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Abstract

Despite the proliferation of research on the lack of women holding leadership positions in organisations, antidotes prescribed for improving gender parity have failed time and time again. We conduct a case study to observe and explore the participants evaluations from a specific intervention: The Leadership Development Program in an international energy company based in Norway. We seek insights from participants in into how such programs can be useful for career advancement, and to add understanding of what dynamics affect such career advancement for men and women. Our findings are grouped into two categories: dynamics inside the leadership development program and outside the program. Findings include insights on how the leadership development program develops confidence, confirmation and self-development beneficial for career advancement, with some gender differences. The findings on dynamics outside the program indicate the significant importance of organisational initiatives such as career opportunities, career rotation, follow up and managerial support, dynamics that are lacking at the case company. Recommendations for improvements to the case organisation's program are given.

Research question

What can the reflections of participants of a leadership development program add to the understanding of the dynamics of career advancement for male and female employees?

Introduction

Women across the world continue to face inequality in the workplace, despite the clear disadvantages that gender inequality has for society (WEF, 2017a; Credit Suisse, 2012; McKinsey, 2016). Improving gender parity would have significant national and international economic consequences, with the potential to increase global GDP by US\$5.3 trillion by 2025 by closing the gender gap in economic participation by 25% over the same period (ILO, 2017). The presence of women on corporate boards has also been correlated with financial performance, and one study showed that having at least one woman on a corporate board lead to higher return-on-equity, lower gearing, higher price/book value and better average growth (Credit Suisse, 2012). There is also a value-based case for promoting gender parity, as women constitute for 50% of the world's population and should have equal access to health, education, economic participation and earning potential, and political decision-making power. (WEF, 2017a). Despite this, parity levels appear to be stagnating, and in 2016 it was estimated that gender parity would take another 168 years to achieve (WEF, 2016).

The representation of women in managerial roles has been slow, and women account for only 24% of senior roles globally (McKinsey, 2018; IBR, 2018; Eagly & Carli, 2007). As of the 2018 Fortune list, only 24 women (4.8%) were CEOs of Fortune 500 companies, and one third of businesses globally have no women at all in senior management (Catalyst, 2018; Grant Thornton, 2016). Representation on executive committees is likewise small, with 15% of seats being occupied by women in European organisations in 2017 (20-First, 2018). Research indicates that not only do women want to work (WEF, 2017), they also want to get promoted to the next level of their organisations (68% compared to 67% men) and reach top management positions (48% compared to 44% of men) (McKinsey,

2016; Ely, Stone & Ammerman, 2014). Of those that wish to become a top executive however, 42% of men but only 25% of women believe it is likely to become a reality (McKinsey, 2016). This suggests that there are hindrances not in the motivation of women themselves but in society that cause a lack of career advancement for women. In fact, recent figures illustrate that the underrepresentation of women in management cannot be explained by attrition, and that men and women are leaving their companies in equal numbers (McKinsey, 2018). Education is no longer an explanation either, as women are matching, and in many cases out-doing men in educational achievements. Women in the United States for example are more likely than men to finish high school and obtain more higher education degrees at a bachelor and master level (Aud et al., 2011).

Despite this, women have lower chances of being selected for a position at entry level (48% of entry level positions), and subsequently achieve less and less representation as the seniority level of positions increases (McKinsey, 2018). Research found women make up 48% of entry level positions, 39% of manager positions, 34% of senior manager positions, 30% of vice president positions, and only 23% of senior vice president and C-suite positions (McKinsey, 2018). This research highlights that *career advancement* is not happening for women as it is for men, and it is this element that we wish to explore.

Norway is one of the world's leading countries concerning gender parity in corporations and ranked second in 2017 & 2018 on the Global Gender Gap Index (WEF, 2017c & 2018). Recent years have consecutively shown a steady increase in representation amongst legislators, senior officials and managers. However, as of 2018, only 22% of executive committee positions were held by women in Norway (with only 21 of the 200 largest organisations having a female CEO). At 31%, representation on corporate boards is better than executive committees (significantly higher than the European average of 15%) (CORE, 2018). However, only boards subject to gender quota legislation have a gender balance. There is also a significant difference in representation between the public and private sectors, with the public sector leaps and bounds ahead of the private (CORE, 2018). It is for this reason that a focus on the private sector is needed.

It is on this backdrop that our study is based, with a Norwegian, private sector company as our case study. Many companies are seeking to address their gender inequality issues, and our aim is to analyse one such attempt to do so. The purpose of the study is to explore whether participants' evaluations and experiences from a specific leadership development program (LDP) can assist the case organisation in their goals for achieving greater gender parity in leadership positions. The case study presented concerns a Norwegian organisation struggling with improving the gender balance in leadership positions, despite high representation of women in its LDP. We seek to understand what career advancing effects the LDP has, and whether these are felt in equal measure for men and women.

Literature Review

Reasons for gender inequality in career advancement

A lack of demand (as opposed to supply) for female leaders has been cited as the main reasons for there not being more women in senior positions (Gipson, Pfaff, Mendelsohn, Catenacci & Burke, 2017). Demand issues concern discrimination, gender bias and stereotyping issues. Gender stereotypes typically dictate that women are and should be communal (Eagly & Karau, 2002; Fiske, Cuddy & Glick, 2007). Agentic characteristics seen as necessary for leadership are typically traits that are expected of men (such as confidence and assertiveness; Schein, 2001). Women displaying such characteristics experience backlash for behaving in ways that do not match stereotypes (e.g. Heilman, Block & Martell, 1995; Koch, D'mello & Sackett, 2015; Heilman, Parks-Stamm, 2007; Ely, Ibarra & Kolb, 2011). Thus, women face the challenge of defying expectations held about them as women or expectations about them as leaders, as the two appear to be mutually exclusive (Gipson et al., 2017).

According to implicit leadership theory, followers hold specific stereotypes about what makes an effective leader, influencing the perceptions of their superiors (Stockdale & Crosby, 2004; Ely et al., 2011). Descriptions of such behaviours are typically masculine traits, indicating that a man's style can be preferred simply

because it fits what subordinates expect. Men are also preferred for male-dominated jobs (gender-role congruity bias), a phenomenon particularly strong when the evaluators themselves are male, and one that does not consistently decrease with an increase of information about candidates (Koch, D'mello & Sackett, 2015). Women also face a social likeability penalty for success due to incongruence with prescriptive gender stereotypes, or a violation of social norms (Heilman, Parks-Stamm, 2007; Ely et al., 2011). As a result, women are more likely to hold back from building strong networks to support their leadership ambitions in order to avoid such penalties (Ely et al, 2011). This research indicates that there are significant differences in the challenges that men and women face regarding career advancement in leadership. Research also indicates that women also tend to display a more transformational leadership style than their male counterparts (Eagly, Johannesen-Schmidt, & Van Engen, 2003; Carless, 1998), and are rated more highly than men on charisma (a trait associated with transformational leadership; Groves, 2005). Transformational leadership is typically associated with high organisational performance (Wang, Oh, Courtright, & Colbert, 2011). Despite this, Ayman, Korabik & Morris (2009) found that the higher female leaders scored on certain subscales of transformational leadership, the less effective they were rated by male subordinates (but not female subordinates). This suggests that even when displaying traits that are objectively deemed to be effective, women's leadership is judged more critically than that of men (Gipson et al., 2017).

Men are typically recognised for their potential, whereas women are recognised for their performance (Carter & Silva, 2011). This indicates that career advancement is somewhat more of a challenge for women to achieve, as new, more senior roles may involve responsibilities that candidates have not had the opportunity to display aptitude for. Being judged for the potential to tackle such new responsibilities is arguably more favourable than being judged for current performance in less advanced responsibility situations.

A lack of female applicants can be a cause for a lack of women in leadership, however, not because of a lack of interest, but due to other factors influencing their decision-making (Lawless & Fox, 2012). A study conducted in a political

context has implications that can be useful for understanding issues in a business context. Lawless & Fox (2012) found that the lack of women in politics is a result of the fact that women do not run for office in equal numbers to men, and that this is due to several factors that have a negative effect on political ambition. Women tend to perceive the political environment as very competitive and often biased against them (Lawless & Fox, 2012). This has often proven to be the case in a business context, as women have much less belief than men that they will reach their career goals (McKinsey, 2016). This belief in itself can affect their interest in applying for these positions. Another factor shown, is that women are less likely to feel that they are qualified for a position than men. The study also showed that the female participants were less confident, more risk averse and less competitive than the male participants (Lawless & Fox, 2012).

Another concern in politics leading to less women running for office than men is that they are not getting encouraged or recruited for positions (Lawless & Fox, 2012). The study shows that encouragement and recruitment for a position is of great importance in determining whether a person decides to apply or not. The fact that women are still taking on most household responsibilities and childcare is also cited as a reason. The study shows that the women who advance to top-level positions, are more likely than men to de-emphasize traditional family structures or roles. This suggests that if as organisations want more women in leadership positions, they need a greater understanding of the family roles that women often possess. Women's considerations when contemplating running for office (or applying for leadership positions) appear more complex than for men, as they more often have to make difficult choices about priorities at home and investing in their career (Lawless & Fox, 2012). Adopting these findings from a political context into a business context should be done with caution. However, there are distinctive similarities which indicate that the same issues are experienced in both settings.

Issues concerning a lack of supply and demand of female candidates are not isolated to top management but can permeate recruitment positions at all levels of an organisation. A report by McKinsey (2018) states that organisations cannot recruit more women into top management without recruiting more women into

entry levels, as doing so will create a gap in the organisation, whereby there are no women left in middle management, and hence no future senior managers. The report shows that organisations need to start with closing the gaps in the entry and lower levels of the organisation for the issues with underrepresentation to actually be solved (McKinsey, 2018).

