on the leaders' effectiveness.

INTRODUCTION

A recent survey of 7,280 leaders across North America, Europe, South America and the Pacific Rim countries has shown that there is an increase of 78% male managers in the corporate world. The increase in female managers is only at the lower and middle management levels. The statistics in Fortune 500 leadership have shown that women's representation at the top management positions only occupied 14.6% in 2006 and only increased to 16.1% in 2011 whereas the Women's Share on Financial Post 500 Leadership

merely increased by 2.5% since 2005 (Catalyst, 2012). However, females have scored relatively higher at 75% for work competency (ABAC Women's Forum as cited in Zenger and Folkman, 2011). The effectiveness of female senior executives is also rated 10% higher than their male counterparts (Harvard Business School as cited in Hadary and Henderson, 2012). The leadership qualities essential for leadership effectiveness are innate in female leaders and these are expressed more regularly than men.

The insignificant figure of female leaders at the top management level has amplified the burden of female leaders as their actions, capabilities and decisions do not only reflect on their individual character, but also serve as the identity of "the women". Working under pressure, these female leaders work extremely discreetly to avoid mistakes and to stimulate self-development. The big question here is why women are not in positions of power? Perhaps, the issue of gender role stereotype contributes to the rationale why men always belong to the dominant group. A consensus is met on the existence of distinctive gender roles in management. Toegel (2011) raised her concern in Forbes Woman stating that the minority of senior women in the management positions has created a gap, in that they do not fit the (male) stereotype of what it is to be a leader and these women are perceived as "outsiders". Senior female managers are often underestimated and criticized on the capability to lead and influence her people, to resolve organisational management disputes, to judge and make decisions, as well as other leadership qualities that the majority consider that men can surpass women. This does not only happen in the United States or European countries; Asian females are also trapped under such an idiosyncrasy. It was announced in the World Economic Forum (2012) on East Asia that despite the increasing economic growth during the past few years, Thailand has yet to achieve gender equality due to the reluctance in cultural change and recognition of females' contributions. Many organisations as well as the society have not realized the importance of female leadership in preserving organisational success. In terms of economic impact, it has been evidently proven that a higher return on investment (ROI) is achieved in companies represented by women leaders; whereas in organisational leadership, women leaders also outperform male leaders in terms of leadership (Hadary and Henderson, 2012). APEC (2012) reported that corporations with gender diversity in senior management generate higher operating profit than their rivals, greater success in achieving market responsiveness and transparent communication resulting in elevated employee and customer satisfaction and prolonged enthusiasm on corporate social responsibilities.

This study investigates two main research questions:

- (1) How employees perceive the leadership styles of an effective female leader?
- (2) How do differences in work context influence employees' perception on the effectiveness of female leaders?

There are many studies that argue and compare female leaders' capabilities with men leaders; and many have concluded that women differ from men not only in terms of leadership styles but also both genders often do not react similarly under the same circumstances (Statham, 1987; Eagly, Klonsky and Makhijani, 1992) These researchers also take both genders' work context into consideration to exemplify how they react under different work environments as well as with diverse academic backgrounds. Most of the existing research focuses on the context of female leaders' 'management styles' or the public's perceptions towards their leadership styles and effectiveness (Buttner, 2001; Normore and Trinidad, 2005). However,

few studies have been conducted which evaluate what these female leaders' subordinates or employees perceive to be as their leaders' characteristics, performances, leadership styles and effectiveness. Being supervised and controlled directly under these female leaders, the employees are undoubtedly better informed candidates to make rational and valuable feedback on their female leaders' leadership effectiveness. Although the employees' perceptions tend to be very subjective and may lead to bias, learning and accepting these unspoken words could bring a better understanding of female leaders' leadership styles and effectiveness in the workplace from the employees' perspectives and this would help female leaders in improving their leadership and management strategies, styles or actions. This understanding would also help them identify the reasons that impede their personal development and growth.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Winston (2005) explained that a leader is one who selects, trains and influences his followers who are skilled with abilities, and emphasizes on driving towards achieving the organisation's mission and objectives. He added that a leader influences followers to achieve the designated objectives. Regardless of the advocates' general belief on what defines a leader, it is still a debatable issue of whether women leaders' characteristics and leadership qualities are of similar to men leaders, let alone the gender distinctiveness of leadership effectiveness. Some argue that female leaders exhibit the same leadership behaviours as their male counterparts because the role of leadership requires certain actions and behaviours (Riggio, 2010). However, some researchers have proposed that the evidence from real life practices go beyond the simplicity of that common fact. A study by Toegel and Barsoux (2010) on executives of Switzerland's Institute for Management Development (IMD) has shown that women must exhibit a set of common expectations as leaders while fulfilling their societal gender roles. This set of common expectations is the universal traits that both effective male and female leaders should master such as judgment and decision-making, adaptability and capacity to learn, long term vision and strategic thinking, competitiveness, independence, decisiveness and self-confidence as well as creativity and innovation. Whereas the true gender expectations lying behind the genuine notions of distinctive leadership styles between different genders have been far less studied..

