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# LEADERSHIP STYLES OF WOMEN MANAGERS IN THE UK CONSTRUCTION INDUSTRY: KNOWLEDGE CAPTURE

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This paper is part of an ongoing doctoral study about exploring the contribution of women managers towards the construction industry. UK construction is typically portrayed as a male dominated industry. Women are highly under-represented particularly at the managerial and technical sectors of the construction industry. This research intends to explore the contribution women managers could bring to the construction industry. Exploring the benefits women could bring to construction will help to recruit more women workforce to construction industry which in turn will help to address the skills shortages in the industry by bringing in a wide range of skills and talents. Women's presence in managerial workforce is growing and continues to motivate research on the leadership styles typically exhibited by women to determine if women have their own ways of leading. Further leadership is considered as an important quality for those who occupy managerial positions in organisations. In this context this paper takes the leadership styles exhibited by women managers in construction industry as the primary unit of analysis. Thus this research fall under three major knowledge domains namely gender, leadership and construction. In order to ensure the comprehensiveness and completeness of this study, an expert knowledge capturing exercise has been undertaken. This paper shares the captured expert opinions about the identified knowledge domains.

**KEYWORDS: construction, gender, leadership, UK.**

## INTRODUCTION

The UK construction industry is slowing down especially at the housing market. The construction industry faces many challenges such as low performance, high dissatisfaction among clients, low productivity, poor image, high fragmentation, skills and labour shortages, recruitment difficulties etc.

The skills and labour shortages both at technical and managerial levels has been a problem in the UK construction industry for many years (Egan, 1998; Whittock, 2002; Construction Skills, 2007). The recruitment difficulties that the industry faces with traditional workforce are adding further impact on the level of skills shortages. Construction employers recruit and rely increasingly on workers from overseas, either inside or outside the European Economic Area (EEA), giving rise to immigration issues with an increasingly diverse force (Gurjao, 2006). However, a recent survey by CIOB (2008) revealed that migrant workers are not

common as senior and middle managers in UK construction. Even if migrant workers hold managerial skills they are often not recruited due to their poor English language competence (CIOB, 2008). Further, the industry prefers people with construction background when they recruit specifically for senior/ middle level managerial jobs. Because taking people from different background and train them to relate it to construction may take longer time and may incur more cost. This issue contributes to an increment in the shortage of skills particularly at senior and middle management levels in the UK construction industry. The current economic condition makes this situation even worse.

A gendered perspective view on the construction industry indicates that the typical gender segregation pattern of the construction industry, which is the concentration of men and women into different kinds of jobs, is highly according to the societal expectations of the gender roles. Women constitute nearly 9% of the total construction workforce, of which more than 85% hold administrative and secretarial positions which are not contributing directly to the construction mainstream. Therefore the women who directly contribute to the construction mainstream is very low in number and they largely fall under either professional jobs (11%) or craft and trade level jobs (4%). This representation is very low as 1.5% in the total construction workforce.

In this context, increasing the number of women managers at senior and middle level management in construction may help the industry to reduce the recruitment difficulties and skills shortages. The recruitment base for the construction is limited largely to one gender. Recruiting from a wider pool of talents and skills will help to address these recruitment difficulties and in turn the skills shortages. It will also benefit the industry by maximising the utilisation of existing workforce. However, before persuading the industry to recruit more women managers it is imperative to find out what contribution women managers can bring to the construction industry.

In order to analyse the contribution of the women managers, their leadership styles are taken as the primary unit of analysis. Growing presence of women in managerial workforce created an interest among the researchers to study women's role as leaders. Organisations have paid more attention to the leadership styles of those who occupy managerial positions as they believe leadership is an important factor in solving organisational problems. Considering these points and the past researches done on possible differences in the leadership styles of men and women, this research endeavours to investigate the leadership styles typically exhibited by women managers in construction and their contribution towards the construction industry.

The next section explains the overall methodology of this research including the expert interviews based on which this paper is produced. The preliminary findings from the expert interviews are presented thereafter.

## **RESEARCH METHODOLOGY**

Research methodology refers to the overall approach to a problem which could be put into practice in a research process, from the theoretical underpinning to the collection and analysis of data (Collis and Hussey, 2003; Remenyi et al., 2003). The selection of an appropriate methodology is vital in order to achieve valid and reliable results. For this, it is important to understand the philosophical underpinning of this research.