Research on gender inequality indicates that the issue is persistent, and organisations cannot expect equality to happen without actively doing something about it. In recent years, interventions have been implemented, in the hope that they will provide the solution to gender inequality, but organisations have been disappointed by a lack of results. More needs to be done to understand why inequality persists, and why interventions aimed at tackling inequality fail to do so. It is with this theory in mind that we explore a specific LDP in order to understand how it can, and also how it fails to promote career advancement.

Interventions

A great many interventions for increasing the demand for women in managerial positions and thereby improving gender parity have been proposed in research and popular media. These include but are not limited to mentoring, sponsorship, networking, unconscious bias training and designated diversity management (McKinsey, 2016; Kalev, Dobbin & Kelly, 2006). Studies have shed little light on how to best improve the situation, and at times contradict each other (Syed & Özbilgin, 2009). As Kalev et al. (2006, p. 590) put it, “we know a lot about the disease of workplace inequality, but not much about the cure”. Another issue with the theory is that most of the research has been conducted about experiences in general but not about specific practices (Kulik, 2014). Kulik (2014) defines this as HRM “above” and “below” the line, and that there is a research gap concerning specific diversity management activities and when to implement them. More research on specific activities is therefore needed to better understand how they work and which ones are effective (Kulik, 2014). It is this research gap that we seek to contribute to, honing in on one specific intervention in order to explore its

inner workings in detail. The specific intervention is one particular company's leadership development program.

Leadership Development Programs

One specific intervention utilised by organisations is the introduction of leadership development programs. According to McCauley et al.'s (1998, as cited in Day, 2000, p. 1) article, leadership development is defined as "expanding the collective capacity of organisational members to engage effectively in leadership roles and processes". The focus in this definition is on expanding capacity, giving the right tools and knowledge to the employees so that they feel comfortable in exercising leadership roles. According to Kaiser & Curphy (2013) leadership development is a \$14 billion industry in the US alone and is becoming increasingly popular globally.

Some of these programs are designed specifically for women, while others are for both men and women, with organisations utilising them as an intervention to promote gender equality in leadership by requiring that women are prioritised for participation. Research on whether such leadership programs are effective as interventions is scarce (Kaiser & Curphy, 2013). Hopkins, O'neil, Passarelli & Bilimoria (2008) found that effective training programs can improve leader outcomes with up to 18% both for men and women. Training can increase both knowledge and behavioural outcomes. They recommend that, should organisations wish to reach more equal representation in management positions they should encourage and support women to take part in further education such as such executive and certification programs. It's also important from an individual perspective that female seek these training opportunities and encourage others to take part to strengthen leadership development among females (Hopkins et al., 2008). This indicates that LDPs can be utilised as interventions in an attempt to achieve better gender equality in management. The most effective programs are those that are tightly connected to the strategic goals of the organisation (Hopkins et al., 2008). According to Fulmer & Bleak (as cited in Hopkins et al., 2008) the five best practices for leadership development are 1.)

Start with the top 2.) Connect leadership development to the business itself 3.) Construct an integrated leadership strategy 4.) Be consistent in the execution of leadership programs & 5.) Hold the leaders and organisation accountable. (Collins & Holton, 2014; Ely et al., 2011). This indicates that for leadership development to take place, it is not enough to have a well-designed LDP. Leadership development must be something that top management are accountable for, begins at the top and is well connected to the business and strategy. Our study will therefore not analyse the LDP in isolation but consider it as a part of the organisation in order to ascertain how well it is integrated.

Hopkins et al., propose that in order to get more women into management, they must be included in LDPs and encourage others to take part. However, for the case company, ensuring that women are included in their LDP is not proving to be enough to improve the representation of women in leadership positions, as numbers of women in leadership are not increasing in correlation to their participation. There is therefore a need to understand what kind of opportunities and experiences LDPs give their participants in reality, as well as a consideration of other factors external to the program that affect career advancement in the context of the LDP. By examining a specific case, we are able to hone in on particulars and explore the inner workings of such a program in a way that would not be achievable by looking at quantitative data from a distance. By conducting interviews, we are able to explore issues that may not yet be considered as having an effect on the efficacy of such programs, and understand how perceptions and experiences can be linked to outcomes. The nature of the gender inequality dilemma is so complex and intricate that we are not attempting to find causal relationships or specific quantifiable answers, but rather gain insights and a broader understanding of how LDPs can be used for the promotion of career advancement.

Case study

This study investigates a multinational energy company from Norway. The case company size is in the range of 1000-5000 employees and with a revenue of over NOK 50 billion. The case company have an externally provided LDP that has

been run annually in the case company for more than 10 years. The program includes leadership modules developing authentic leadership, leadership skills training, assessment centers, lead and deliver and change management (lead and deliver concerns learning to take responsibility for results and delivering on goals). The program is a significant investment of time and resources for the participants and the organisation. Since 2014, the company has required that at least 30% of the program participants are women, in the hope that doing so will accelerate the number of women going into management positions. However, a significant increase in the number of female participants has so far not correlated with an improvement in gender equality in leadership. Although conclusions cannot be drawn only five years after the change in policy, the organisation wishes to understand more about how their LDP actually influences career advancement. We wish therefore to explore the LDP and the general context further, and look into how or if LDPs can in fact provide the career advancing opportunities for women that the organisation is hoping for.

The case company is trailing behind the national average with regards to female representation. As a result, the company has laid out specific goals for increasing the representation of women in managerial positions in the organisation. Despite higher participation rates of women on the LDP in recent years, percentages of women that are achieving promotions is not improving accordingly, indicating that participation in the LDP is not providing career advancing outcomes.

Based on company facts received from the case company, their current female percentage of the workforce is 23%. The female management ratio the latest five years have been between 21-23% women. Middle managers in the company consist of in total 28% women whereas one step up in the senior management consists of around 21% women. The female managers are spread unevenly across company departments, in some departments up to 59% are women whereas some only consist of 14% women.

The lack of women in the organisation can possibly in part be attributed to the nature of the organisation's core operations. At the middle manager level, the organisation actually have a higher representation than in general at the company,

where 28% of the middle managers are women. On the next level, in senior management only 21% of the managers are women as earlier stated. Comparing these numbers with the number of women in the company in total (23%), the company is succeeding in preserving the female percentages in the middle management levels. However, with only 23% of the total workforce being women, there is a clear need for an increased recruitment of women at all levels of the organisation. This an issue that the company may additionally look to address.

Methods

This paper explores the participant's evaluations of an LDP, to understand the dynamics of career advancement for male and female employees at the case company. The paper belongs to the qualitative field research and interview data is collected. To gather practical information that can add to the existing theory about career advancement and gender diversity in management, the data gathering will consist of interviews with employees that have participated in the LDP since 2010. We are looking at one particular LDP in one specific organisation in order to get rich and in-depth data that can help provide insights into the dynamics of career advancement for men and women.

The case

The study explores one case company, and specifically one intervention for career advancement, the LDP. The idea of having a case study is to find practical, raw and integral data that can be explored in more detail than a larger, more comprehensive study would allow. The case study will build upon interview data, the interview data we receive from the participants of the LDP.

Interviews

The case company has provided information of all the participants of its leadership development program since the program began in 2006. In total there are 160 participants that have completed the course, 48 of which have been women. Of the total participants, 11 participants were selected for interviews consisting of both men and women. The participants have participated in the LDP

since 2010 or later, as there were material changes made to the course in 2010 which could render feedback given for earlier years irrelevant.

The participants were chosen through purposive sampling, which means that the participants were deliberately chosen based on the qualities they possessed. Qualities that were considered when screening the participants were that we wanted a mixture of both genders, different management levels, career trajectories, participation year and departments. Screening the participants on these qualities, we found 11 participants to proceed with. The sample size of 11 interviewees was considered as acceptable as the interview data was complex and as Ragin (2014), cited in Shah, 2017, p. 449) states, “*quantitative researchers work with few variables and many cases; qualitative researchers work with few cases and many variables*”. The interview length ranges from 30-60 minutes. Our project has been approved by the NSD (Etikan, Musa & Alkassim, 2016).

We used semi-structured interviews with the aim to give the participants the opportunity to guide the conversation into areas of importance for them, and allow them to describe and evaluate their experiences more openly. The full interview guide can be found in **Appendix A**. The participants were asked questions divided into two sections. First participants were asked about their experiences and evaluations of the LDP. The participants were asked to give positive and negative feedback about the program, which skills the program developed in general, as well as specific leadership skills, whether they had any goals coming into the program, did they reach their goals, whether the program affected their motivation for work, and so on. Following these questions, the participants were asked more specific questions on the consequences of the program and if the program affected their career advancement. Questions connected to career advancement included whether the LDP affected their career choices and if they found the program useful for career advancement. The participants were also asked questions not connected to the LDP about career advancement, such as which internal and external factors would impact the participant decision making for taking a position in the next level of leadership, what could the company do in order for the interviewee to agree to take a role in the next level of leadership. These questions were constructed in that way to make it possible to compare the answers between

the genders in order to ascertain whether they experience the consequences in the same way or differently across genders.

Data collection

Face-to-face interviews were conducted in eight of the interviews whereas video interviews were conducted in the remaining three interviews where personal attendance was not possible. The interviews were conducted by one interviewer using an interview guide as a foundation (**Appendix A**). The interview guide included both background questions as well as more open-ended questions about the evaluation, and consequences of the LDP. As relevant information came up through the open-ended questions, the researcher could then digress from the interview guide and ask to follow up answers to get richer data on specific themes. The interviews were audio-recorded and subsequently transcribed before being analysed. The accuracy of the transcription was ensured by using a transcription program called *Transcribe*, followed by a quality check of the transcription by listening to each interview and manually correcting the mistakes made by the program. (Mak, Kippist, Sloan, & Eljiz, 2019).