In the aspect of gender difference in leadership, male leaders are described as displaying agentic attributes more strongly than their women counterparts (Eagly&Johanessen-Schmidt, 2001). Some of the agentic attributes are task-oriented, dominant and controlling, impersonal, assertive, self-confident and tough minded. In contrast, female counterparts display more communal attributes than males; these attributes are empathy, caring and nurturing, people-orientation towards integrative goals, interpersonal sensitivity, attentiveness to and acceptance of others, responsiveness to subordinates' needs and motivations. Helgesen's (2012) research elaborated that women leaders are perceived more favourably with direct communication and they are comfortable with diversity. Today's globalization and diverse business environment places these women leaders as having an upper hand as most companies are restructuring into flatter and decentralized organisational structures. Maintaining strong interactions and relationships with stakeholders is an essential element to

tap into this transformation. On the other hand, men leaders scored relatively lower in emotional intelligence than women (Mayer and Geher, 1996; Wong and Law, 2002). Men primarily focus on what they want whereas women have higher potential in manipulating feelings, emotions and social abilities but with lesser emphasis on the intellects (Noor, *et al*, 2011). No doubt, many men leaders play a fantastic role in contributing solutions with excellent analytical skills yet the majority fail to perform as brilliantly in social communications. They tend to have higher self-esteem and an autocratic leadership style, they are often aggressive in selling their own solutions and neglect to reap the full benefits of other employees who can contribute (McCrimmon, 2008). Unlike women who encourage multidirectional feedback and develop reward systems to value personal and group contributions, men leaders are less able in dealing with employees' feedback (Rosener as cited in Buttner, 2001). Instead of devising improvement and corrective actions with employees, men leaders would expect their employees to be rational enough in finding solutions through logical understanding and most likely to encourage self-improvement. (Buttner, 2001) The disparity between female and male leaders' characteristics and leadership styles are very significant, hence the combination of both would most likely result in a balanced managerial framework in an organisation.

Past research had mainly scrutinized the different perceptions of people, in the workplace or in general, on gender leadership effectiveness. Perception is a personal sensory impression that one selects, organises and interprets, which is often, influenced by the formation of memories and life experiences and which is tried to be made as sensible as possible to develop the consciousness of rationality (Merleau-Ponty, 1964; McDonald, 2011). Very often, when asking one about his or her perception of female leaders, words like emotional, compassionate, relationship building, verbal, gossipy and multi-tasking are described whereas men leaders are described as powerful, strong, arrogant, physical, direct and single-tasking (Gamb, 2012). A research carried out among MBA students from the University of Utah has shown that female leaders in organisations are perceived as less capable than their male counterparts, IPOs (Initial Public Offerings) led by female CEOs are less attractive as investments and to a certain extent, female leaders are described as less experienced, less able to lead and less able to resolve senior management disputes, despite their identical personal qualifications and firm financials (Henderson, 2012). However, this certainly does not occur in reality, because studies of effectiveness of female leaders in organisations has shown a positive outcome; a finding indicating that companies with women in the top management team tend to achieve better short-term performance in post-IPO, stock values and earnings per share than companies with only men in the top management team (Andrews and Welbourne, 1996). Women leaders are gradually closing in on men to move into global power positions in politics, media, business, technology as well as in non-profit industries. For instance, Angela Merkel, Germany's Chancellor, was awarded the World's Most Powerful Woman in 2012 based on her great contributions, including European unification and strengthening of German-American relations. Despite how much hard work she has given to her people, disappointedly, she was criticized on her authoritarian style and indecisiveness by some of her own party members (Hung, 2012). Speaking about the Business and IT industry, Sheryl Sandberg, the COO of Facebook and IndraNooyi, the CEO of PepsiCo are both very significant figures who have never failed to bring billions of dollars of revenue to their shareholders annually. However, the perceptions of these leaders' board

members and employees definitely carries weight; they must consent to their leaders' leadership styles and hence, value and appreciate their leaders' contributions.

Transactional and Transformational Leadership

According to Burns cited in Hickman (2010), transactional leadership is more commonly practiced by leaders in coordinating their followers. Farey (1993) pointed out that the transactional and transformational leadership dimensions were developed to represent an enthusiasm for different types of outcomes. In this context, transactional leadership is seen as enthusiasm for improvement, productivity, solving problems, being efficient, cost-effective and fair, doing things right and carrying out single loop learning. Transactional leaders tend to maintain stability within the organisation through recognising the employees' needs and desires, delegating or facilitating them to meet the specified objectives and improve the organisation's current administrative planning and operating systems (Daft and Lim, 2004; Achua and Lussier, 2010). There is a win-win situation whereby the leaders achieve task completion while the followers receive monetary or non-monetary rewards for their job performance. Occasionally, transactional leaders are more action and outcome oriented; but they tend to focus lesser on employees' intrinsic motivational or emotional needs (Beerel, 2009).

In the past, transactional leaders were deemed to be most effective especially in bureaucratic organisations whereby there is a clear line of authority and limited space for creativity and innovation. As time passes, the leadership trend has changed to depend more on transformational leadership due to the multifaceted and uncertain internal and external work environment. This leadership style is more complex as it goes beyond recognising and exploiting the existing needs or demands of a potential follower. The difference between transformational leaders and transactional leaders is that the former engages in people whereas the latter deals merely in exchange (Nicholls, 1988). Indeed, the transformational leadership style gives greater impact to both the organisation and the people. A transformational leader raises the level of human conduct and ethical aspiration of both leaders and followers. Farey (1993) differentiated transformational leadership as enthusiasm for the new and unique ideas, taking risks, being proactive, having vision and being future oriented, being creative and innovative, showing initiative, looking beyond their current role, doing the right things and engaging in double loop learning. Generally, transformational leaders are more positively-minded, passionate and energetic. They are more concerned on the process of helping each subordinate to perform work tasks. This elevates followers' work motivation and satisfaction in achieving common goals.

