

Narratives of ‘bad leadership’: Experiences and perspectives of successful Icelandic female leaders

Sigrún Lilja Einarsdóttir and Einar Svansson¹

Abstract

Conservative, male-oriented company culture makes the corporate ladder more slippery for women, who are probably more likely to deal with “bad leadership” from superiors. The lessons drawn from the experiences of women, who have accomplished unusual success as top directors in their organizations, are important guidelines to improve management. This paper reports primary findings from an Icelandic study on the characteristics of exemplary Icelandic female leaders and top managers and their leadership styles. Data was collected through qualitative semi-structured interviews with a chosen group of women that have got nominations and/or prizes for excellent leadership record in recent years in Icelandic organizations. Participants provided various narratives on their experiences of bad leadership (mainly from men in management positions), the more experienced interviewees felt pressured at times in their career to assimilate themselves to the male culture in their corporations and that the glass ceiling was indeed visible until they tried to break it by pushing forward and obtain power positions. Majority of the interviewees had experienced tunnel-vision, narrow-mindedness and resistance to change among their male counterparts and tendencies of top-down management, arrogance and pride, leading to incompetent mode of communication that can lead to weaker, non-professional decision-making with lack of diversity and open dialog ending in worse results for the organizations. Findings indicated that unacceptable working conditions, and the implication of stress and too much workload can transform a good leader to demonstrate some characteristics of a bad leader.

JEL classification: Xx; Xx.

Keywords: Bad leadership; female leaders; diversity; top-down management; equality.

1 Introduction

Experiences and “horror stories” of “bad leadership” are probably more common than stories of “excellent leadership” and can be a valuable inspiration for further research in the field of leadership. In this context, there are three related arguments that are worth considering: Firstly, when bad leadership occurs, it is frequently due to lack of diversity

¹ Sigrún Lilja Einarsdóttir, Associate Professor, Department of Social Sciences, Bifröst University. E-mail: sigrunlilja@bifrost.is. Einar Svansson, Associate Professor, Department of Business, Bifröst University. E-mail: einarsv@bifrost.is.

and equality in the workplace (Stroh, 2004; Acker, 2006; Triana, 2017; Ali and Konrad, 2017; Desvaux et al., 2007). Secondly, the top-down management is still a big problem in many companies. It leads to negative corporate culture, based on power struggles and internal politics, counteractive to democratic leadership style and empowerment of employees (Shuh et al., 2012; Kellerman, 2005). The first two arguments often lead to bad recruitment techniques where the best candidates for middle and top management positions are left out due to nepotism and fear of competition on the top. The third argument refers to difficult work environment and work-related burnout because of too much pressure and stress, which can make any good manager to deteriorate in communication and decision-making (Shuh et al., 2012; Kellerman, 2005). Bad leaders tend to shy away from delegating and trusting middle managers and co-workers resulting in too much workload and top-down decision making. This behaviour can lead to weaker, non-professional decision-making, tunnel vision and worse results for the organizations (Schuh et al., 2012; Kellerman, 2005; Higgs, 2009; Allio, 2007; Erickson et al., 2007). At the same time, the top director will endure more stress and is in more danger of burn-out and in risk of deteriorating health and well-being (Belyakova and Polyakova, 2017; Ronginska and Dolinski, 2020). It is important to stress that these leaders are not “bad” by nature but can become “bad” due to negative working conditions. It is of high importance to shed a light on why people become bad leaders, for improvement and preparation for people going into management positions.

Exemplary women leaders are interesting cases related to the first argument and they are more likely to cope with even more stress and difficult personal circumstances due to the so-called ‘third shift’ than men (Tabassum et al., 2019; Júlíusdóttir et al., 2018). However, women are not necessarily better “by nature” to lead than men but company culture and cultural gender discrimination makes the corporate ladder more slippery for women than men and women are thus perhaps more likely to experience “bad leadership” on behalf of their former superiors and/or colleagues (usually male) their way up the corporate ladder (Blickenstaff, 2005; Böhmer and Schinnenburg, 2018; Eagly and Carli, 2007; Eagly et al., 2014; Acker, 2006; Akande, 1994; Bruckmuller and Brascombe, 2010; Haslam and Ryan, 2008). Women are also more likely to be in more stressful conditions by shouldering more responsibilities in their personal life than men so women in management may have developed valuable methods to cope with stressful working conditions (Doyle and Hind, 1998; Nelson and Burke, 2000; Belyakova et al., 2017). Women managers are a very good subject to highlight and study some of the predominant topics related to power dynamics in leadership and diversity problems in organisations worldwide. To gain a first-hand perspective from women that have reached the top of the corporate ladder can give a unique insight into this battlefield of power and inequality.