Data analysis of the interviews

The data analysis was conducted once all the data had been collected to ensure that the appearance of themes in the initial analysis did not affect the questions asked in subsequent interviews. The findings in this paper represent the participant's evaluations and subjective experiences and consequences of the LDP at the case company. This data is extracted through inductive thematic analysis and explores the data in relation to the research question. Based on this analysis, we explore emerging themes in the data that seemed connected to career advancement. As the importance in thematic analysis is not how often the theme recur, a lot of the judgement of what themes are important is not only based on frequency but on relevance to the research question. The goal of the thematic analysis is to provide detailed description of each theme instead of discussing the whole data set (Braun & Clarke, 2006 & Jamshed, 2014). We have therefore decided to leave out themes that we do not perceive as adding value concerning the research question.

Braun & Clarke's (2006) step-by-step guide for inductive thematic analysis was used, as this provided a useful framework for a thematic analysis approach. The process started after transcribing the data set, with help from the program *Transcribe* and a manual comparison of the audio with the transcript produced by the software. We started the analysis by reading the data set several times, familiarising ourselves with the content. This allowed initial ideas and patterns for potential themes to materialise. Such initial themes and patterns were recorded by highlighting sections of text and tagging the highlighted section with a broad theme. The first phase in the analysis was done individually through a mutual Document. In the initial coding we read through the data set several times individually and searched for anything that we felt could relate to the research question in any way. After the initial coding, we compared our findings and discussed what emerging themes and patterns we experience in the data set. Through discussion we then managed to agree on how different groupings of ideas could be collected into specific themes. We experienced that the segments could be grouped into themes that explained a broader level than the segments alone (Braun & Clarke, 2006).

The fourth phase in Braun & Clarke (2006) step-by-step guide is to review the identified themes. Together we went through the text again, considering the importance of the themes, and checking whether these themes addressed the research question in a way that reflected the content of the interviews. At this stage we discovered an important theme that had not been identified previously, as well as splitting a collective themes into two separate themes, as we felt that on closer inspection, the segments of text collected were in fact describing two different phenomenon's. Some themes that were initially identified were also left out due to a lack of relevance to the research question. In the process we experienced that both researchers agreed on most of the segments of data but also disagreed on a few data sets that made us leave out a few segments. After reviewing and refining our themes we were left with those that are named in the **model 1.1** in the results chapter below. Each of the quotes that were building our themes were grouped in the documents so that we could read what the participants said on a specific theme. These quotes were grouped on gender so that it allowed us to assess each theme for gender differences. Analysing for gender differences

was the next step, which was approached by reading them through individually to create our own opinion on whether there were any gender differences or not. Later we discussed potential gender differences. Most of the gender differences found were rather distinct, with several text segments backing up each finding. However, in some cases we experienced some gender differences, but felt that these were too subtle to build a case upon. These were therefore left out of the analysis.

Next in the process is identifying what each theme explains about the data set and explaining why it connects back to the research question. We collectively went through all of the text segments in each theme and wrote a summary of what meaning the content gives in regard to the research question. Once this was completed, we could see clear categories that the themes belonged to, which helped to create greater understanding of the analysis and the conclusions that could be drawn. The categories that these themes appeared to fall into where themes connected to career advancing outcomes from the program itself, labelled “inside the program”, as well as themes relevant to career advancement that are not LDP outcomes, labelled “outside the program”. These fall into two separate sub-categories related to individual differences and organisational initiatives.

The last phase of thematic analysis is to produce a report that we present in the results section of this paper. We identified, organized and interpreted themes from the answers given by interviewees. These themes are all dynamics that add to the understanding of career advancement for men and women.

Ensuring quality of data

In order to ensure the quality of the data set, we used Guba’s criteria for assessing the data. Guba’s criteria are organised into credibility, transferability, dependability and confirmability. Credibility was ensured through researcher-triangulation which hindered subjectivity as well as bias. All coding was reviewed by both researchers in order to counteract analytical blindness. The nature of our study (case) inevitably restricts its transferability. The dependability is confirmed through having written protocols in both the data collection as well as in the analyzing process. Earlier in the methods chapter the interview and analysing

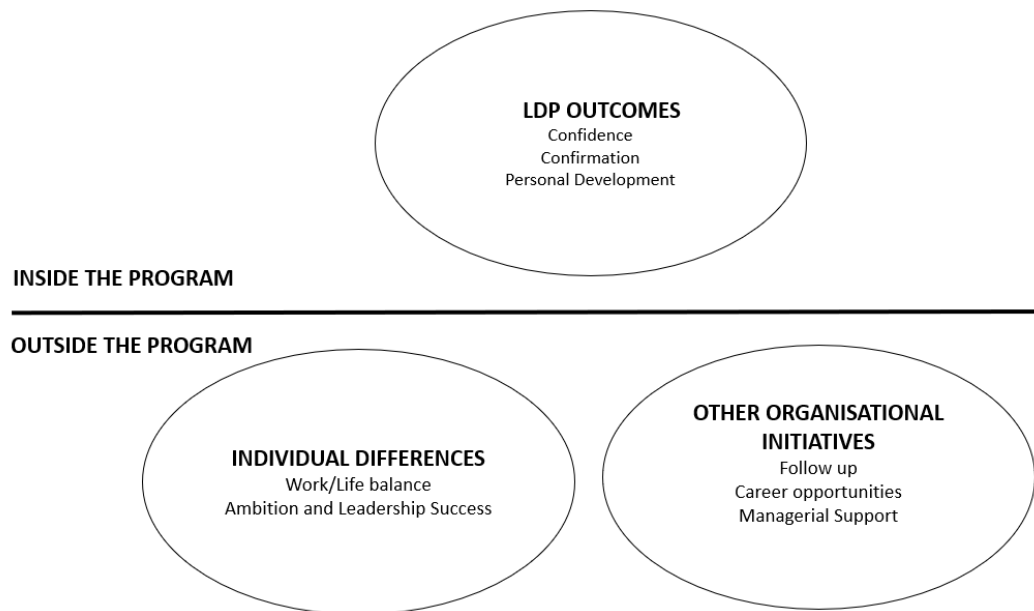
process were described in detail. By using a standardised interview guide, the interviews were performed with some consistency throughout the process, however, we adapted the interview guide questions slightly where interviewees found them unclear or gave responses angled at a different topic to the one we were pursuing. Finally, objectivity was ensured by having a demonstrated methodology, and making it traceable. The interviewers and the participants did not have any kind of relationship before the interview process which reduces the possibility of researcher bias. The project is approved by the NSD, the Norwegian center of research, confirming that the conducted research follows the requirements for collecting personal information (Guba & Lincoln, 1982).

When using direct quotations from the interviewees in our results section, we identify participants only by gender. We have chosen to refrain from mentioning age, management level and department. The small number of participants in the study mean that giving such information could make them easily identifiable, so in order to respect anonymity we have left this out. We have also exchanged references to the company's name with “*company name*” in the quotations, and replaced the name of the leadership development program to *LDP* in order to preserve anonymity. The same applies to any names of employees of the company, which are replaced with *name*.

Results

The analysis of the interviews and company information implies that our findings can be split into two main categories for understanding the dynamics of career advancement. Themes related to career advancing outcomes from the actual LDP, or “Inside the Program”, as well as themes relating to career advancement that have surfaced from our study, but that are not direct outcomes of the LDP, or “Outside the Program”. The Outside category comprised of two sub-categories concerning findings on Individual Differences and impacts on career advancement, as well as Other Organisational Initiatives. Collectively these themes help us understand the process of career advancement for male and female employees and the role that LDPs have to play.

Model 1.1: Illustrates the findings divided into two categories, dynamics inside and outside the leadership development program. LDP outcomes are dynamics of career advancement that are experienced inside the program whereas individual differences and other organisational initiatives are dynamics that are connected to career advancement outside the LDP.



Inside the Program

LDP Outcomes

Themes that arose concerning aspects of the actual LDP that seem to affect career advancement outcomes have been gathered under the category, LDP Outcomes. There were three noticeable themes concerning the program’s content: confidence, confirmation, and personal development.

Confidence

When searching for patterns in the data, confidence emerged as a prominent theme. By analyzing the data set provided from the interview, we see that both men and women experience an increase in confidence as an important outcome of the LDP. The data shows that most of the participants interviewed reported feeling more confident in various ways by participating in the LDP. However, the program enhanced confidence in different ways, with some participants reporting becoming more confident in managing the tasks that they faced in their current

role, while others reported increased confidence in their ability to manage the next level leadership, and in some cases a confidence increase that instrumentally affected their actions, prompting them to actually apply for positions.