Several studies have suggested that women are related directly to the notion of transformational leadership whereas men are more related to transactional leadership (Alban-Metcalf and Alimo-Metcalf, 2003). Women leaders characterize themselves as transformational leaders as they tend to transform subordinates' self-interest to the group's interest through concern for broader goals (Rosener, 1990). In addition, women leaders encourage participation, share power and information, enhance other people's self-worth, and

get others excited about their work whereas men leaders tend more to manipulate power through their organisational position and formal authority. Studies on large Spanish firms showed that transformational leadership facilitates the organisational members' ability to create and use knowledge, leading to organisational productivity and effectiveness (Aragon-Correa, *et al* as cited in Dimovski, Skerlavaj and Zagorsek, 2009).

RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

The intention of this qualitative research is to extract particular and specific characteristics that would add value to the research through interviewees' experiences but not to generalise the information. The concept of purposeful sampling used in qualitative research is conducted through selection of individuals and sites for study by inquirer to purposefully inform an understanding of research problem and central phenomenon in the study (Creswell, 2007). Using purpose sampling and one-to-one conversations for the in-depth interviews are techniques that evaluate the trustworthiness of qualitative findings (Carson, *et al*, 2001).

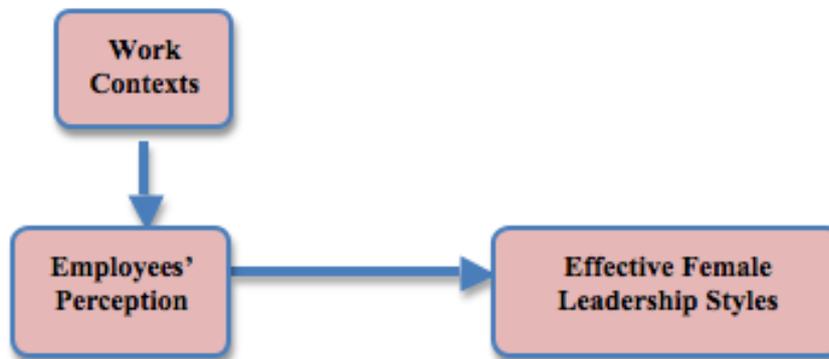
Demographic variables such as age, gender, status, role or function in the organisation are taken into account for sample selection. The most appropriate qualitative sampling strategy for the research is criterion sampling whereby respondents are selected based on certain criterion that relates to the research. This include employees who are under the direct supervision of women leaders or bosses, the nature of the work, years of experience in work, open-minded to share ideas, and having the relevant knowledge and experience. Such phenomenological research aims to collect data from individuals who have experienced the phenomenon (in this case, their experiences with female leaders), and develop a composite description of the essence - experience and perception on the female leaders' leadership styles and effectiveness for all the individuals (Creswell, 2007).

The main form of qualitative data collection employed is through in-depth interviews. An unstructured, open-ended interview on a one-to-one basis is conducted to provoke in-depth discussion and experience-sharing with four respondents. The place for conducting the interview is selected subtly to avoid background noises and distractions for ease of audiotaping.

According to Huberman and Miles as cited in Creswell (2007), the process of data analysis requires code identification from transcript data, reducing codes to themes and identifying patterned regularities, relate categories by noting relations among the variables to build a logical chain of evidence and relate categories to the analytic framework in the literature. Lastly, points of view from each interviewee are drawn to excavate optimum academic findings to support the research questions.

Based on the research questions, an evolving conceptual framework of the employees' perception on the effectiveness of female leader is depicted as below:

FIGURE 1: AN EVOLVING CONCEPTUAL FRAMEWORK OF EMPLOYEES' PERCEPTION ON EFFECTIVENESS OF FEMALE LEADERS



This conceptual framework shows the influence of employees' perception on female leadership effectiveness, whereby the elements of work context are also tied in to examine its influence on the female leadership effectiveness.

FINDINGS

Each respondent who was interviewed using a pseudonym; Respondent 1 is named Ms A. She was 18 years old when she first entered the accounting industry. Then she left and got accepted by an insurance company, and continues to serve with that company. She had encountered many lady bosses in the accounting firm whereas in the insurance service industry, she is led by a male superior who reports directly to a female manager. Basically, her daily work reporting involves interaction with both female and male leaders.

The second respondent, Mr B was working in the advertising industry as a graphic designer for five years before switching to his current career in the real estate and property industry. Throughout his working life, he has been mostly supervised by female leaders or directors.

The third respondent is Mr C who had served in a non-governmental organisation (NGO), AIESEC Malaysia for two years. Being less experienced in the industry, he managed to observe and pick up many skills and knowledge from his female leaders, in particular, with whom he has worked for and with throughout his working life.

The last respondent, Mr D belongs to the education industry. For one who has served the same industry for 33 years, he is very loyal, passionate and committed to this occupation. Throughout his work journey as a senior language teacher, Mr D only encountered two headmistresses from the primary school he is teaching at now. He indicated that the

experiences with headmistresses were very different from his working with male headmasters.

Leadership Styles of an Effective Female Leader

According to Ms A, an effective female leader must possess strong and influential characters. She emphasized that for female leaders to have a “strong mind, focus, and never look back” is never easy. Ms A added, “you must know what is right and wrong, digest and carry out a very different attitude to show it to everybody...” Also, influential leaders grasp power in their own words and actions; people would eventually learn, respect and follow their footsteps. Ms A stated, “You do not need to advertise...it comes from knowing and respecting people.”.

To be recognized as an effective female leader, Ms A deemed intelligence and abilities as the utmost essential traits. For her, “without knowledge, people may think...you are not holding the position with the right amount of ability”. Partially, this is because Ms A strongly believed that gender inequality and stereotyping are unavoidable.