The lessons, learned from the experiences of women leaders in terms of “bad leadership” of some of their former superiors and/or colleagues (usually male); particularly women who have accomplished unusual success as top directors in their organizations, can be valuable to highlight both negative and positive traits and behaviour of leaders. They are also important guidelines to improve management by controlling stress load and use coping techniques against burnout, particularly in difficult circumstances (such as in times of crisis). This chapter reports primary findings from an Icelandic qualitative study on the perspectives of “bad leadership” and the characteristics of exemplary Icelandic female leaders and top managers styles and key values of good leadership. In this light, it is worthy to consider the experience of women and female leaders on the concept of bad leadership – particularly in countries that pride themselves of being the most gender egalitarian countries in the world.

The research question put forward in this paper was the following: How are women leaders in Iceland experiencing bad leadership on their way to the top of organisational hierarchy?

2 Theoretical background

Most research on gender ratio and general diversity in leadership and management point to similar conclusion: Men outrank women in comparison and dominate most of the high-profile CEO and CFO positions worldwide, despite extensive research demonstrating that companies with diversity are more likely to be profitable and gender equality is more likely to increase the profitability. Women are at the same time more likely to shoulder more domestic responsibilities in terms of childcare and household (OECD, 2017; OECD, 2023). Does that make the “bad leadership” phenomenon primarily a “male problem”? As tempting as it is to conclude that, it is more important to wonder how and why bad leadership exists. What options should organizations look at to make leadership “better”. Existing literature is quite focused on “good” leadership (Higgs 2009) but the “bad” stuff is equally important to consider.

This paper is tackling “bad leadership” from various viewpoints, such as focusing on the character traits of “bad leaders”; narcissism (Higgs, 2009), authoritarian leadership behaviours (Schuh et al., 2012; Thoroughgood et al., 2012), ineffective and unethical behaviours (Kellerman, 2005), toxicity, corruption, misguided behaviours, bad temperament, and that bad leaders are more prone to scandals and other epidemics of misbehaviour (Allio, 2007) although they are occasionally awarded for their “bad leadership” (Erickson et al., 2007).

2.1 Ineffective (bad) leadership and challenges for female leaders

Bad leadership (negative leadership) has traditionally been classified into two categories: a) ineffective leadership and b) dark and/or unethical leadership (the leader fails to distinguish between right or wrong and harms people and organizations). Ineffective leadership is our focus in this paper based on the data we have. It is defined as not fulfilling the expectations with proper organizational outcomes because of wrong actions of the leaders or in-action on their behalf. Sub categories of ineffective leadership include incompetent leadership; rigid leadership; intemperate leadership and callous leadership. Ineffective leaders don't reach positive outcomes since they lack either skills or will to do the right action. They are unable to adapt to changing environment and don't learn from mistakes. These ineffective leaders are sometimes known for not caring enough for their subordinates (Kellerman, 2005; Gini and Green, 2012; Khizar et al., 2023).

Even though increased presence of women in leadership positions is considered as a key to a healthier economy, women still deal with negative stereotyping, even though in some cases they may be considered as “the superheroes of tomorrow” (Adams, 2015, p. 371). In a recent study by Kairys (2018) on the influences of gender on leadership in education management, male managers ranked skills in business and strategy of the highest importance (focusing on task-oriented leadership), while female managers prioritised cognitive and interpersonal skills, focusing on relationship development leadership skills (Kairys, 2018). In general, the stereotypical manager heavily relates to the concept of hegemonic masculinity or symbolic masculinity (Connell and Messerschmidt, 2005) and the traditional stereotype of the real and “good” manager tends to be a male and thus some women have throughout the years had the tendency to adapt to the company culture by obtaining certain male characteristics in their leadership styles (Faniko et al., 2017).

Recent research has demonstrated that the negative stereotypes are one of the biggest obstacle women face in terms of climbing the corporate ladder. Women seem to be more reluctant to emerge as leaders in groups, particularly when the group predominantly consists of other women, but mostly in groups high in extraversion where, interestingly, men are in majority (Lemoine et al., 2016) which suggests that women do not automatically become leaders where women are the majority and vice versa. However, a study by Stoker

et al. (2012) demonstrated that individuals who had female managers had stronger preferences for feminine characteristics of managers, as well as preferences for female managers (regardless of gender). Furthermore, people who are generally positive towards women displaying agentic attributes were typically positive towards supporting quotas for women in leadership (Mölders et al., 2018). According to a recent study by Brinkhuis and Scholtes (2018), the gender of CEOs and CFOs were not a specific concern of potential investors. This indicates that the presence of women in leadership position can create a shift in the corporate culture and attitudes towards female managers.