Our analysis showed that confidence-building was a universal experience. However, after analysing the results collectively we cross-examined them comparing for gender differences. Splitting the data based on gender showed us possible gender differences in the way types of confidence men and women gained. The data on confidence showed us that women often experienced that the program gave them confidence in the role they already have, whereas the men gave no mention of this. Examples of women's answers include,

"It's also helps in being some more secure in situations. Yeah, knowing that I'm quite good at a lot of things and being more sure about it." - Female

"I didn't feel very confident in the role. So the program actually helped me to to find more confidence and to understand, you know, you understand a lot a lot about your style and maybe everybody doesn't need to be very kind of assertive, but to be more aware of different communication styles and the styles which may be our mostly applicable or easiest for me to use". - Female

The women in the program also became more confident that they could handle a more senior position, should one present itself. Examples of this include,

*"So yes, it made me more definitely more confident in the fact that okay, I think I got the talent but I also have the capability of being a leader a good leader and it has if I find a position that I would like and have I would like and have I would definitely go for it. Having this with me from from *LDP*." - Female*

"You just get out of it, with more wisdom and more competence and more understanding that actually I could I could take that step. All right, I could be manager for more people I could if I want to step up." - Female

The difference between the genders concerning confidence was that the men in the program had similar positive effects on feeling competent enough that they possessed the skills for a higher position, but in addition experienced an instrumental confidence effect whereby they felt more compelled to apply for such positions. Examples of this include,

“I think for getting the position it helps just just to have that diploma. Yeah, but of course it gives you comfort to apply.” - Male

“To dare to apply and to take on take on challenges within leadership” . - Male

*“I wasn't a leader when I signed up for *LDP* and now I am. It has made me more comfortable taking on leadership positions...it give me more comfort and I dare to take on leadership positions that are maybe all of us wouldn't have dared to take on.” - Male*

The gender differences here are not on such a scale that generalisations can necessarily be made. However, they raise interesting implications about the mental process of the participants. The findings imply that for men the program gave them confidence in a more instrumental way, and pushed them to apply for new positions, whereas women received confidence in their current position or regarding them being able to manage a higher position. If this is the reality, then LDPs are possibly benefitting men more than women, or at least that they translate to career advancement outcomes in a greater number of cases for men than women. Earlier research also implies that women are less likely to feel confident about them being qualified enough for a position than men. Our findings strengthens this, but it appears to be more complicated than initially implied (Lawless & Fox, 2012). The data shows us that it can impact the decision-making for women when applying for higher positions. The enhanced confidence in different decision-making areas shows the importance of participating in the program for potential leaders of both genders (Lawless & Fox 2012). This finding is also interesting due to the studies of Carter & Silva (2011) that states that men are typically recognized for their potential whereas women are typically recognized for their performance. This research could also provide an additional

explanation as to why women are more preoccupied with performance in the current position than men.

Confidence is of great importance as it affects people's choices in fundamental ways. An interesting quote by one participant on the program was,

"I guess at least many females need that extra push. So when when there's positions which are going to be filled maybe someone needs to push the females as well to try to grab the positions because sometimes we don't believe in enough in ourselves to do it." - Female

This supports what our findings imply; that both male and female participants received confidence from the program, but that there are indications that women still require more active encouragement in order to apply for higher positions compared to men. This finding underlines the importance of career opportunities and managerial support later discussed in the paper. Based on our findings and earlier research, we argue that confidence can be very important for understanding career advancement and that gender differences should be taken into account considering confidence.

Confirmation

The data set also revealed an interesting outcome from the LDP that directly impacts on career advancement: Confirmation. More specifically, the LDP was useful to the participants for ascertaining whether leadership was in fact something that they wished to pursue at all. Statements pertaining to this include:

"[my inclination for management was] Maybe not strengthened and maybe not changed. That was just confirmed. I think so more that I got the confirmation".- Female

*"there was an open position as a leader in one of the department in *company name* and I was considering applying for that position. And with the course, I would say that with the course I felt more certain that I wanted to pursue such a opportunity rather than if I had not attended the course."*.- Man

The LDP also gave some individuals the realisation that they did not possess the desire to become a leader:

“[after the LDP] I remember talking to a person that said yeah, he realized that he didn't want to manage, which was really insightful”.

*“I know some that...decided not to be leader...maybe the *LDP* program helped this person to realize that. I think he is much more happy now. This person is still a very key resource for the company...[measuring success according to how many people became a leader after the program] is not necessarily the right answer. You could find out that leadership isn't for you. Yeah, and then it's best for the company that that person does not get a leadership task. That...could be a success as well”.*

These reflections indicate that LDP can provide useful experiences that enable individuals to ascertain whether leadership is in fact something that they wish to pursue. Although the program involves a significant resource investment from the company, it is arguably more beneficial that participants are given this opportunity to put their ambition to the test, so that they are not in a management role before finding out the leadership is for them. Although this outcome is small, it is an important one for organisations. For those that are ambitious about leadership, the LDP provided many with the conviction that they wanted to pursue leadership, which would arguably motivate their pursuit of leadership positions, and thereby chances of career advancement.

Personal Development

When examining the data and observing for themes, one initial and very clear theme that surfaced was a consensus that the LDP teaches the participants greater self-awareness. Every participant that was interviewed mentioned that the program gave them personal insights, including understanding what type of personality they had, as well as their strengths and weaknesses. Quotes verifying this include the following:

“it taught me a lot about myself and about how I handle situations”- Female

“It was mainly learning my strengths and weaknesses”- Male

Many of the participants also mention how this self-awareness has made them better leaders, for example,

“the setting is good because it teaches you mindfulness... it's really good leader not being swallowed up by short-term stuff and then losing losing sight of the long term goals”- Male

Several of the participants also mentioned more specific learning outcomes from the LDP in the form of various leadership tools. Coaching, communicating, dealing with conflict and listening to others were all mentioned several times. The following are examples:

“Some of the basic tools you learn are extremely useful. Coaching in that, active listening techniques, these kinds of things. Quite useful to get a bit more frame around why people are different, meaning some basic behavioral types”- Male

“It taught me...some tools about how to how to handle situations when I find it uncomfortable or I'm not sure what to do”- Female

“I mean we have to prepare to take very difficult conversations with team members... I actually sacked my first person some months ago... and I could go back and use some of what I learned back [in the course] and it kind of went okay”- Male

An interesting observation was that in the case of participants that felt they did not get the self-development outcomes that they had hoped for, all of the participants took personal responsibility for this failure. Far from blaming the LDP itself, they put the lack of development to their own failings to dedicate themselves to the course, or for adopting the wrong approach to learning. An example of such reflections is:

*“I did not get kind of a very concrete effect very fast from *LDP* other than the network and some sparring partners and good friends. I can talk to you about leadership type things. That in itself is valuable almost enough, I think but, I didn't I fail that kind of practice the tools we were taught. Basically I failed on making them mine”- Male*

The program itself was highly praised by all interviewees, indicating that it is well planned and executed. We feel personal development is a relevant outcome of the LDP affecting career advancement, as individuals that exhibit superior leadership qualities and skills in their current roles arguably have stronger chances of being favoured in a recruitment process for higher positions. The LDP clearly helped develop participant's core leadership skills, such as active listening, coaching. Greater self-awareness is typically a characteristic associated with effective leadership (Sosik & Megerian, 1999), and something all participants made reference to about the LDP. Participants gained greater awareness about their strengths, and also what came less naturally to them, giving them the opportunity to practice and improve on such skills. This arguably gives them the opportunity to become better leaders than if they had not participated in the program, and thereby indirectly influences the career advancement opportunities.

Outside the program

Individual Differences

There were certain themes that emerged that seem to refer to career advancement outcomes, but that were not directly linked to the LDP. These themes arose from questions asked in the second part of the interview when we moved on from focusing on their experiences in the LDP to questions about career ambitions and experiences. The individual differences themes includes aspects inherent to the individuals participating in the program, that we perceived to be connected to the core values of the individuals, and therefore not things that the LDP would change. The themes provide interesting and useful insights for companies to consider about career advancement, and how to facilitate for advancement. The

category Individual Differences includes work/life balance and ambition & leadership success.

Work/Life Balance

Attitudes concerning work/life balance seemed to be a factor that affected career advancement. Although these findings do not link to the LDP, they are of interest when considering career advancement generally, and therefore included. When asked what factors would influence choices about taking a position in the next level of the leadership hierarchy, both male and female interviewees cite being able to maintain a desirable work/life balance, suggesting that career advancement is affected by personal priorities and life situations. One interviewee answered the question thus:

“Whether it would be If that position could provide a good work-life balance still because often you expect that having more senior position you need to be more dedicated to do the work and increasing workload. So that would be a factor”. -

Male

When asked about considering a position in the next level of leadership, one participant said,

“It needs to be limited in the number of hours because I have a family. Yeah, so work life balance, which I think works pretty good at this level and I'm not sure how it works at other levels”. - Female

These answers indicate that although employees have to do with colleagues in the next level of leadership, they do not necessarily feel that they know what the work/life balance is like at the next level. The responses seem to suggest that individuals can make presumptions about the next level of leadership and whether it is compatible with their home-life priorities without knowing what the reality of such a position is like. Such findings suggest that if companies wish for more employees to advance, they must not just facilitate for flexible working conditions, but also vocalise that this is the case also in senior positions.

An interesting insight from one participant choosing not to prioritise progressing further up the organisational ladder was,

“I think I can do this job well and and but I also have the confidence that if I want to spend more time working with work, I would get the opportunity to do that sometime in the future”- Female

This highlights the fact that although priorities may have a strong influence over the decisions of employees, they can change over time. Companies should therefore avoid making presumptions about whether individuals are willing to prioritise positions with more responsibility, as this can unnecessarily shrink the pool of possible candidates for a position. The suitability of employees for career advancement opportunities should not be static, but should be reevaluated regularly, as inclinations for new positions may change.