Ms A agreed that majority of the female leaders are more caring and concerned about their employees and clients. Talking about Ms A’s experience in the insurance company, her female boss would arrange things from head to toe for the convenience of associates, besides making sure that all information was fully delivered. She offered assistance with everything within her power and expertise. Apparently, this trait is usually missing in men leaders. “Female leaders are more caring...they will tell you what is the event or requirement is like...everything they have done”

Besides, Ms A mentioned that female leaders are more attentive to details especially if the work design requires tedious procedures, “we are very fussy about our filing...every single thing is very detailed”. Often, they demand for well-rounded information and resources; carry out numerous information search processes before decision-making. This could result in slower decision-making as compared to male leaders. Ms A pointed out that this happens when it comes to certain strategy-making or investment decisions that involves greater risk. Female leaders prefer to “play a safe game and tend to be less risk-taking in terms of work”, said Ms A.

In addition, Ms A highlighted three main skills that an effective female leader must hold which are listening, understanding and communication skills. Effective female leaders ought to listen and understand incoming information or sources in order to communicate the right message to the employees. The following summarize Ms A’s key statements:

“You must listen to the next party, client or subordinates, what exactly they want, need and understand their problems”. You must understand, everybody comes from a different background, brought up with a different education and understanding level...”

To be an effective female leader, Mr B said that she must be able to set clear directions to guide the people towards team goals. Besides, the ability of leaders to delegate tasks provides the people with new opportunities to learn and build capabilities. He stated,

“...you have a problem...she can clearly tell you, dissect everything and give you directions”. “She would give a few (suggestions) but the choice (of action) is yours...She gives us very large room to be creative”

Mr B also said that female leaders are more attentive to details and more careful than most male leaders . He said, female leaders are able to “pinpoint on little things, small solutions and problems that men don’t realize”.All these personal qualities are exceptionally vital in the advertising industry whereby certain mistakes made by a designer could jeopardize the entire team’s performance.

Besides, Mr B perceived that effective female leaders should be visionary and long-term oriented when he indicated, “they can foresee what is going to happen”. From Mr B’s experience, he made comparison with male leader by commenting,“Female leaders think further, they see things in a longer-term and overall picture...unlike male leaders who focus only on resolving current and surface issues”.

Another trait that is highly required by an effective leader is concern about people. Mr B’s female leader is supportive and builds good relationship with employees. Usually, female leaders view social relationship and teamwork as more important than personal achievements. The leader would usually be accountable for the subordinates’ mistakes. As mentioned,

“...she will care about your progress, how is your work going, what is actually pulling you back...” She will sometimes chat with us; bring us out for some treats”. “She wouldn’t blame all things on you because it’s a whole team thing for her...”

In addition, Mr B believed that female leaders are also good analysers, however when disasters or a crisis hits, female leaders might act rather negatively and emotionally.

Furthermore, Mr B suggested that an effective female leader must be patient. From his experience, females are more patient especially in encouraging the full exploitation of employees’ capabilities. These capabilities can refer to personal qualities, knowledge and skills. “I think the patience is what I felt from my experience (with female leaders)...they still try to develop you, more of your own capabilities”

Lastly, it is the legitimate power that Mr B thought would make a female leader stand out as the subordinates succumb to the authority and willingly obey and respect her decisions. Then again to close the gaps between subordinates, she must leverage on her femininity to remain accessible and approachable to others. “She somehow stand alone and a little apart of us...if she doesn’t, people will not respect her for the decisions she makes”

Mr C revealed that an effective female leader must be able to hold “thoughtful, insightful and a holistic approach towards the team management itself”. It is really appealing for female leaders that provide sensible advice and “help us to see things in different perspectives”. r C.

Mr C stated that female leaders may be directive and decisive when it comes to “pushing for deadlines, numbers and performance”. Said Mr C, “She is directive and decisive...she doesn’t just give me a problem, she gives me a solution as well”.

To be an effective female leader, she must not fear to change or break the norms. In order to achieve this, Mr C encouraged “if they are willing to step out no matter how hard it is to break through the social norm which is perceived as “male” as being the norm, she is more likely to achieve success.”.

Female leaders who are capable of being both result-orientated and people-orientated, and put such principles as priority are well respected by Mr C. She can be focused and persistent in delivering end results but meanwhile, she does not neglect to support, be concerned with and build good relationship with her people. As he said:

“A person who actually looks into the goal, wanting to get it but at the same time taking care of the people around her”. “She takes care of the people , she asks about any problems they might have and tries to assist solving them.” ”

Additionally, Mr C agreed that female leaders must be willing to open up their ears to listen to employees’ problems and expectations. Meanwhile, the female leaders must be open-minded enough to accept the feedback or critiques and make changes if necessary. Female leaders tend to request regular feedback from employees before taking action.

More significantly, female leaders are more team oriented and willing to facilitate employees’ ideas during decision-making. Also, Mr C admired female leaders for their passion in work they appear not to expect high personal returns. In the NGO industry, it is indeed a noble act when one commits a project or work task knowing that there is no incentive rewarded. They value the process as more important than the outcome or returns. ,

“Every time we hit a roadblock, she will come in and we will solve the problem together”. “Passion doesn’t die easily in women...In an NGO there’s no incentive for us to stay...”