Another dimension frequently mentioned in leadership studies is the work-life balance, particularly in relation to female leaders and managers and that women's leadership aspiration is more influenced by work-life initiatives than men's leadership aspirations (Fritz and van Knippenberg 2018) and organisations that were predominantly male-oriented, work-life practices had limited effects (Kalysh et al., 2016). In addition, self-confidence is crucial in terms of climbing the corporate ladder. In terms of gender, research demonstrate that appearing self-confident has different results for the genders. Women are expected to be more socially oriented, equipped with communal skills, whereas gender stereotypes presume that men are more 'naturally' confident, but women shamed for being arrogant and aggressive (Carlin et al., 2018). In a study by Huang and Kisgen (2013), male executives tend to demonstrate a certain level of overconfidence in terms of acquisitions and issuing debt in comparison with their female counterparts who are more likely to divide the risk and refrain from risk-taking in terms of financial decisions. Furthermore, this type of behaviour, in addition with communal attributes, tends to be required as female leaders are more likely to experience expectations linked to the gendered expectations of their subordinates (Efferin and Haranto 2016). In addition, women are more likely to experience two kinds of biases: Agentic deficiency (which includes minimal leadership potential for women) and agentic penalty (a backlash on counter-stereotypical behaviour) (Rosette et al., 2016). Female leaders face controversial demands for displaying both agency and communion as a result of gender role demands, which creates an internal tension. Zheng et al. (2018) concluded that women may adopt a paradox mindset which includes both agency and communion and thus use it to construct resilience, co-existence and leadership effectiveness. In another study, Kusterer and Montgomery (2013) found that among employees in the bank and insurance sector, men evaluated female managers on communal attributes, but male managers were more positively perceived on agentic attributes among men. Women on the other hand evaluated female managers positively on both communal and agentic attributes.

Akande (1994) refers to systematic bottlenecks that women face within organisations, particularly when climbing the corporate ladder in a male-dominated workplace, often referred as the glass ceiling – an invisible obstacle that women seem to 'hit' on their way up the corporate ladder, despite qualifications, experience, skills and hard work ethics. Studies have shown that informal communications outside work hours and networking are the factors that influence workers' potentials (and primarily men's) to get promoted (Glass and Cook, 2016). Furthermore, mentoring programmes are less accessible to women and they tend to be more likely to be underestimated and perceived as lacking both stamina and essential 'characteristics' and attributes that are considered vital for future managers (Glass and Cook, 2016; Akande, 1994; Folke and Rickne, 2016).

Despite being in the majority (Blickenstaff, 2005; Böhmer and Schinnenburg, 2018) of university graduates, women tend to 'get lost' in the corporate pipeline; ignored and underestimated by their superiors and/or forced to take on part-time jobs due to family responsibilities. Furthermore, issues like gender-based violence and harassment is a prevalent factor where women are more likely to deal with from their male counterparts. Therefore, the path for women to leadership positions is like a labyrinth; the way to promotion is more complicated and confusing for women than men, based on gender pay gap, lack

of opportunities to gain relevant experiences, pressure on demonstrating communal attributes and shamed for displaying agentic attributes, lack of social capital and in many instances they put more workload and workhours in that tend to be overlooked by their superiors (Eagly and Carly, 2007).

However, if the boys in the house have made a mess in the kitchen, it is always assumed to be a "good idea" to get a woman to clean it up. The emphasis on women's skills and capabilities as a "solution" and "salvation" during times of crisis can create a risk for female candidates and cause an unfair pressure on them to be the saviours of the company, to clean up after the screw-ups of their male counterparts (Axelsdóttir and Einarsdóttir, 2017; Bruckmuller and Brascombe, 2010). Hence, studies have demonstrated that women are more likely to be chosen into management positions in times of crisis (Kanter, 1977; Stroh et al., 2004; Glass and Cook, 2016;), particularly when their male counterparts have made a financial mess or partaken in scandalous and/or illegal activities and someone needs to do the organisational housework and end up on the glass cliff (Bruckmuller and Brascombe, 2010; Haslam and Ryan, 2008). On the contrary, men are more likely to be chosen into management positions in times of prosperity. This tendency puts an increased risk on the shoulders of female leaders. Obtaining a management position in times of crisis is a certain risk for their career, plus the pressure of women expected to be better than their male counterparts (Bruckmuller and Brascombe, 2010; Glass and Cook, 2016). What contradicts this position is the fact that some studies (van Esch et al., 2018) have demonstrated that hiring women in management positions is perceived more of a risk, particularly if the woman is only evaluated as "moderately qualified". This can lead to higher levels of stress (Doyle and Hind, 1998) and can increase the risk of health issues, even leading to burnout (Nelson and Burke, 2000; Belyakova et al., 2017).