We analysed the answers of male and female participants comparatively to questions directed about what aspects would affect decisions to take a promotion. Taking all the answers to these questions and separating male and female answers for analysis revealed some slight gender differences in the answers of male and female participants:

“I need to have [work/]life balance. My kids are extremely and families and very important to me. Yes. I have to have a fighting chance of being active father.”- Male

“I would very much try another another another level, or the next level, but for me, I just got a family. I don't I can't take leadership positions positions far away from Norway... so for now as it is for now I have to kind of see if there is any vacant position position in in the area of South Norway or something...I can do travel but I cannot kind of stay away for years or something like that”.- Male

“I can travel but I can't travel from Monday to Friday”.- Female

These statements show how dedicated men can be to maintaining a work/life balance. However, when comparing the interviews of men and women, there seemed to be a genuine divide in expectations of men and women as parents. Wishing to be an “*active father*” is typically praiseworthy in western society, whereas being an “*active mother*” is an expression not commonly used (Marsiglio, 1995). Similarly, the other male participant quoted explains that he can travel, but not stay away for years due to his family, whereas the woman was opposed to staying away “*Monday to Friday*” for the same reason.

This theme supports theory on the differences in expectations of priorities between mothers and fathers in society that research has so often highlighted (e.g. McKinsey & Company, 2016; Lawless & Fox, 2012). Our results support research that indicates that maintaining a work/life balance is more a necessity for women and a choice for men. In a survey of Norwegian workers for example, achieving a work/life balance was cited as the biggest challenge that women face in the workplace (Gallup & ILO, 2017). This inevitably affects career advancement, as women that do not share responsibilities of childcare and tasks in the home are more likely to feel the need to hold back from more responsibility at work (Lawless & Fox, 2012).

Ambition and Leadership Success

When analysing answers on the question of how participants got to their current role, a recurring similarity emerged: The marked lack of focus on “making it” up the career ladder to get to leadership positions. This theme is not linked to the LDP, but provides interesting insights on whether career advancement opportunities should be given to those who seek them the most, or rather to those that don’t necessarily ask for them, but that are suited in other ways. Examples of participant’s responses about how they have advanced so far in their careers include:

“To be honest. I think I did not become a leader to lead people first and foremost. It wasn't I would like to have impact on people...but I saw that my profession, my specialization grew, it became bigger and I couldn't do it alone”.

“I was promoted, and still I don't have ambition to be a top leader. I've never had that ambition...I think structures and hierarchies and that kind of stuff is actually not my thing”.

Several participants attributed a lack of desire to progress further in the organisational ranks to their preference for pursuing a career as a specialist. One participant stated:

“for me the career choices are between the leadership part and and the expert part being a specialist. So from my side, I enjoy both but not leadership to such extent that I want to weight that even higher cause now I have a mix In my current role and having more leadership responsibilities that is not appealing to me having more people or a larger organisation to follow up”.

When asked whether leadership was something that one participant had aspired to, their answer was,

“...no I hadn't. I hadn't searched for that path or done anything for entering into kind of that career path, what but then it started when I got the first responsibility of building up the first team and then, you know, then you are heading a couple of people and it starts rolling. So I would say I haven't, it's more that I've been open for new things and haven't said no when things are coming to me. But yeah, it's more like that. It's not a very thought through step”.

These statements prompt an interesting perspective concerning ambition- whether it is necessary for leadership success, and whether recruitment of new leaders is too heavily based on individuals themselves taking initiative, if indeed many capable leaders are not seeking promotions. Whether or not ambition is a relevant concern for leadership is also pertinent with regards to gender, is there has historically been significant focus on this. There is a significant body of research on ambition with regard to leadership positions and gender. While some research claims that more men aspire to positions of power than do women (Credit Suisse, 2012), others declare that women are more ambitious than men, but doubt that their wishes will become reality (McKinsey & Company, 2016). Our research

prompts a different perspective altogether: whether we should be preoccupied by the apparent presence of ambition when it seems so disconnected with leadership success. Many of the participants of our interviews are in high levels of leadership, experiencing rewarding and successful careers. However, many of them have reached their positions, not because they have actively sought them, but because they simply “*haven’t said no*” when new opportunities are presented to them. One trait worth exploring in this regard is humility. According to Morris, Brotheridge, & Urbanski (2005), humility is “a personal orientation founded on a willingness to see the self accurately and a propensity to put oneself in perspective”. The work of Collins (2001) provides strong evidence for the utility of humility in leadership, identifying it as the marker of a leader’s intrinsic wish to serve. Collins (2001) found that one of the things that consistently high performing organisations have in common is that they are run by individuals who possess a blend of humility and strong personal will. Such leaders are ambitious, but their primary focus is the success of the organisation rather than personal success. Such leaders are arguably more concerned with delivering high performance in their current job role rather than seeking higher status and power elsewhere. It is perhaps plausible that individuals with high levels of humility are not preoccupied with advancing their personal careers and will accept higher positions but do not actively seek them as much as those that are attracted to the “celebrity” of leadership (Collins, 2001). This prompts the question of whether recruitment processes in the higher levels of management that are based on employees taking initiative themselves by applying may be missing out on significant talents that simply do not aspire to progress further. The findings highlight the importance of managers identifying talents, providing sponsorship and actively recruiting so that those less likely to actively seek management positions are also considered as possible candidates and encouraged to apply despite not necessarily having thought to initially.

Other organisational initiatives

During the course of the interviews, there were several themes that emerged about other organisational initiatives within the organisation that were important in order for career advancement outcomes to be a reality. These were very prominent

in the data, with several candidates giving in-depth explanations about how they felt that the outcomes of the LDP were being stifled by a lack of these organisational initiatives. While a lack of follow-up and a lack of career opportunities were themes directly highlighted in the participant's feedback, the importance of managerial support was a more subtle theme observable in their comments. The following are the themes that appeared under this category.

Follow Up

The data collected from participants on the program highlighted a general consensus that the LDP finished quite abruptly and lacked subsequent follow up. This finding adds understanding to the dynamics needed for LDPs to successfully help men and women in career advancement. The data shows that the general feedback on the program itself is very positive, but that many participants felt there was a lack of follow-up after the program which could affect whether the program succeeded in producing career advancing outcomes. Some quotes from the data set show this,

“I would have liked after finishing the program is after a year or two, maybe an add on module right on that. Yeah, because because I think this also this also needs to be brushed up it needs to, we drown in daily life. So you need to you need to kind of be reminded a bit once in a while.” - Female

*“As I said, I think maybe the *LDP* program could have some potential in the after the course ends in a way. Maybe *company name* could do some things to make the participants to grow better if you know what I mean? Yeah some more focus on that. That's my opinion. I think that's a potential for the organisation”. - Male*

Some of the participants even suggest that the lack of follow up affected their motivation for work such as,

“Yeah, what would you say you pop the bubble, the reality comes back and we actually, for most of us fall in the deep deep, well not depressed depression, but

because there was nothing that the the program was finished and there was no follow-up.” - Female

“There was no follow up on the program and then LDP was over...then the reality comes back and that was... kind of shock for most of us because now we have that energy now, we have the feeling that we have, yeah energy, power or that we want to do something and then: ‘poff’”. - Female

The program itself clearly gives the participants a lift in motivation, but as the program is not followed up, the potential gain or utility of this motivation seems to be reduced. Follow up events, such as a mentor session, a meetup event for internal networking or clear career planning could significantly enhance the outcomes of the program that are detailed in the “Inside the program” section. One of the participants stated:

*“*LDP* is a fantastic foundation. It just it could have been, the fruits of it could have been extracted even more extensively and I think having become even better if there had been something following the *LDP* program.”. - Male*

The utility of the program is brought under question by participants due to the lack of follow up. One participant demonstrated this by saying,

“I think I think it could be back to my point if we had been shown that you know, I think they have told us that it costs with everything included, is it 100,000 euros per person participating which is you know, a significant amount which I think is to be appreciated that that amount is spent on you. But I think if they had spent another, you know 5,000, every second year on each of us. We would have felt that our development, our further development was really appreciated and we would have continued to develop internal relationships.” - Male

Following up the participants in the program would potentially be a simple but valuable initiative that prompts stronger outcomes for the company. A lack of follow-up currently means the program risks only providing enriching insights for participants about themselves without subsequent skills being developed as a

result. Earlier research supports these findings. Research indicates that the most effective programs are those that are tightly connected to the strategic goals of the organisation, and interventions that are decoupled from the organisation's everyday activities will fail as they are not integrated into the organisation but are simply ideals that get forgotten in the busyness of corporate life (Hopkins et al., 2008; Kalev et al., 2006). Follow up would mean that the LDP was not decoupled from the organisation's activities, but became an integral part of them.

According to the study by Gurdjian, Halbeisen & Lane (2014), one of the main issues for LDPs is that their effects are very difficult to measure. Follow up initiatives are classified as being measurable, through 360-degree feedback sessions focused on behavioral change both in the start of the program as well as half a year or a year later can be beneficial for measuring results as well as getting an update on the career development.

There seems to be no question as to the quality of the program itself. However, the benefits and outcomes of the program can arguably be optimized to a much greater degree if a follow-up plan is put in place. Following up and integrating the program with the organisation is according to existing research proven to make the program more efficient. Topics that participants suggest would be helpful include networking events, feedback or mentoring sessions, help with converting the program into work roles, and developing a career plan for further advancement. The last topic- further advancement and career opportunities- is an emphasized topic in the data which will be discussed in the following subchapter.

Career opportunities

Further analysis of the data set revealed that participants feel that the company is failing to integrate the program with the strategic aims of internal career advancement within the company. This can add to the understanding of career advancement as it gives concrete modules that are needed for the LDP to be utilised from a career advancing perspective. The data evidence for this will be

presented in the following sub-themes, first discussing lack of visible career opportunities, lack of career planning and limited rotation.