Last but not least, Mr C also believes that to reward a female with a crown, she has to gain support, recognition and appreciation from her subordinates. Of course, being capable is inevitable to be rewarded with such such an honour, “Like she can hold the position and influence because we recognize that she is capable of doing that”

Akin to some of the comments of respondents as indicated above,, Mr D deemed that an effective female leader must be “able to perceive the overall world view...be more foresighted”. They should be able to consider every circumstance and action in the long run, but not just “solving the present problem”.

Mr D described an effective female leader to be one who is able to set clear directions and share these directions with her employees in order to excel in the company's future undertakings. In the education industry, setting "good education policies to upgrade students" is important in driving towards academic excellence. Also, female leaders are often more firm in decision-making. Mr D expressed, "they are more firm in solving certain problems".

To be effective, a female leader ought to always listen and be open to new ideas from the employees. As Mr D explained, "she (my female leader) is very concerned about education and what students need and what are the needs of the industry".

It is insufficient to be only people-oriented, effective female leaders must also be able to achieve goals effectively and efficiently. From Mr D's perspective, female leaders are required to achieve "a very high level of education standard and produce a lot of graduates comparable to other higher learning institutions".

Also, Mr D deemed that female leaders are often more caring in nature as is proven by his female boss, "she is very caring to students". Apparently, her soft nature goes well with good communication skills. This has given women an upper hand especially when collaborating or negotiating with the opposite sex. "To overcome a problem, it will be easier for female leaders to talk especially to male leaders".

Besides, Mr D thought that female leaders are more systematic and rigid in performing tasks. As Mr D mentioned, "everything is black and white...based on procedures". That explains why "they make very good planners", added Mr D. They tend to arrange everything according to the procedures and make things appear to be neat and well structured.

In addition, Mr D recognized that effective female leaders in the workplace are patient in facilitating their people, "Need a lot of patience...to guide subordinates along the way". They never hesitate to spend time with subordinates to conduct performance feedback sessions, etc., with their employees.

More importantly, Mr D stressed that female leaders tend to build good relationship with employees. Their employees are usually satisfied and happy working under such a relationship with their female superior.

Influence of Work Context on Employees' Perception of Female Leaders' Effectiveness

Ms A said that employees' perception of female leaders' effectiveness is partially dependent on the group size when she confided, "for big corporations, you need to support your subordinates to enhance their abilities, having different programs to improve their skills." This implies that employees in medium-sized or multinational corporations expect their female leaders to provide them with the opportunities for learning and building their capabilities.

Besides, Ms A explained that "the type of industry in particular she is working with" can influence the perception on an effective female leader. Generally, working behaviours and values can vary based on different types of industries. Ms A stressed, "In my industry, in a

way, we are more understanding and caring for our associates”. She strengthened her statement by comparing this with male leaders, “male leader don’t do that...it’s so obvious compared to males in the insurance industry”.

Apparently, the type of job design is one of the factors that influences how employees perceive female leaders’ effectiveness. Ms A confessed that meeting deadlines and experiencing high levels of stress are common for accountants. “At closing time, we have to be on time to finish our work...we really stress this especially for the female seniors”.

Mr B had working experiences in the advertising industry in several Asian countries. He did not provide any distinct examples in working behaviour across different nations. More specifically, he considered three work contexts that influence female leaders’ effectiveness.

Similarly, Mr B stressed the fact that the type of industry influences the trend of decision-making or negotiation terms by stating “advertising needs a lot of thought and problem solving”. In terms of ‘thought’, Mr B meant that the advertising industry requires more creativity and innovative thinking or ideas to provide clients with new solutions.

Mr B said that a good leader should instil a healthy, happy and well-satisfied work environment for the employees. Positive energy or motivational words and activities can improve the spirit of the whole team. Instead of saying “Oh, we have a huge problem” and start solving the problem, Mr B thought the totally opposite way of operating in such a tense environment can be more productive by consoling the people by saying “don’t worry, everything will be settled”.

Moreover, Mr B said that the type of work design impacts female leaders’ effectiveness. In the advertising industry, the designers often are required to meet deadlines in submitting advertising layouts and production, hence being supportive and motivational seem to be necessary for female leaders. “When we burn midnight oil, we have deadlines after deadlines to follow...she would come and join us...cheer us up a little”

For Mr C who is from the NGO industry, says the organisational culture plays an important part. Most of the workers are volunteers and they put more emphasis on addressing “communal harmony, human and social welfare”. Hence, the leaders must uphold such cultural values to stimulate consistent growth and development among the management and employees. “Our culture is different; we do things because we want to do it, not because we have to do it”

Also, Mr C highlighted that the NGO industry works differently from other industries or profitable organisations. He shared, “coming from the NGO background, the whole process is very well structured and well understood.”

Thirdly, Mr C mentioned about the work environment as another factor. Being positive minded, determination, perseverance and flexibility are some of the traits encouraged in his working environment. There were times when he faced limitations in raising sponsorships, these positive spirits that are implanted by the female boss would motivate him to gain his confidence and strength.

Understanding from Mr D, the education industry involves a high layer of administrative paperwork, policies and procedures. It is rather autocratic to work in a school or educational institution. To make decisions, a headmistress or headmaster must take account for all angles and stakeholders including management, teachers, students and parents.

Mr D admitted that power and authority in the workplace are very important. It also sets as a criteria to determine female leaders' effectiveness. Mr D stated, "Anyhow, their authority is stamped from how much power is given to them...female leaders are basically more afraid of protocols"

Besides, Mr D views organisational structure as one of the elements to determine the effectiveness of female leaders. He said "depending on the company organisation structure, it varies from industry to industry".