Studies referenced above show that corporate talents tend to be overlooked or ignored, specifically within male-dominated organizations. Homogeneity and lack of diversity can therefore be considered as a bad leadership trait. The process of identifying problems within the organization is less efficient and reaching out to all stakeholder groups in times of crisis might present unforeseeable challenges. Hence, diversity, democratic leadership and shying away from arrogance (Senge, 2006; Collins, 2001; Sousa and van Dierendonck, 2017) and micromanagement are mechanisms that help with coping in difficult circumstances,, particularly in times of crisis. This paper makes an attempt to draw into light how Icelandic female managers experience "bad leadership" by their (mostly male) superiors and/or colleagues and particularly the methods they use to prevent themselves from becoming "bad leaders".

2.2 Leadership and management in the Icelandic context

Despite Iceland being on the top of the Global Gender Gap Index many years in a row with the smallest gender gap worldwide, the Icelandic job market is still facing challenges in terms of gender equality and diversity. In 2022 the occupational participation is 83,2% among men and 76,7% among women (Hagstofa Íslands, 2022) and men's total average income is about 29% higher than women's average income. Around 38% in parliament and 44% of elected local council members are women but only 1 of 8 supreme court judges. In organizations with 1-49 employees, 22% of managers are women, but the ratio goes down to 10% in organizations with 250+ (Hagstofa Íslands 2018),. A higher ratio of men graduates with degrees in math, science, engineering, but all other fields are dominated by women. In 2022, 66% of university students in Iceland are women but men tend to dominate most fields in terms of high rank positions (Hagstofa Íslands, 2022).

In a more recent study by Jóhannsdóttir and Einarsdóttir (2015), after the economic recession, women are still less visible than men in the Icelandic media, or only 1 woman of every 5 interviewees in the news, which was considerably lower than in the other Nordic countries.

A study by Arnórsdóttir et al. (2017) on Nordic leadership styles indicated that characteristics like trust, clear work-processes, minimal bureaucracy and short chains of command were prevalent and that cooperation, open communication and democratic approaches, critical thinking and caring were apparent within the Nordic context. Another study by Qureshi et al. (2011) showed that female leaders were likely to adopt democratic approaches in their leadership positions in different cultures. A recent study by Óladóttir et al. (2019) demonstrated that women are more likely to be managers in small firms with 1-10 employees and in cases of companies that have 50+ employees, women hold only 13% of all CEO positions. The striking fact is that in November 2023, only one woman represents a company listed in the Icelandic Stock Market. Other research regarding the management style of Icelandic managers indicated a strong link to the past, specifically in the pre-2008 era, viewing Icelanders as the descendants of tough Vikings from the glorious middleages (a narrative drastically supported by Ólafur Ragnar Grímsson, the former president of Iceland and other Icelandic political leaders, particularly right-wing politicians), that they considered themselves to be unique, making quick decisions, working hard with optimism and positivity and by claiming that the “sky is the limit” (Óladóttir and Jóhannesdóttir, 2008, p. 47).

Research conducted around the economic collapse presented this view of Icelandic managers as being extraordinary in some way, causing the extraordinary results in profit and growth (Eðvarðsson and Óskarsson, 2009). However, after the economic collapse, women were more likely to be perceived as ideal to ‘clean up the mess’, risking their careers and reputation by stepping into top management positions in the time of crisis (Ryan et al., 2016). In this context, it is important to bear in mind that the population of Iceland is roughly 350 000, where interconnectedness is unavoidable and the promotion and hiring process can be heavily affected by family relations, political connections (Kristinsson, 2006) and homogeneity. An article by Torfason et al (2017) indicated that within the Icelandic business and commerce elites where relationship structures in many directions and prevalent homogeneity, particularly among top managers in politics, sports, and business (mostly middle-aged and older males). A study by Júlíusdóttir et al (2018) on top managers and the generated interplay of organisations and family life in Iceland demonstrated that while men have longer working hours, higher salaries and more work-related traveling, women are more likely to carry the burden of the unpaid labour managing family and home in addition to their paid labour.