Lack of visible career opportunities

Several of the program participants state that they are struggling with seeing and finding career opportunities within the organisation, which directly affects career advancement. Participants mentions things such as,

“I strongly state that there isn't any perceived link between having done the program and how you are being kind of assess for further opportunities.”. - Male

“I'm holding the same position now as when I joined... I haven't made any big career jumps or anything, but I think that's not because of the program, so it's other both choices and opportunities.”, - Female

“No career jump is always depending on opportunities that there is” - Female

These comments indicate that the LDP is not sufficiently supported by visible career opportunities available to candidates. There are other examples such as

“There's also lacking the signals that... 'we are aware of you that you want you to develop' and I'm saying, you know, it's not all about climbing the ladder, it's about developing.” - Male

The last quotation implies that the issue is not solely about the career opportunities being visible, but also giving signals to employees that the organisation is following up on their career development. Existing research confirms that training and development such as LDPs, are only beneficial for participant's career development within an organisation if there are visible career opportunities internally (Kraimer et al., 2011). Research shows that employees that are given development but cannot see clear career opportunities are more likely to leave their organisations. When considering gender, earlier research shows that the career opportunities can be even less identifiable for women compared to men due to a lack of female managers in the higher echelons of

organisations. As women have less role models in the form of other women that have achieved a management position above them, they may be less confident about their ability to reach the organisational level they aspire. Therefore, having visible career opportunities can be of great importance both for the efficacy of the program as well as the organisation's attrition rate (Ely et al., 2011, McKinsey, 2016 & Credit Suisse, 2012).

Lack of career planning

The second sub-theme that our data analysis showed with regard to career opportunities is a lack of organisational career planning. This is also connected to the follow up theme, whereby after the program participants express their interest of having a mentor or development talks, setting the career path for the employee or goals for the future. One of the participants speculates whether it is intentional or not that the company does not discuss possible career paths with employees, saying,

“In general, we are not very good at, maybe we shouldn't be so, it's not the kind of critique, it's just an observation. We're not very good at having a clear path available for everyone. And it's yeah kind of career planning. We're not very good at that maybe on purpose”. - Female

Another participant discusses whether people are actually advancing as much within the organisation, speculating that maybe there needs to be a clearer career path,

*“So far I haven't actually seen that many people who are really climbing up the ladder here, going through *LDP* and then all that. They're [at] the L4 and L3 and normally stop. For young [ambitious] people it might be better to have a longer plan than only...12 months.”* - Female

*“But you know there is a Norwegian mindset and Scandinavian mindset of of don't believe you are special... And I think I think *company name* is quite typical in that sense. We officially don't want to create a goldfish pond of talents. We don't*

want to signalize anyone that you you are on some kind of development track”. -

Male

The organisation creates to some extent a group of selected talents when choosing employees for the LDP, but the yield from having such a pool is arguably limited due to the lack of career planning or development afterwards. Due to the lack of further career planning or mentoring of the participants, the program is even perceived in one case as simply “ticking the box”:

*“I think *company name* doesn't give or doesn't care too much about the the actual outcome of *LDP* participation or the leadership program participation beyond that for I think for corporate HR it is ticking boxes...It is showing to me as an individual when I got the chance- ‘We think you are a talent. We believe in you therefore you get this opportunity’. However...I would like to strongly state that there isn't any perceived link between having done the program and how you are being kind of assessed for further opportunities”.* - Male

By having structured career planning or developmental follow up integrated with the program, participants could feel more valued and noticed by the company. Communicating that even if there are no apparent immediate opportunities in the short term, the organisation has a plan to develop them long-term. (Kraimer et al., 2011).

Lack of career rotation

Another recurring sub-theme of career opportunities among the participants is the interest and issue with limited career rotation possibilities. Job rotation gives the organisation the possibility to observe their employees in different settings and roles (Ortega, 2001). Although developing career opportunities is often thought of concerning vertical advancement, horizontal advancement opportunities seem to be perceived as motivating and fulfilling for some participants. Interviewees state that they feel job rotation possibilities within the organisation are too limited.

Some of the participants stated the following:

*“I think *company name* is...not very good [at seeing] all the leaders under one umbrella. We're talking much about rotation these days but we are actually only rotating in a very very close areas.”, - Female*

*“Maybe *company name* could be better to do like kind of some kind of rotation system or something like that. As for me. I'm still kind of relatively stationary”. - Male*

The data set implies that the rotation is too restricted and the organisation could look to initiate rotation between departments that do not necessarily have a natural connection, such as rotations between HR and production, or finance and marketing. Several discussions in the interviews focused on rotations and several participants showed their interest rotating within the organisation.

*“From the hierarchy point of view, I think I'm on the level, I want to be but I could actually lead I think and that's also what what *LDP* help me with even if I haven't changed that much during last five years. I've moved [internally in the department], but what I can actually think about is to...something different... for example HR...because from a certain kind of leader management level you are not the specialist anymore. I think if you have the leadership... skills, and you probably also can manage to to manage specialists in other areas than your area right?..That's why I also mention if *company name* have been a bit better on the rotation”. - Female*

As the data shows, there is an interest in rotation, but the data implies that participants do not know how to go about pursuing horizontal rotation. The participants that have not considered this option appear very open to the idea, but it is the organisation's responsibility to create the foundation for such an initiative.

The company's diversity statistics also confirms the need of job rotation from a gender perspective. The company has a low percentage of women in all levels of the organisation, and the female managers appear to be concentrated in a few departments such as in the supporting departments where 59% of the middle

managers are female, compared to operational departments with 14% of the middle managers being women. This indicates that job rotation could be an efficient way to bring women into the management pipeline in all departments.

The data collected provides valuable insights regarding gender equality in leadership considering existing theory by Ely & Meyerson (2000). Their research suggests that top leaders are often recruited from departments such as sales and operations that are historically very male dominated. Job rotations across departments could therefore be instrumental in helping the organisation reach its goal of getting more female leaders into the management positions. According to earlier research, job rotation can have the same effect as a promotion or a salary growth on employees (Campion, Cheraskin & Stevens, 1994). Job rotation is seen by employees as an investment in their development by organisation, which increases the employee's satisfaction, involvement and commitment to the organisation (Campion, Cheraskin & Stevens 1994). Other benefits of job rotation are enhancing the internal network, transferring company culture across departments, as well as personal development benefits such as coping skills. The potential cost of job rotation can be increased workload, decreased productivity or increased learning costs, emphasising the importance of a well-integrated and efficient job rotation system. (Campion, Cheraskin & Stevens, 1994)

Managerial Support

When analysing the data, we noticed a pattern in the way interviewees had received their current positions, and a position on the LDP: Their manager had put them forward. This theme does not give insights into the outcomes of LDP, but is nevertheless important for understanding how career advancement often works in practice. Nomination of individuals to participate in the LDP itself appeared to be a decision solely made by management. Participants confirmed this in several instances, for example,

“First of all, I didn't even know I was nominated. So it was my manager who told me that I got the space in the program. So I didn't know I applied”. - Female

The same can be said of many of the promotions attained by interviewees- they had not actively sought them, but rather had been encouraged, nominated or selected by their managers. Examples include,

*“I wouldn't have gotten this job if, by coincidence I didn't work with *manager's name* a while ago... It's a bit random. And that's for me that's worked well, but it's not clear to me what will happen next”. - Female*

“[Researcher:] Do you feel like you in a way kind of got a bit lucky then in the fact that your boss saw you kind of pushed you into the first position that you came into is that? [Participant:] Yeah because or else I would never have applied for a position which included heading a team. No...because I didn't feel that I had any experience to speak of”. - Female

Having someone demonstrating faith in them and giving active encouragement to dare to take the next step seems to be of particular importance for women in the data set. The importance of having a manager that believes in them was interestingly a recurring theme amongst female participants, but not once mentioned by men. A good connection with their manager was also cited several times by women but not at all by men. One example of many similar statements is:

“What I need in order to function well is a manager that believes in me”. - Female

The fact that there is a clear gender difference concerning statements given about the importance of managerial back-up supports the theory that women benefit more from an active role of a sponsor figure (Ibarra et al., 2010). One participant said,

“I guess at least many females need that extra push. So when when there's positions which are going to be filled maybe someone needs to push the females as well to try to grab the positions sure because sometimes we don't believe in enough in ourselves to do it”. - Female

This highlights a key issue in the gender differences in the need for encouragement. Lawless & Fox (2012) suggest that women are less likely to feel qualified for a role than men, which could explain the need for more confirmation. The same study showed that encouragement and recruitment for positions is decisive for whether individuals choose to apply (Lawless & Fox, 2012). One participant noted,

“it is easy to look at organisation charts and to think about some managers are quite good to lift on gender... I was only female on the program for one year. And that means that there is something that we can still improve on”. - Female

Clearly defined sponsorship initiatives that are followed up regularly seems like an important step for the company, as unofficial sponsorship is behind many of the promotions occurring in the organisation that has a very informal approach to career advancement.

Sponsorship is an advanced form of mentorship whereby sponsors goes beyond typical mentoring activities (giving feedback and advice) and advocate for their mentees and help them get to the next level of the organisation (Ibarra, Carter & Silva, 2010). There is evidence of informal sponsorship taking place in the organisation, for example the female participant whose manager put her forward for the leadership development program and took her on as part of a new team without any formal recruitment process having taken place. According to Ely et al, et al. (2010, p. 5), *“without sponsorship, a person is likely to be overlooked for promotion, regardless of his or her competence and performance—particularly at mid-career and beyond, when competition for promotions increases”*. Research on sponsorship shows that women who find mentors or sponsors through formal programs had received more promotions by 2010 than women who had found mentors or sponsors on their own (informally), by a ratio of almost three to two (Ibarra et al., 2010). There is much evidence of the need for a formal sponsorship program in our data, as women and men alike do not feel they know where the opportunities are in the organisation, and in the case of several of the women interviewed, lack confidence to put themselves forward for new positions. Among

all participants who had found mentors on their own in Ibarra et al's study (2010), the men received more promotions than the women (again, by a ratio of almost three to two). Sporadic, one-off sponsorship appears to take place in the organisation, but this seems to be only benefitting a few, and is doing little to address the larger problem of a lack of women in leadership positions. Findings show that best-in-class organisations that have successful sponsorship programs make sure to address the following: clarify and communicate the intent of the program, select and match sponsors and high potential women in light of program goals, Coordinate efforts and involve direct supervisors, train sponsors on the complexities of gender and leadership, and hold sponsors accountable (Ibarra et al., 2010).