ANALYSIS & DISCUSSION

Employees' Perception on Effectiveness Female Leadership Styles

All four employees from different industries who have working experiences with female superiors perceive that effective female leaders must possess leadership qualities as stated: 'strong, decisive and focused mind', 'build rapport with employees', 'caring and concern about employees', 'visionary and long-term orientation', 'attention to details', 'good listening and understanding skills', 'good communication skills', 'ability to set clear directions', 'passionate and patient', 'legitimate power and respect', 'teamwork spirit', 'not afraid to break the norms', 'able to achieve goals', 'acceptance and open minded', 'knowledge and capabilities', 'serve others without expecting returns', 'empowerment and delegation of work tasks', 'good analytic skills', 'systematic and rigid' as well as 'accessible and approachable' (refer to Appendix A).

According to Farey's (1993) Transactional and Transformational Leadership Model, he generalized that transformational leadership style is more encouraged among effective female leaders. Transformational leaders have enthusiasm for the "radical and revolutionary, visionary, future-oriented, looking outside and beyond the current role, doing the right things and practises double loop learning" (p. 116). These qualities are congruent to the respondents' perceptions on effective female leaders. Female leaders are visionary and long term oriented; they tend to view things in a bigger perspective in both problem solving and strategic planning and encourage innovative thinking (Derue, *et al*, 2011). Many researchers represent a transformational leader with ideal qualities of creating new vision that triggers organisational change and effectively communicate these visions to the employees (Farey, 1993; Chow, 2005; Irtaimah, 2011).

Burns (1978) differentiated transformational leaders as people who can set clear goals, be firm on their own mind and decisions, and restructure day-to-day routine by taking account of new ideas and potential changes in shaping a holistic organisational management. In other words, female leaders must be open-minded and accept to changes to avoid being trapped in the traditional beliefs and practices. Dimovski, Skerlavaj and Zagorsek (2009) identified a

significant disparity of which that 'transformational leaders involve their people in the process of change unlike transactional leaders who merely build upon exchange process. In Farey's (1993) research, he brought in Zaleznik's idea of leaders 'using power to influence the thoughts and actions of other people' and 'taking of risks and striking out in new directions' (p. 113). Indeed, female leaders are effective when they unleash their legitimate power and potential, leveraging her people to become a source of lubricant to smoothen the operational tasks. This power is also the driving factor that influences female leaders to "establish specific desires and objectives that determines the direction of the organisation's future and changes the way its people think about what is desirable, possible and necessary" (Farey, 1993, p. 113).

Furthermore, Farey's study of the Map of Behaviour of Leader or Manager has discovered that employees expected effective leaders to possess better listening and learning skills. In Farey's leadership context, female leaders are transformational when they encourage multidimensional feedbacks from employees and being ready to change, being accessible and available when guidance are needed, willing to listen and attentive to others' problems. In fact, these leadership qualities are reflected in most of the respondents' female leaders. Conversely, the finding shows that only one leadership quality described by a respondent inclines towards the transactional leadership styles, which is effective female leaders are 'systematic and rigid'. Levitt as cited in Farey (1993) discussed the fine line between transformational and transactional leadership in which they are differentiated; transactional requires more rationale and systematic style in situational analysis and strategic planning.

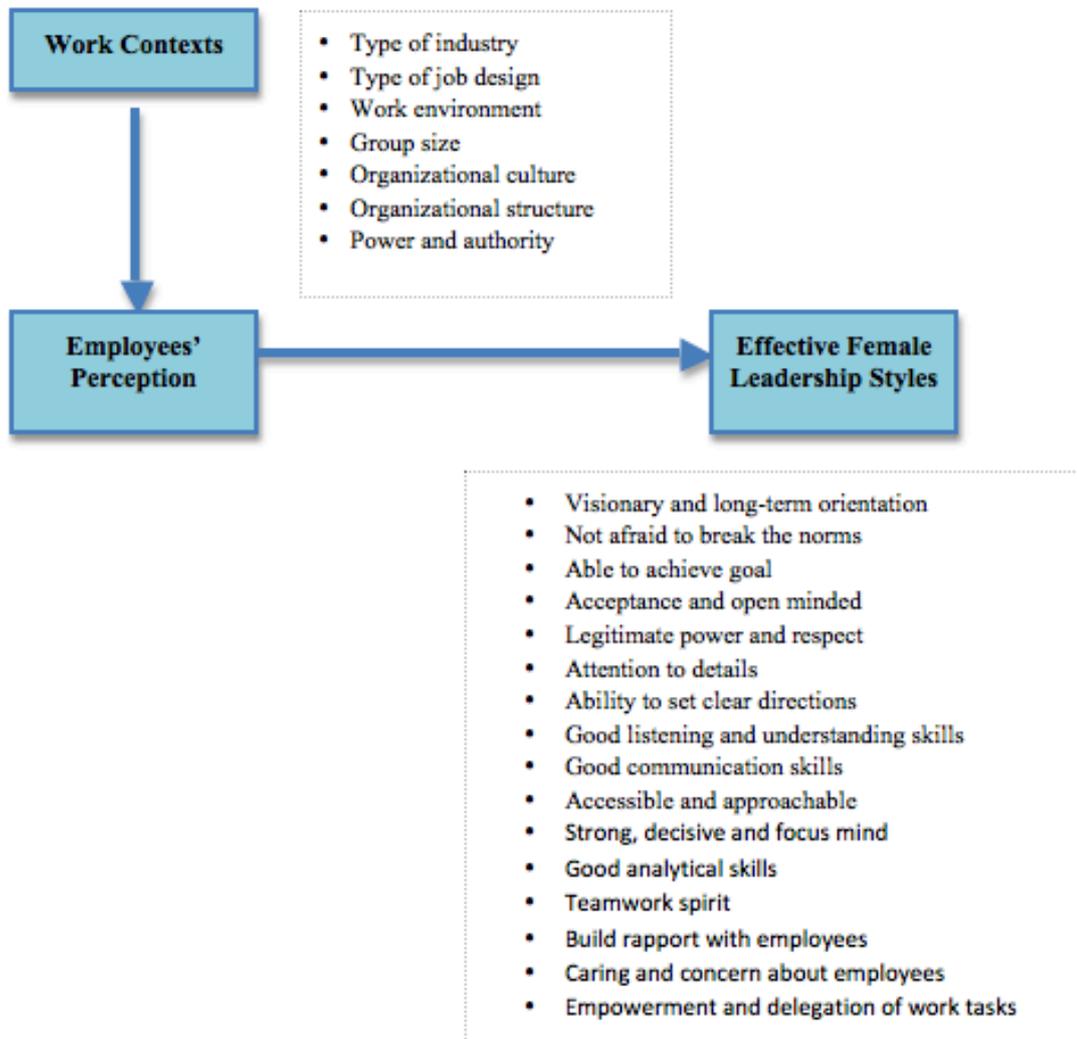
Influence of Work Contexts on Employees' Perceptions on Effective Female Leaders