In a study made by Directorate of Equality Iceland (Jafnréttisstofa) in 2015, (Rafnsdóttir et al., 2015), authors surveyed the Icelandic job market with special emphasis on men and women leaders (70% men, 30% women). Results indicated that 35% of male respondents agreed that women had a harder time to deal with stress and pressure than men. Furthermore, 75% of male respondents and 51% of female respondents disagreed that the job market is ruled by men who do not trust women with responsibilities. Half of female respondents agreed that hiring women is not a priority in their organisations. When asked if the gender ratio in management positions would be even if the two genders were equally qualified, 23% male respondents and 15% female respondents agreed. Whether equal gender ratio would affect the operation of the company, there was a significant difference in attitudes between the men and women: 56% of the men disagreed but only 17% of the women. In addition, women were more in favour of paid parental leaves and equality in childcare and household responsibilities. Furthermore, 77% of women and 42% of men were in favour of gender quotas in company boards (Rafnsdóttir et al., 2015).

In 2013, the Icelandic government passed corporate gender quota laws which required the minimum of 40% of each sex in corporate boards. In Iceland, research indicate that diversity and more gender equality in corporate boards results in increased performance and returns on equity (Snorrason, 2012; Sæmundsdóttir, 2009). These legislations were criticised and debated in the public sphere and faced a greater opposition among male man-

agers, as previously indicated (Axelstdóttir et al., 2023; Rafnsdóttir et al., 2015; Rafnsdóttir and Þorvaldsdóttir, 2012).

3 Method

Data was collected through semi-structured, qualitative interviews. A list of prospective participants was made with women who had succeeded in their leadership / management roles (both from the public and private sector), where the main criteria were women who had a) received nominations or awards for their excellent leadership record in recent years in some of the biggest Icelandic organisations (purpose sampling), b) were pioneers in their field and c) were recommended by other female leaders and managers (snowball sampling). Participants were contacted through e-mail to volunteer for interviews. Ten women responded (of 15 who were invited to participate) and were interviewed.

Participants were informed about the nature of the research beforehand and received the question frame by e-mail before the interview took place. Interviewees were asked about their experiences on bad leadership, both from the perspective of leaders they have met on their journey and also to reflect on their own bad leadership tendencies, e.g. what they could have done better while looking in the back mirror. At the end of each interview, participants were asked to recommend 3-5 other prospective interviewees (outstanding female leaders in their perspective) and therefore we used snowball-sampling in addition to the purpose sampling (Charmaz, 2006).

All interviews were audio-recorded (with full consent of participants), transcribed and analysed with thematic coding analysis (Charmaz, 2006). The interviews were anonymous, all identifying details from the interview transcripts were deleted and not used in the reporting of the findings and interviewees were provided with numbers. Due to the small size of Iceland, no personal/demographic details about interviewees (from now on called Interviewee 1, 2 etc.) will be published. All data were kept in a password-protected computer.

4 Findings

The analysis demonstrated three main themes in the data: 1) Lack of diversity and equality in top management; 2) Tunnel-vision and leaders' resistance to change – both conscious and unconscious (also related to gas-lighting) and 3) Top-down management, pride and arrogance. Findings indicated both reflections on what bad (or ineffective) leadership 'is' and what are the probable causes of bad leadership. The results shed a bad light on too much micro-management, arrogance (stubbornness) and conservative attitude. Leaders who do not practice open and informal leadership style are less likely to gain trust from their employees, which might affect their behaviour for the worse. Bad leaders tend to be more individualistic and self-oriented. Plausible causes that lead to "bad leadership", can also be a result of too much workload, overwhelming responsibility and a lack of coping mechanisms and self-care (with women in a specific danger of burning out, due to more domestic responsibilities).

4.1 Lack of diversity and equality in top management

The first theme relates to the homogenous environment of the Icelandic job market. Interviewees had the common perspective that the emphasis should be on empowerment (power distribution) and diversity related directly to team building; using all the skills and knowledge of the workforce to enhance the organization, strengthen the individual employee and unleash hidden talents and increase job-satisfaction.

They mentioned the severe lack of diversity in terms of gender, age, nationality, and socio-economic background. One of the interviewees described the dominating patriarchy

in the Icelandic job market as a kind of “promised land” (heaven), strongly guarded by men positioning themselves along the way as armed guards and gatekeepers who don’t let upstart women easily in. So, the only possibility to get in is to put their foot fast or furiously through the door (Interviewee 7). Another mentioned the frequent experience of being the only woman in meetings, specifically abroad. Her male colleagues now always bring a woman with them in meetings, “otherwise they know I comment on that and make fun of them. Some people claim that this one woman is just for show, but hey, I don’t care – she’s there, she’s at the table” (Interviewee 1).