## **Research Philosophy**

The two contrasting views on how social science research should be conducted can be labeled as positivism and social constructionism / phenomenology (Esterby-Smith et al., 2003; Collis and Hussey, 2003; Remenyi et al., 2003). The key idea of positivism is that the social world exists externally, and that its properties should be measured through objective methods, rather than being inferred subjectively through sensation, reflection or intuition (Esterby-Smith et al., 2003). The phenomenological paradigm assumes that the reality is not objective or external but is socially constructed and given meaning by people (Esterby-Smith et al., 2003). This research intends to explore and investigate the ways leadership styles of women managers may contribute to the UK construction industry. Leadership characteristics and styles mean different things to different people (Pedler et al., 2004), thus a socially constructed idea should be obtained in order to identify the appropriate styles. In this context, it could be said that this research takes the overall phenomenological stance. The research philosophy that is adopted contains important assumptions about the way in which we view the world. These assumptions will underpin the research strategy and the methods one chooses as part of that strategy (Sauders et al., 2007). The three major ways of thinking about research philosophy are ontology, epistemology and axiology (Collis and Hussey, 2003; Sauders et al., 2007). These ontological, epistemological and axiological assumptions are concerned with the nature of reality, the acceptable knowledge in the field of study and the values respectively. These three assumptions help to position the research within the philosophical continuum.

## **Research Strategy**

A research strategy may be thought of as providing the overall direction of the research including the process by which the research is conducted (Remenyi et al., 2003). The commonly used research strategies in business and management research are experiment, survey, case study, action research and ethnography (Sauders et al., 2007; Remenyi et al., 2003; Esterby-Smith et al., 2003). This research intends to find out the contribution of women managers towards UK construction industry by identifying the leadership styles exhibited by women managers in construction. Accordingly, an in-depth analysis of the construction industry with a gender perspective is therefore vital for this study. Also the researcher neither is part of nor has control over the actual environment. Thus “case study” has been chosen as the most appropriate research strategy. Case study is an empirical inquiry that investigates a contemporary phenomenon within its real-life context, especially when the boundaries between phenomenon and context are not clearly evident (Yin, 2003). This study takes the ‘individual’ as the ‘case’. In this scenario it is the woman manager in construction industry. It has a single unit of analysis which is the ‘leadership styles exhibited by women managers in construction’. This research, therefore, adopts an exploratory, multiple, holistic type of case study.

## **Research Techniques**

Research techniques refer to the specific methods used to collect and analyse the data. Data collection and analysis are developed together in an iterative process in a case study (Hartley, 2004). This research adopts Multiple Leadership Questionnaire (MLQ), Personal Attribute Questionnaire (PAQ), semi-structured interview and expert interview as the data collection techniques.

MLQ offers researchers the most validated and efficient measure of broad range of leadership behaviours (Bass and Avolio, 2006). In this regard MLQ will be used to measure the leadership styles of individuals (women managers in construction). The outcome of the analysis will help to investigate the contribution of leadership styles exhibited by women managers in the construction industry towards its development. The leadership styles that are exhibited by a person are influenced by the person's gender (Cubillo and Brown, 2003; Larson and Freeman, 1997). It is therefore appropriate to find out the gender qualities of the construction women managers. To fulfil this purpose Personal Attributes Questionnaire (PAQ) by Spence et al. (1975) will be used. The analysis of the PAQ will help to find out the personal characteristics of an individual in terms of masculine, feminine, or androgynous qualities. This research also uses semi-structured interviews as part of the data collection technique. Semi-structured interviews have the advantage of being a 'halfway house' between the rigid layout of a structured interview and the flexibility and responsiveness of an unstructured interview (Moore, 2000). The interview guidelines prepared cover the issues such as personal information, job history, role of woman manager in the organisation, context in which the manager works, skills and competencies, leadership styles, gender discrepancy issues, diversity issues, barriers in effective leadership, challenges they face in resolving problems. Expert interviews, based on which this paper is produced, are not part of case studies but are conducted prior to case studies in order to obtain further knowledge in the subject from experts who excelled in issues associated with construction industry, gender and leadership. This will ensure the comprehensiveness and completeness of this research. The experts were carefully identified in such a way so that a comprehensive knowledge capturing from all three knowledge domains was ensured.

## **PRELIMINARY FINDINGS**

This section shares the expert opinions captured through expert interviews as part of the research. The expert interviews have been conducted among the people who excelled in areas related to construction, gender, leadership or combination of any of those. This section is presented under three major headings namely construction, leadership and gender. Under each heading the captured expert opinions are discussed.

### **UK construction industry**

The UK construction industry is described as much more service industry compared the industry to the past years. There is a significant shift in the health and safety consideration. It is considered as a cleaner and safer industry. The considerations on environmental aspects have also been improved. There has been a very slight shift in the culture of collaboration. Procurement roots such as partnering encourage such collaborative environment. However, collaboration cannot be forced. Factors such as win-win situations, win-win solutions, future gains, rewards, and incentives are therefore needed to promote collaboration.