The further up the hierarchy that women come in an organisation, the more they lack the social support of other women that have achieved management positions above them (Ely et al., 2011). This reduces the identifiable career opportunities that women have compared to men, and is reflected in research that implies that, despite at least equal ambition, women have much less belief in the fact that they will actually get to the organisational level that they aspire to (McKinsey, 2016; Credit Suisse, 2012). Such a phenomenon is referred to as women's recruitment disadvantage, and it in turn depresses ambition (Fox & Lawless, 2010).

Reporting on Gender Attitudes

In order to observe the attitudes of participants on gender equality in the organisation, we asked all of the participants whether they felt that gender played a role in management decisions in the company. Although this is not a theme in our analysis, we have chosen to report on their answers, as they give interesting insights into the current status in the organisation, and the differences in perceptions of men and women. There were notable differences in the responses of men and women. The majority of the women interviewed perceived that the number of women in leadership could be a problem. The following are some examples of their responses:

“Yes I think it's a bigger problem than acknowledged, Yes, I do. I think the numbers kind of speak for themselves. It is kind of a that's an objective fact. And it's not pronounced by anyone... there's nobody talking loudly about this and nobody is saying that it's it could potentially be an issue. And then when it's not acknowledged as a potential issue than things keep on as they've always been”.-

Female

“I haven't experienced that but sometimes I reflect upon it because it's absolutely more male managers than female, but for me personally I have never I've never experienced that being a female is...negative for getting a position”.- Female

*“Good question. It is a very very male dominated area. I work with mainly men when you work with the technical, still I have to say that in *company name*, I myself have been very well perceived, I'm acknowledged...I know in other areas that I'm involved in that it's definitely plays in”.*- Female

The examples given show a reflective approach to the question. Interviewees that do not feel that they have experienced a social penalty for being a females are nevertheless aware that their personal experience does not necessarily reflect the full spectrum of experience. When the male participants were asked the same question, however, the responses were quite different and included the following:

*“No, I will not say that... I know that *company name* has a lot of quality female leaders that I think are doing an excellent job. So I cannot see any reason that women should not be succeeding as leaders in *company name*”.*- Male

“No, maybe it's a bit. I don't think so. If anything it's probably a bit easier for a woman... we're a state-owned company and there's assuming some pressure to try to move towards...50/50 than the current status which I don't disagree with in general. I've had the several kind of males and few female leaders through the years and if I would average them out my preference is female. I have had some very good female leaders”.- Male

*“I literally developed the lady that ended up being my successor...But I think all in all *company name* is open to this is by no means having a negative culture. But I think *company name* is just struggling with the legacy of being male dominated and therefore It is difficult to change things overnight. Therefore maybe there is a rationale to quota. So women into certain roles, but, I think, Leadership opportunities are given independently of gender in *company name*, that I think I could say in general”.- Male*

A common trait amongst male responses seems to be to take a defensive stance. The way many interviewees used personal experiences of positive scenarios for females as an answer to whether they believe there may be an issue in general arguably indicates some defensiveness- a reaction possibly to feeling personally attacked by such a question. Several of the male participants genuinely feel that such a problem does not exist. This supports the concept that for those who possess it, privilege is invisible (Geiger & Jordan, 2014). Privileged members of society are either unaware of their advantage or choose to overlook it. This supports findings from a Gallup & ILO (2017) study in which males and females were asked if they thought a female with similar education and experience to a male has a better opportunity, the same opportunity or worse opportunity to find a good job. 6% of men and 3% of women chose “better opportunity”, 64% of men and 55% of women chose “equal opportunity”, and 29% of men and 42% of women chose “worse opportunity”. According to Geiger & Jordan, (2014, p. 263), *“When confronted with the reality of privilege; previous entitlement to invisibility can lead to surprise, acknowledgment, discomfort or denial”*. One male participant was open to the fact that the company had low representation of female leaders saying,

“Yes, I think so we say and we try to ‘oh we need to put women in leadership positions’ but we are not good enough”.

When asked why he thought this was the participant replied, *“I don't know. Men prefer men”*, but when he perceived the researcher had understood his answer to be including himself, his response was an exclamation,

“I don’t do that!...My last leadership recruitment was a woman...but no I don’t know, I still think...men prefer to recruit men”.- Male

This short exchange highlights an unconscious bias problem: people are often unwilling to own that they can hold unconscious bias and instead of exploring the possibility that even with the best intentions, they may also fall prey to bias, they put the blame on others. According to Hooks (1981, p. 138), *“those who have societal privilege [have] the freedom to ignore that privilege”*. Geiger & Jordan (2014) provide the following advice for those with privilege on how to deal with it: First they suggest problematising privilege for those that have it. Next, they propose becoming a social justice ally. This involves demonstrating empathy without erasing or ignoring differences, challenging others and oneself in the belief that change is possible and taking a matter-of-fact approach, *“assuming it is a result of negative results of socialization rather than a moral judgment on one's personhood”* (Geiger & Jordan, 2014, p. 267). Such a stance could make men in the organisation less defensive and more open to the idea that gender inequality may in fact be an issue.

Many interventions focus on attempting to fix individuals as opposed to more structural elements (Bohnet, 2016). It is this flaw that Kalev et al. (2006) attribute the failings of unconscious bias training and networking for promoting the advancement of women. Theory tells us therefore, that for a diversity intervention to be effective it must address structural bias and be embedded in the organisation. The argument is that people cannot be changed, but processes can. Bohnet (2016) suggests gender equality by design, stating that bias is not just built into our minds but also our practices and procedures. Law, regulations and incentives do not always work for influencing behaviour, as we as humans *“do not always do what is best for ourselves, for our organisations, or for the world”* (Bohnet, 2016 p. 5). Automatic mechanisms that circumvent bias is therefore a more effective approach than simply telling people that they have bias.

Conclusion

The results that this investigation has produced reveal interesting insights concerning career advancement when looking at a specific leadership

development program. The LDP Outcomes category outlines specific career-advancing outcomes that are a result of having participated in the program. Personal development includes a greater self-awareness and an awareness of how one differs from others, as well as other key tools acquired during the program that improve leadership ability. This is arguably beneficial for career advancement, as it makes participants better suited to dealing with the challenges that leadership provides, thereby promoting career advancement likelihood. Confidence includes the affirmation that participants feel that they are able to handle their current role, that they would hypothetically be able to manage a more advanced role, and that they can and should apply for such roles. LDPs seem to give ample opportunity for personal development and confidence building, which are arguably both positive for career advancement, as they give participants both the aptitude to handle a leadership role more effectively, as confidence in their ability to do so. Here there were clear gender differences between men and women, with only men reporting a confidence increase instrumental enough to persuade them to apply for higher positions, while the women interviewed only experienced more confidence concerning their ability to effectively manage their current and possible future roles. The theme confirmation revealed that LDPs are also useful for helping participants reach realisation about whether leadership is in fact for them or not, which can have a negative effect on career advancement if their experience convinces them that they would rather stay where they are or become a specialist, for example. However, as one interviewee astutely observed, deterring participants that do not feel suited for leadership from pursuing such a path is arguably a positive outcome for the organisation and for the individual. In sum, the LDP itself provided some outcomes beneficial to career advancement, but these outcomes are somewhat indirect and do not provide large instrumental effects for career advancement.

When considering Outside the LDP themes, there are substantial results concerning themes that affect career advancement. Themes in the “individual differences” category do not directly affect LDP outcomes but reflect aspects of the individual where change is difficult, unethical or simply out of the question. Individual’s beliefs about their preferred work/life balance are difficult to change, and it would arguably be unethical to do so (for example, attempting to convince a

leader that the next position in an organisational hierarchy is worth sacrificing their current work/life balance for). Organisations should therefore seek to accommodate for varying needs associated with maintaining a work/life balance in order to best promote career advancement opportunities. It is worth noting that the case organisation appears to be providing good conditions in this regard. Results about the apparent dissociation of ambition with leadership success provide interesting food for thought considering how organisations recruit, and whether we are hiring the best leaders, or the ones that want to climb highest. Focus on ambition is apparently unnecessary, and organisations should rather be concerned with finding and recruiting their best potential leaders and incentivising them to manage teams.

When it concerns the other organisational initiatives, the study suggests that these factors have a fundamental “make-or-break” influence on whether LDPs are successful for career advancement. In this case study we see that much is left to be desired for the positive outcomes of the program to translate into career advancement opportunities. A lack of follow up and clear career opportunities mean that the positive outcomes of the program that should be affecting career advancement are short-lived, and participants are left feeling frustrated and disorientated. Both the interview and company diversity statistics imply that job rotations can help the organisation both with regards to career advancement as well as gender balance in management. The data also shows how instrumental managers are for facilitating career advancement, and these effects were also influenced by gender, with women seeming much more dependent of their managers for career advancement.

Attitudes regarding gender reveal that bias is in everyone, and that attempts to remove bias from an individual are fruitless. These results underline that in order to promote career advancement, companies should not focus on changing deep-rooted personal values, but instead change the organisation in order to circumvent them.