I had to spend 20 years acting like a guy in a suit – laughing at all the hoarse jokes and adapt to the male oriented culture completely ... Perhaps that experience has provided me with essential skills dealing with male colleagues in meetings (Interviewee 1).

As evident in the above quote the more experienced interviewees talked about their experiences adapting to the male culture in their workplace, and to that experience changing their behaviours to simply fit in.. Some of the interviewees claimed they did not think much about being a woman in a male sector in the beginning of their careers:

When I was young, I made speeches about how easy it is to be a woman in my sector, even though most of the time I was the only woman. That was simply because I wasn’t taking anything away from anyone. The very day I became a threat, the shit show began, when I took something someone thought belonged to him ... (Interviewee 2).

Furthermore, the interviewees mentioned the tendency of male managers to look at themselves in the mirror and say hey, I like this one, let’s hire him!, preventing diversity on so many levels; “missing out on the energy and power of the young people and the wisdom and experience of the older ones” (Interviewee 5). This lack of diversity appears in managers’ reluctance of hiring women to position of power. One of the interviewees told a story about a CEO who contacted her; he wanted to hire a financial manager and claimed that this time, he wanted to hire a woman. However, despite getting many suggestions on capable female candidates, he ended up hiring a man (Interviewee 1).

4.2 Tunnel-vision and leaders’ resistance to change

The second theme emerging from the data was the perceived tendency of tunnel vision and narrow-mindedness among male managers as a part of bad leaderships. Interviewees reflected on their views of how modern leadership styles incorporate a relaxed workplace with some fun factor included. It is fine to “...let the flipper out occasionally and add some punk to it ...” (Interviewee 8), since by doing that the leader can get closer to the employees as an equal with own personality that can sometimes pleasantly surprise and therefore create casual atmosphere and positiveness in the corporate culture. Curiosity / openness to learning and change were also mentioned as important aspects in the modern leadership agenda. In a fast-moving world, the ability to change is as important as ever and the learning curiosity character is more likely to cope with new challenges without resistance and in a proactive manner that builds knowledge in organizations.

An experienced female manager working in a male oriented sector described the prevalent issue that many managers do not stay in the same position for a long time; they jump between companies, staying only for 2-5 years in each position before moving on:

They never stay long enough to experience the implications of their own decisions and their own mistakes. It’s always someone else’s matter to clean up after them – thus they go from one place to another, perceiving

themselves to be ,so cool and they make the same mistakes over and over again and never learn anything (Interviewee 7).

Adding to that, she claimed that the total lack of long-term thinking and planning affects leadership and the systematic ignorance. Some people say that history does not matter – that makes you do the same error repeatedly (Interviewee 7). According to the interviewees, what is characteristic about Icelandic managers is that they are middle aged men with a tunnel vision (misconception) on what is categorized as a good management. They come from the same schools, they have similar background and are blinded by their own privilege. They say they are in favour of equality, but they want all women to be like men;

... and when they interview women, they say “oh, she seems so undecisive” – but isn't that a good thing? This is what interests me in the recruitment process – are we going to hire the cool guy with the cool power point slideshow ... let's think about this a bit, shall we? and this stereotypical image of the manager is just a man who is incompetent (Interviewee 8).

Furthermore, the resistance to change, to learn new things was considered as an obstacle (Interviewee 9), like one of the interviewees put it:

Yes, sometimes people want to put me down and put me in my place [laughs]. I've also been in the position where group of men collectively decide to deliberately misunderstand me, when it suits them to keep things unchanged (Interviewee 6).

The narratives above demonstrate the severity and cause of bad leadership and how it can impact the live and death of organisation. This toxic culture maintains and creates bad leaders, specifically in the fast-moving modern environment, companies sometimes only survive in dire straits if the top management brass is open to change and the change culture is fostered and ingrained into the company membrane.

4.3 Top-down management, pride and arrogance

The third theme referred to top-down management in a sort of 'old-fashioned' context, with a lack of democracy, pride and arrogance associated as a form of communication with subordinates. Direct respectful communication and transparency were topics frequently mentioned by interviewees as essential in modern day management. Open and honest open-book style management and respectfully listening to employees' opinions before decision making were considered essential and desirable.