Despite the improvements in the construction industry, the industry still faces challenges and struggles to tackle many of those. The major problem that the industry has at the moment is its survival with the current economic crisis. The construction industry faces difficulties in delivering the project in time, within budget and at the required quality. The other problems that exist in the industry for a long time are identified as low productivity; high fragmentation; poor image; skills and labour shortages; and recruitment difficulties. UK construction industry is a global industry. To certain extent UK construction industry builds elsewhere and employs people from other part of the world to UK. The skills shortages may

be due to either the fact that there are not enough skilled people at all or they are not in the place where the industry wants them to be. In addition, there are restrictions with employers as they may not recruit people from all over the world due to issues like government immigration regulations. The construction industry is still fragmented. One of the reasons for this fragmentation is due to the way people are trained and educated. Training and education for different disciplines are provided separately whereas the construction requires the people from different disciplines to work together as a team. Construction being the labour intensive industry, people management needs improvement. High dissatisfaction among clients is another challenge that the industry faces. Little has been realised about the user needs, particularly when the product has a long life span where users or their requirements might change over the time.

The efforts industry has made or could make in order to tackle the skills and labour shortages are discussed with experts. One solution is to train more people who are already in the industry or people who want to join the industry. Introduction of technology to reduce the need of some skills or skilled people could be another solution knowing the fact that it might create some rooms for other inviting jobs to handle the technology. However, there will not be any substantial reduction in the labour intensive nature of the industry due to the introduction of technology. One other solution suggested is to re-engineer the process to the extent it re-designs the entire supply chain operations. Making the industry more attractive by ensuring job stability would be another step that the industry could take to meet the skills shortages. Diverse entry could be encouraged. There are various types of diversity such as technical, cultural, professional, gender etc. Diversity can benefit the industry, but mere diversity will not result in the improvement. Diversity itself does not create collaboration unless it is linked with the team work. In reality it doesn't happen in the industry. Because, little or no time is spent on team building, team working, and getting people from diverse disciplines to work together coherently. This is one of the things which are not good at the industry and need improvement. All in all, the industry needs people who actually understand what they know, what they do not know, and do not pretend to do things that they are not good at. Because it is a complex manufacturing process, is ever changing and requires people who really do understand the whole of the process, particularly if they are senior or middle managers.

## **Gender**

All the experts interviewed agreed that there are two major perceptions of gender as a biologically determined element or as a socially constructed one. People are fundamentally socialised in working particular ways more than they are different by nature. However, gender has very close identity with being a male or female in biological term. When talking about the female gender, we think particularly of women in social roles rather than domestic roles. It has therefore issues and it helps to see gender is something that functions as an aspect of roles people have in society rather than thinking in terms of the physiological.

Women leaders showing masculine behaviour are evaluated more negatively than male leaders showing the same behaviour (Eagly, 1992). However democratic male leaders and democratic female leaders are not evaluated differently. This is further supported by a study by Wolfram et al. (2007), on the professional respect for female and male leaders, where they revealed that the gender differences are in line with general gender stereotypes suggesting that women are gentler, more expressive and more socially oriented than men. Individuals who show gender role discrepant behaviour run the risk of being less positively evaluated by others. This issue was discussed with the experts and their views are presented below.

There is lack of female role models in the construction industry and it leads women to follow male role models when taking on leadership roles. As a result there could be instances where women behave like a man or openly reveal masculine qualities. This could make others feel uncomfortable due to the gender stereotype and expectations. 'Women in construction sector' is a relatively new phenomenon. Therefore there is a learning process in both women managers and to her associates. It takes time for the associates to accept a gender discrepancy. It also takes time for women managers to find the right way of dealing with their subordinates. Being stereotypical, it might be said that the female stereotype leadership is much more connective, collaborative, and corporative. However, it is important to have leaders who are sure about their expertise, are knowledgeable and decisive. If women behave in a stereotypically female gendered way in a leadership role, then they are not respected. But if they behave overlay a male way they are not respected either. Therefore getting the right balance is the challenge for women in leadership roles.

The experts' opinion say that it is the quality of the knowledge be in parted and the capability to understand the technology and processes that surrounded play a major role rather than being a male or a female. The type of leadership role also depends on the maturity and experience of the sub-ordinate or the target group. Therefore an appropriate leadership style relates much more to the context and situation rather than it does to the gender.

## **Leadership**

Leadership is a complex process and it carries many definitions. According to the experts, leadership has been described as 'understand what you are trying to do as a whole, working with the associates to understand their skills, and getting the best out of them'. It is a process of setting the right direction, deciding the right things to do, facilitating those who have skills to actually do it, and monitor and take corrective actions. In summary, leadership is about setting up a vision; walking the talk; understanding what needs to be achieved by different people; being hand-ready, not hands-on or hands-off; clarity; communicating; sticking out for people or work force; making people feel important; bringing about change. A leadership style one exhibits depends on the circumstances, context, the knowledge and skills of the subordinates, and the culture of the organisation.