Recommendations

The LDP in itself is producing great personal insights for participants about their personalities, strengths and weaknesses, communication styles and so on. The program is well thought-out and very well received by participants. We do not recommend material changes to its content, therefore. The organisation also takes a commendable stance when it comes to flexibility and allowing employees to maintain a work/life balance they feel is manageable. In this way, they are able to retain their talents through life changes. However, there are areas that we have identified that, if implemented could considerably improve career advancement opportunities for employees.

Recruitment

If organisation's internal recruitment is done passively, expecting candidates to put themselves forward, they may miss out on some of the best talents. Findings on ambition suggest that companies should take a much more active approach and select, encourage and nurture potential talents for positions, as talents that are "too humble" or simply not focused on career advancement may otherwise never take initiative to apply. Women have been shown to fall into this category more often than men, so by more actively recruiting, the organisation could see more women leaders being promoted. The research suggests that many of the promotions given are done ad-hoc by managers, proving that they are instrumental in many of the leadership decisions made. Managers can be incentivised to put forward candidates and be rewarded for doing so, and recruitment processes can be built around a feedback system where positions are posted, and managers contacted about whether their subordinates could fit the bill. This is linked to sponsorship, whereby managers take an active role in the career advancement of mentees. This recommendation has an advantage for improving the number of female applicants for roles, due to the findings that suggest that women do not get enough of a confidence boost from LDPs for them to take the initiative to apply.

Other initiatives should also be considered concerning gender equality in recruitment procedures. Recruiting women for leadership positions without ensuring equality at entry level positions achieves short-term goals, but fails to

ensure a future of female talent in the long run. Recruiting women into entry level positions must therefore be taken as seriously as efforts to generate more female leaders, as without the first it is impossible to ensure the second in the long run. Recruitment procedures can be structured to avoid unconscious bias, which our findings (supporting earlier theory) suggest is invisible particularly to those possessing privilege. Although men are willing to accept that bias exists, it is harder for them to accept that they themselves may be part of the problem, and as a result recruitment procedure should accommodate for this. Initiatives include writing gender-neutral job descriptions, de-identifying CVs, having a diverse interview panel and setting out a clear set of ideal characteristics before interviewing candidates.

Follow-up Module

The research suggests that initiating follow-up initiatives would have two instrumental effects: maintaining the motivation of participants and helping them to retain the learning outcomes of the LDP. Follow-up could include mentoring sessions with the course instructors or a relevant person within the company. Such sessions could be one-on-one, as well as group sessions which would ensure that the network benefits of the LDP are maintained. Arranging meetups for the class of each LDP year would also facilitate this. Responsibility for such meetups could be delegated to a willing LDP participant who takes responsibility for their year. Subsequently, the amount of time the participants invest in such activities will be up to their preferences, but the organisation should still take responsibility to facilitate for such meetups, providing ideas, resources and guidance. Career development conversations should also be included in the follow-up of LDP candidates (discussed further in the career planning recommendation).

Sponsorship Program

There is evidence in the data that ad-hoc sponsorship occurs in the organisation. However, if there are to be consistent positive effects on leadership progression, sponsorship should be formalised. This recommendation is particularly important for the advancement of female participants, whom our research indicate are often dependent on active encouragement in order to seek promotions. By establishing a

program whereby sponsors are incentivised and relationships are followed up by the organisation, a sponsorship program could be a positive experience for all parties involved. The following should be addressed to ensure a sponsorship program is effective: Clarify and communicate the intent of the program, select and match sponsors and high potential women in light of program goals, coordinate efforts and involve direct supervisors, train sponsors on the complexities of gender and leadership, and hold sponsors accountable.

Rotations

Our findings show that a more comprehensive and inclusive job rotation scheme is a potential area for improvement that would make career opportunities more visible and offer career advancement in an instrumental way. Leadership talents in the organisation could get a greater sense that they are valued and that possibilities are there should they wish for a new challenge. Job rotation is also closely linked to career development discussions, as having feedback session where employees get to express their wished career paths and where the organisation can mentor their employees on what options there are internally. Rotations is also an initiative that could particularly benefit women, as senior managers are typically recruited from operations departments, which are rarely where women advance in an organisation. Having the possibility to migrate horizontally could open up opportunities that are not visible from the area of the company that the employee typically belongs. A rotation system could also help preserve talents inside the organisation until possibilities for vertical progression materialise.

Career Planning

Career planning is another way of helping employees to realise their wishes to move upwards or sideways in the organisation and find new challenges. Talking to a relevant superordinate about aspirations and motivation for current and possible future positions could mean employees feel more valued, and that they are “going somewhere” in their current employment. This can serve as motivation to stay with the company, as there is a clear future. Such conversations could also help managers with active recruitment, as it makes them aware of the ambitions

and interests of their employees. Career planning could have motivational outcomes for the employee, and recruitment outcomes for superordinates.

Executive Management's Endorsement

For any of these recommendations to become a reality, initiatives must be endorsed fully by executive management. Research tells us time and time again that without the support of C-suite executives, the chances of initiatives not being prioritised and fading out in the busyness of corporate life are high. When concerning diversity management, top management's personal intervention is ranked as the single factor managers considered to be most important (Morris, 1992). The specific recommendations suggested therefore need public management endorsement and sufficient allocated resources in order to be successful.

Final Statements

The LDP has positive learning outcomes for participants, but these outcomes do not translate to career advancement due to a lack of organisational initiatives in the organisation that utilise the LDP to its maximum potential. Ensuring that women participate in the LDP has not in itself improved gender parity in leadership, and we believe this is due to the fact that the organisation is failing to support women with other organisational initiatives needed to combat the challenges women face in career advancement. By following our recommendations, we feel the participants of the LDP and the organisation will experience more positive outcomes concerning career advancement. If these are incorporated, we believe that gender equality can begin to improve in the organisation.

Limitations

As with all studies there are limitations to our findings. First of all, as the study is done through a case study in a Norwegian company with a limited number of participants, we do not expect the findings to be generalisable to all other cultural contexts. However, we do think the findings are valuable for organisations beyond Norway and can help many organisations that consider LDPs as an intervention

for career advancement among their employees. We are also aware that gender differences may be exaggerated in our findings, due to the small sample size.

There are also cultural considerations that could have affected the answers from the interviews. Typical of the Norwegian culture is the emphasis on humility as a core value, and appearing overconfident is a particularly negative trait. We realise that this can affect the answers given by participants that may not want to want to make statements that could make them appear overconfident or ambitious. Too much ambition or confidence breaks the cultural norms of a Norwegian stereotypical citizen. Another obstacle concerning the reliability and honesty of the answers given by interviewees is the personal nature of some of the questions. It may be unpleasant for participants to admit that they are not happy in the current position or feel that they are not where they had hoped to be. It is innate for individuals to wish for others to see them as successful, so admitting that they are not where they want to be in their career can include emotions of shame or disappointment, making honest concession more unlikely.

The interview process was fully anonymous; however, we still believe that an obstacle in getting honest answers may be that the participants see it as a risk to open up to a complete stranger. It is difficult to know for example how safe a participant feels about opening up regarding such a sensitive topic in an interview setting that is taking place at their place of work. This limitation is not present in the same way during the video interviews, however, here one can speculate whether the video format be creating other issues of lack of personal contact due to not meeting the researcher face-to-face.

One considerable limitation of this study is language. The interviews were conducted in English which was not the mother tongue of any of the participants. We observed that the language made some participants unable to answer in depth in some situations and some could not find the right word to describe a scenario. At times, interviewees used a word that did not match the meaning of what they were attempting to express, which could have given misleading data had the researcher not asked for clarification. There may also have been instances where the researcher did not perceive these mistakes, and miscommunication may have

resulted. Language was a barrier for the flow of the conversation, and something that limited the content of the data.

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Appendix A

Interview Guide

Interview Introduction

Length: 45-60 minutes

Explain the primary goal/ purpose of the interview: Understanding the experience of being a participant on the leadership development program *LDP*

Address the terms of confidentiality: The interview is completely anonymous

Explain the format of the interview: Open questions, follow-up questions

Tell them how long the interview will be: 45-60 min

If you want to you can get in touch with us by:

Laura Mercer Traavik: laura.e.m.traavik@bi.no

Do you have any questions before starting the interview?

Verbal Consent

Would you like to participate in this interview?

Verbal Consent was obtained from the study participant

Verbal Consent was NOT obtained from the study participant

“Describe” questions

- Please, tell me about your experiences in the *LDP* program (negative and positive things)
- Why did you participate?
- Did you have any goals coming into the program?
- Did you reach your goals by participating in the program? How come?

- Has the *LDP* program affected your career choices? Give specific examples, why do you think that is?

“Evaluation” questions directed at outcomes

- What did you find useful about the *LDP* program? (Give examples)
- What could be improved about the *LDP* program? (Give examples)
- Did you find the *LDP* program useful for career advancement? In what way or why not? Can you give us an example?
- Did the *LDP* program affect your motivation for work? To come to work and to do your work. If yes, please explain
- Did the *LDP* program develop your competencies as an employee?
- Did it develop your leadership skills? Can you give an example? Why do you think that is?
- What other outcomes did the program have for you?

“Gender” questions

- What factors would impact on whether you would take a position in the next level of leadership in the organisation (internal and external factors)
- What would *company name* have to do for you to take a role in the next level of leadership in the company?
- If they had a position available in your area that was the next step up, would you go for it? Why? Why not?
- Do you think in careers in the company that gender play a role in leadership? How? Why do you think that is? Why not? Do you have any examples of this?
- Do you have anything to add to the interview?

“Background” questions

- Invite interviewee to briefly tell us about him/herself: General information about work background,
- Ambitions as a leader, aspiration? Are you where you hoped to be in your career?