In the minds of the interviewees, bad leadership is tainted with top-down micro management, where overrated, incompetent managers rule in the shelter of positional power and strong hierarchy, without the knowledge and capability to be leaders (Interviewee 1), being the manager with a big M and using dictatorship and arrogance to maintain power. Individuals who openly aim at being CEOs are not necessarily the ideal candidates for the job, in the minds of the interviewees; “they tend to stink – no one follows these kinds of people” (Interviewee 6). Lacking self-confidence negatively affects managers, causing arrogance and lack of respect, possibly a result of a lack of good role models in leadership:

What I have witnessed, specifically among men, is that they are now the boss and now they are bossing people around and show them how strong they are. In my opinion, this can prevent success, you are just insecure, and you don't really know what you are doing (Interviewee 8).

Another tendency accompanied with a lack of self-confidence is according to interviewee 5 more apparent with male managers who have the tendency to recruit people who are

not as skilled as they are, because they are afraid that someone might take away their position:

They are so fundamentally wrong – you should hire people who have knowledge and skills that you don't have. This way, you will make a better team – but it takes courage to do that (Interviewee 5).

in addition, one significant factor in bad leadership is pride in large quantities; particularly for male managers who according to majority of the interviewees have issues with admitting that they've made a wrong decision and hang on them, even though the situation is aiming for the worse (Interviewee 7).

In addition, internal and external factors like stress, pressure and a crisis situation can have a negative effect on a manager, even though said manager has the reputation and experience of being considered a skilled manager and overall a good leader (specifically by his/her/their employees and co-workers). One interviewee described her experience running her start-up company in difficult times, experiencing her communication skills to turn out for the worse due to stress and pressure:

You stop seeing things you used to see as a manager; you are not as perceptive towards people as before and you are simply in survival mode. You don't notice how other people feel and that's when you stop being a good leader. I was just lucky to have a person who confronted me with this when I was in this mode – of course I didn't agree at the time but it is interesting to reflect on this afterwards and observe what I could have done better as a manager (Interviewee 3).

One of the interviewees claimed that it is “impossible to change a bad character”, however; situations leading to overload of stress can be prevented:

I think with my generation, there was a certain shift away from old-fashioned, top-down dictatorial management style, which is still happening. Being humble and tolerant is easier for women than men (Interviewee 1).

Interviewees all mentioned the importance of strong support from family and friends and are very active physically and mindful. How successful leaders cope with stress and burnout (such as with sports, leisure, and mindfulness) can help to improve leadership tenure and minimize and/or lower the burnout effect in management. How successful leaders cope with stress and burnout can help to improve leadership tenure. That is no less important than trying to correct bad behaviours and/or change bad characters.

5 Discussion

The research question put forward in this paper was the following: How are women leaders in Iceland experiencing bad leadership on their way to the top of organisational hierarchy?

In order to draw some lessons from these findings, it seems to be important to address the culture and structure of leadership positions and roles. This could be helped through reframing or maybe somehow else preparing people better for the role/position. Sharing between two or more people with personal coaching methods and mentoring.

5.1 Lack of diversity and equality in top management

Iceland is a nation of homogeneity and relative lack of diversity. This partly reflects in the job market, specifically in the highest level of management (Hagstofa Íslands, 2018;

Óladóttir et al., 2019; Torfason et al., 2017; Rafnsdóttir et al., 2015; Axelsdóttir et al., 2023). Findings indicated a strong tendency among the more experienced interviewees to assimilate themselves to the male culture in their corporations (Faniko et al., 2017) and that the glass ceiling was indeed visible until they tried to break it by pushing forward and obtain power positions, thus taking something “away” from those men who felt entitled to their promotions (Acker 2006; Eagly and Carli, 2007; Böhmer and Schinnenburg 2018; Eagly et al., 2014).

The narrative of Interviewee 1, spending 20 years in a suit (often being the only female manager in her sector) and assimilate the dominant male corporate culture in her work place is in line with previous research, where female managers adapt certain male characteristics to survive in a male-oriented culture, shaped by power, close connections and even family relations (Axelsdóttir et al., 2023; Torfason et al., 2017; Júlíusdóttir et al., 2018). Furthermore, the tendency of some male CEOs to hire a younger version of themselves and ignoring advice on many capable people (including women) is in reality a part of the patriarchy dominating the corporate culture in the western world, where the tendency is to exclude talents based on race, gender and other demographic traits, who are not perceived as a part of the dominant logic (Kairys, 2018; Connell and Messerschmidt, 2005; Jóhannsdóttir and Einarsdóttir, 2015 Stroh, 2004; Acker, 2006; Triana, 2017; Ali and Konrad, 2017; Desvaux et al., 2007; van Esch et al., 2018).

Diversity is something to look into for leading organisations in Iceland, since there is a dominant homogenous culture that could need a fresh look with infusion of new perspectives from people with different backgrounds and different education.