All four respondents from the different work backgrounds clearly defined the influence of work context in their perception towards female leaders' effectiveness. In this research, the work contexts that influences employees' perception in female leaders' effectiveness are type of industry, type of job design, work environment, group size, organisational culture, organisational structure, and lastly, power and authority (refer to Appendix B).

Engen and Willemsen (2009) supported that organisational context plays a significant role in affecting leadership styles; the application of specific leadership style can be shaped through social setting such as hierarchical level, particular team and type of organisations. The employees perceive female leaders from different work environments and organisational cultures differently in accordance to the norms or behaviours practiced in the organisation or even within the industry as a whole. Engenet *al* (2001) further justified that the variety in work context such as type of industry and management level may result in emerging leadership styles in an organisation. Chermers as cited in Carliand Eagly (2003) had also proven a positive relationship between the work contextual variables and effectiveness of leader behaviours. The strong evidences from the respondents supported by several scholars are convincing enough to prove the influence of work contexts in the employees' perception of female leadership styles.

From the findings of this study, the evolving conceptual framework of the employees' perception on the effectiveness of female leader is developed as shown in Figure 2.

FIGURE 2: AN EVOLVING CONCEPTUAL FRAMEWORK OF EMPLOYEES' PERCEPTION ON EFFECTIVENESS OF FEMALE LEADERS: WORK CONTEXTS, PERCEPTION AND LEADERSHIP STYLES



**Developed for this research*

CONCLUSION

The findings from this research provide some insights of the most effective leadership styles to be best employed by female leaders in the workplace from the perspective of employees. Comprehending the perceived effective leadership styles facilitates the middle and top managerial executives, especially the female counterparts to ponder on their present leadership styles and hence, re-evaluate and revise their managerial techniques to fit into the transformational leadership framework favoured by innovative people and work teams. It is indeed a good opportunity for female leaders to assess their personal strengths and weaknesses before synergizing the contemporary applied leadership style with the most desirable leadership styles in shaping an interactive, collaborative and productive work environment. As supported by Rosener (1995) and Adler (1993), the emerging trends towards flatter organisation, team-based management and increased globalization would work best with women leaders' interactive and transformational approach to leadership. The uttermost significant consequence of this proactive implementation would be a spike in employees' satisfaction and motivation levels.

Associating employees' perception on the elements of work contexts confers the implications of other external factors in defining effective female leadership styles. They can leverage on the discovery of work context as an intermediary factor in managing leadership skills and develop contingent strategies to curb with the varied basis of work context. Humphrey, Morgeson and Nahrgang's study (as cited in Derue, *et al*, 2011) have substantial evidences to prove the strong relevance of work contexts in activating certain expressions of leadership behaviours that are highly desirable. The success and effectiveness of female leaders in the corporate world regardless of the type of organisations would lie behind the practice of an appropriate leadership style to accomplish and fulfil the organisation objectives. Furthermore, female leaders are exposed to the underlying causes that impede the full potential of growth and development in reaching the top management levels to propel the world economy. This global topic has been arousing ever since women unleash noticeable productive power and improvement in the workforce and world economy. Albeit the challenging and almost impossible mission to achieve universal acceptance of female leadership across all countries, potential female leaders can utilize these suggested leadership styles to attest their imperative existence and maximize their contributions to the global economy.

Future studies may consider a thorough probe into several other important outcomes. This research examines the employees' perception based on a wider range of industries and varied size of organisations; it would be interesting to narrow the scope and look into the employees' perception within the scope of service industries and restrict to only within multinational companies (MNCs). This enables in-depth studies into the knowledge and perceptions among employees belonging from the similar job category and background. It may be also fruitful to look at the specific types of work contexts that may bring positive effect to female leadership styles. Some of the suggestions are organisational structure and culture, types of job design as well as power and authority.