Leadership could be an enabler of management. Leadership gives direction and guidance and it acts on top of the functions of management such as planning, organising, coordinating, and controlling. Management is much more to do with ensuring that the conditions are right for the people to do their jobs. Therefore it is rather more functional; more to do with day to day operations; less to do with strategies or vision. But there is a blurred line between leadership and management as they are not absolutely separate. A good leader will often have very good management skills as well. Good managers are not necessarily good leaders. In the construction industry there is much more management focused than leadership focused.

In terms of the work place like construction it is much more normal to refer to people as managers except perhaps those at the very top of the organisation who would probably see themselves as leaders. But lower down in a hierarchical organisation people are likely to say that they manage. But they are likely to be effective manager if they have good leadership qualities. It is important to spread or distribute the leadership down through the organisation as everyone thinks they are leaders in some way. A leader-manager model will therefore be more effective rather than a leader alone or manager alone model.

## **DISCUSSION**

The captured expert knowledge about construction, gender and leadership has been discussed in the aforementioned chapter.

Leadership in construction industry depends on circumstances, the type of experience of the leader, the skills and knowledge of the subordinates, and the culture of the organisation. The industry is moving towards collaborative, mentoring, guidance, building relationship, and communicating. The labour force now is more literate and knowledgeable. Leadership in the industry is more of a guidance role as people sometimes expect the leader to guide them. In the process of guidance certain commands and control may have to be imposed. The trend is moving from 'looking after customer' to 'looking after employees' as it is believed that if employees are motivated then the customer satisfaction will automatically be achieved. Therefore leadership could be getting the best out of the workforce by making them enjoy the job.

Talking in stereotypes, men are more focused on the tasks and less focused on the people doing those tasks. Women would probably focus more on people and may see the tasks as less important. Therefore it could be said that men being more concerned about time; about deadline; about getting a job finished, whereas women might be more concerned about collaborative; the ways things are being done; and whether everyone is contributing. But based on the experience of the experts, there are lot of men who are very people focused and there are men who are not at all decisive. Similarly, there are women who are very focused on the tasks and can be quite brutal with regard to people. Therefore it could be a mistake to assume women are always going to be sensitive about people. Although the gender characteristics play a part, they are not the only factor in the leadership styles exhibited. The styles are influenced also by role models and what behaviour women leaders have seen. If a woman's role model is a very stereotypically male kind of leader, then she may exhibit some of those characteristics when she herself becomes a leader. Because that is what she has learnt. Coaching and training would help to overcome this, by enabling women to take what is the best of those characteristics. Not all the female qualities are very good for leadership. For example, it is not respected if the leader is overly tentative and overly indecisive. Therefore to some extent, even if it is going against the grain of women's personality and the way they typically behave, they may have to behave rather more definite way than they might normally. However, the gender stereotypical views and expectations act as a barrier for women to lead effectively and efficiently. For a woman to lead in a male dominated industry there should be a level of acceptance. People in the industry need to believe that women can lead successfully. Success can be in various terms, for example delivering a project on time, within the budget; managing a team and making everyone happy; dealing with and solving problems. Therefore if women can prove the success then it will give a key opportunity, despite the fact there could be barriers for women in doing so. The collaborative culture that the industry is trying to move towards could also leave more scope for women.

## **CONCLUSION AND WAY FORWARD**

This paper is produced based on the expert interviews conducted as part of this research. The gender stereotype and leadership issues in construction are addressed in this paper. The knowledge and experience of the experts are shared and this will help to take this research forward in the right direction.



The construction industry in UK has changed over the last years and it is considered much more a cleaner, safer and service industry. The number of women managers who are in the industry is still very low. However there is a realisation that the industry needs to maximise the utilisation of the existing workforce in order to help to address the skills shortages and the recruitment difficulties especially at senior and middle management levels. It comprises of people from different culture, different disciplines, and with different levels of knowledge, experience and skills. This diverse nature of the industry leads to a culture of fragmentation. However, by linking the team working with the diverse workforce the fragmentation can be reduced. The culture in fact is moving, but slowly, towards collaboration leaving more scope for women to join the industry. In this regard, it is considered imperative to analyse and understand what benefits women managers could bring to the construction industry. Thus, the contribution of women managers towards the construction industry needs to be explored and investigated which is the next step of this research.

As part of primary data collection case studies will be conducted among the women managers in construction, both at senior and middle levels, in order to analyse their role in the construction industry and to find out what type of leadership styles that they typically exhibit. Also construction being a male dominated industry, the impact of such context on the way women lead will be analysed. Semi-structured interviews and questionnaires will be used as data collection tools for the case studies. The knowledge captured through expert interviews will be carefully considered in every stage of case study research in order to produce a comprehensive conclusion.

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