5.2 Tunnel-vision and leaders' resistance to change

Vast majority of the interviewees had experienced tunnel-visions, narrow-mindedness and resistance to change among their male counterparts and inability to learn from mistakes, since there are examples of male managers who do not stay long enough in their position to experience their mistakes, having difficulties to visualise different types of people in positions of power and sometimes deliberately undermining female co-workers by ‘pretending to misunderstand them’ (Interviewee 6). Some of the interviewers mentioned unorthodox methods to try to lighten up the formalities at the workplace. These findings are very much in line with existing literature about gender-based obstacles in the workplace that women frequently face, where their perspectives are often ignored and are subject to mansplaining and/or gaslighting (Shuh et al., 2012; Kellerman, 2005; Higgs, 2009; Allio, 2007; Erickson et al., 2007).

Direct, respectful communication and transparency were considered as essential to counteract these issues mentioned above, and very much in line with the common Nordic style of leadership (Arnórsdóttir et al., 2017). Traits like empathy and the caring human touch in management are dimensions that create the foundations of Nordic Leadership by looking at the employees as human beings with their upswings and problems. Part of this is looking at the bigger society, all the important stakeholders, caring for the environment and society in a holistic way. Furthermore, trust and honesty are classic traits of a good leader in literature. It rhymes perfectly interacting with the open direct communication style that can lead to a positive spiral of trust and direct communication that inspires people to listen and to admit mistakes openly and personal weaknesses to learn from. The open company culture can foster faster learning curves and change.

5.3 Top-down management, pride and arrogance

Tendencies of top-down management, arrogance and pride, where managers perceived themselves as dominating, incompetent and using traditional mode of communication (or lack thereof). The horror stories indicated a tendency of demonstrating strength and

power through old-fashioned methods of dictatorship – and even to conceal their own insecurity through bossing people around and hire people who are less skilled (instead of building up a diverse and even more competent team of people with different skill sets).

Most of these themes are in line with existing literature (Schuh et al., 2012; Kellerman, 2005; Higgs, 2009; Allio, 2007; Erickson et al., 2007; Thoroughgood et al., 2012) but perhaps the most noteworthy is the implications of stress and too much workload on leadership performance; unacceptable working conditions, conservative corporate culture, poor work-life initiatives and a flawed company structure that can transform a good leader to demonstrate all the characteristics of a bad leader (Kellerman, 2005; Gini and Green, 2012; Khizar et al., 2023). It could be valuable to look at the perspectives of female leaders to address these issues and infuse some more modern leadership methods that focus on the individual without prejudice and cultural aspirations.

As evident in previous research relating to bad leadership, there are many factors that affect the performance and leadership styles of managers. The narrative of interviewee 3 describing her experience running a start-up company when the work-load and pressure had negative effects on her communication skills, which reflects many of the issues leaders face in difficult times – with poor financial status of the company (a common theme in the start-up phase), external factors that create flatliners in the company's operations and other aspects that can make or break with the company's survival and competitive advantage. These circumstances really test the manager and the board, and really test the level of cooperation and the organizational structure. Such situations can easily make a good leader behave like a bad leader. Burn-out is therefore a live threat to good leadership (Belyakova and Polyakova, 2017; Ronginska and Dolinski, 2020; Doyle and Hind, 1998; Nelson and Burke, 2000). Realizing the danger of burn-out is something that good company culture can possibly counter-act.

Burnout was until recently ignored as a problem, like not replacing the manager temporarily with another proven manager. It is important to discuss burn-out as a recurring theme in management that needs to be addressed when it happens, in an open discussion. Just to admit that burnout is a real factor unrelated to gender and can have a big impact on company results. It helps to get boards of directors more open to finding a solution in time.

This paper describes the first phase of a bigger Nordic research that casts a light on the experiences of top women leaders in the Nordic countries. The next phase is almost finished in Finland and we are heading to Denmark this fall (2023), following with interviews in Norway and Sweden in the next two years. These findings are limited as such to Iceland and could benefit from more data, both in Iceland and in other Nordic countries. It is also a possibility to expand the methods into focus groups and quantitative data collection (expanding to other countries with bigger pool of possible candidates in larger countries) to broaden the patterns and make the findings more robust. The most active previous research period in Iceland about bad leadership was based on the economic circumstances around the banking system collapse in 2008. This paper is not trying to draw the conclusion that this represents the general situation in Iceland in the following decade or the current situation. It is used here as a one valid and vivid reference point along the pathway of the women interviewed that were many of them on their journey to the top at that time.

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