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APPENDIX

Appendix A: Themes of Leadership Styles

Themes	Quotes
Strong, Decisive and Focus Mind	<p>“It is not that easy, you must have a strong mind, focus, never look back...strong character and very influencing” (Ms A)</p> <p>“She is directive and decisive...she would say, ‘don’t just give me a problem, give me a solution as well’ ” (Mr C)</p> <p>“They are more firm in solving certain subjects” (Mr D)</p>
Build Rapport with Employees	<p>“She will sometimes chat with us, bring us out for some treats” (Mr B)</p> <p>“We can work things easily because of the relationship we built” (Mr C)</p> <p>“They are very good to us, supportive of our ideas” (Mr D)</p>
Caring / Concern about Employees	<p>“They are more caring...they will tell you what is the event like, arrange a room...everything they have done” (Ms A)</p> <p>“She will care about your progress, how is work, what is pulling you back...throw you some harsh words to wake you up” (Mr B)</p> <p>“She takes care of the people, like she does ask ‘how is it?’, ‘what is your problem?’ and everything...” (Mr C)</p> <p>“She is very caring to students” (Mr D)</p>
Visionary, Long-term Orientation	<p>“Female leaders think more further, they see things in a long-term and overall pictures” (Mr B)</p> <p>“Her thought process would consider every single possibly made that came to her mind” (Mr C)</p> <p>“able to perceive the overall world view...more foresighted” (Mr D)</p>
Attention to Details	<p>“We are very fussy about our filing...every single thing is very detailed” (Ms A)</p> <p>“They will pinpoint on little things, small solutions and problems that men don’t realize” (Mr B)</p>

Good Listening and Understanding Skills	<p>“You have to stand on their side to think what is their need, their problems, make better communication with them” (Ms A)</p> <p>“over there (heart-to-heart talk)... we talked to each other about the problems that we face and what we expect from that” (Mr C)</p>
Good Communication Skills	<p>“The communications is very important and how you handle your problem...When comes to teaching or educating, they can convey clear message to people” (Ms A)</p> <p>“To smoothen a problem, it will be easier for female leaders to talk to especially male leaders” (Mr D)</p>
Ability to Set Clear Directions	<p>“They know what they want...and she will give you very clear directions” (Mr B)</p> <p>“Everybody must be able to see clearer picture for what other goals you want to achieve for the company” (Mr D)</p>
Passionate and Patient	<p>“I think the patience is what I felt for my experience...they still try on you, more on your capabilities” (Mr B)</p> <p>“Passion doesn’t die easily in women” (Mr C)</p> <p>“Need a lot of patience...to guide subordinates along the way” (Mr D)</p>
Legitimate Power and Respect	<p>“You do not need to advertise...it came to know from people and people respect” (Ms A)</p> <p>“She somehow stand alone and little apart of us...if she isn’t, there won’t be people respect for her decision she makes” (Mr B)</p> <p>“Like Kavida can hold the position and influence because we recognize...she’s capable of doing that” (Mr C)</p>
Teamwork Spirit	<p>“She wouldn’t blame all things to you because it’s a whole team thing for her...She is protecting on our side, or the whole team” (Mr B)</p> <p>“Everytime we hit a roadblock, she will come in and solve the problem together” (Mr C)</p>
Not Afraid to Break the Norms	<p>“If they are willing to step out no matter how hard it is to break through the social</p>

	norm where is perceived as male is more the winner, you will be able to do it” (Mr C)
Able to Achieve Goals	“A person that actually looks into the goal, wanting to get it” (Mr C) “They need very high level of education standard and produces a lot of graduates comparable to other high learning institutions” (Mr D)
Acceptance and Open Minded	“She starts fixing on it and everything...she is not defensive at all, she is accepting it” (Mr C) “She is very concern about the education and what students want and what are the needs of the industry” (Mr D)
Knowledge and Capabilities	“Without knowledge, people may think...you are not holding the position and ability” (Ms A) “Like she can hold the position and influence because we recognize...she’s capable of doing that” (Mr C)
Serve Others Without Expecting Returns	“In NGO there’s no incentive for us to stay...they will come right away without hesitation” (Mr C)
Empowerment and Delegation of Work Tasks	“She would give a few (suggestions)...She gives us a very huge room to be creative” (Mr B)
Good Analytic Skills	“She analyzes the project, what’s the client’s point of view and perspective” (Mr B)
Systematic and Rigid	“They are very by the books, everything has to be done based on the procedures” (Mr D)
Accessible and Approachable	“It is not easy for a leader to be always down to earth and really stand together with you” (Mr C)

Appendix B: Themes of Work Context

Themes	Quotes
Type of Industry	“In my industry, in a way, we are more understanding and caring for our associates” (Ms A) “Advertising needs a lot of thoughts and problem solving thing” (Mr B) “Coming from the NGO background, the whole process is very well structured and well understood” (Mr C)

	<p>“In the education industry...the existent policy of the present government that females are...” (Mr D)</p>
Type of Job Design	<p>“Talking about closing, we have to be on time to finish our work...we really stress over it especially the female seniors” (Ms A)</p> <p>“When we burn midnight oil, we have deadlines after deadlines to follow...she would come and and join us” (Mr B)</p>
Work Environment	<p>“The work environment is different, male leaders are more positive and energy...females a lot of emotions, negatives” (Mr B)</p> <p>“It is the work and how they treat people around them that matters” (Mr C)</p>
Group Size	<p>“For big corporations, you need to support your subordinate to enhance ability...have different programs to improve their skills.” (Ms A)</p>
Organizational Culture	<p>“Our culture is different, we do things because we want to do it, instead of we have to do it” (Mr C)</p>
Organizational Structure	<p>“...depends on the company organization structure, it varies from industry to industry” (Mr D)</p>
Power and Authority	<p>“Anyhow, their authority stamps from how much power is given to them...female leaders are basically more afraid to protocols” (Mr D)</p>