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How Women Leaders Can Promote Sustainability Initiatives

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### **Abstract**

This paper discusses what would be the best organizational management model that could help to attain and promote corporate social responsibility. Research has been assessed on the themes of gender differences (men vs women), leadership styles (including men leaders vs. women leaders), sustainability, corporate social responsibility (including the managerial position), the importance of stakeholders (internal and external), and a combination of these subjects. Stereotypical attitudes are discussed on leadership differences between men and women within this paper. Another area of the research emphasized the importance of stakeholders linked with organizations as well as how internal and external stakeholders have significance to a CEO depending on the gender. Another interesting part uncovered in the research, dealing with the subject of gender is with the Board of Directors. The gender of a Board member as well as a diverse board can play a key role in support for the initiatives of corporate social responsibility. Finally, the level of diversity of the top management team is an additional element for corporate social responsibility reaching an organization's prospective goals.

This interdisciplinary paper will help organizations to develop a strategy for the start and/or expansion of corporate social responsibility by knowing which key players to have in place within the organization. This management model can encourage sustainability initiatives. My research used the combined findings to create a resolution on the corporate structure and culture. When these pieces are in place, it could be the optimal plan to use for the advancement of corporate social responsibility. A leader with transformational or dual leadership characteristics with the ability to be flexible with their management style, a gender equality management team of both male and female or a female CEO to head the organization, and a diverse top management team and Board of Directors with female interlinked board members is

the structure to have in place for the support. A bonus to the diverse top management team would be a female Corporate Social Responsibility Officer to increase the focus of the organization's goals.

### **Thesis Statement**

How can women leaders promote and attain support for sustainability initiatives within their organizations?

### **Reflexive Statement**

This paper is focused on women leadership and sustainability initiatives within organizations. I chose female leadership because of my gender and my interest in this subject which was gained through the Accelerated Leadership Program at Grand Valley State University. I have developed a curiosity to fully comprehend women in leadership and the struggles that are involved with gender diversity in the workplace. I have become more aware of the continued double standard women face in leadership roles. Women leaders in today's organizations are still not equal to men including the number of women in these roles. Those few women who are in senior management positions find it a challenge to try to imitate male leadership traits. Women who do so are thought of as arrogant and hard to deal with while those that display a gentler side are considered emotional and indecisive according to Longman and Madsen. The research isn't showing the change of equality happening as fast as I would like it to, but I have found examples of a few women leaders in Michigan who are trying to change the stereotypical mindset that leadership equals a man. This gives me hope. My bias, which is obvious, will need to be put aside as I look at what the data shows in regard to corporate social responsibility and women leadership.

My research problem has elements of environmentalism in it as well as leadership and gender. My fascination with sustainability is from a lifelong love for the preservation of the environment for future generations. The environment is only one portion of corporate social responsibility. Organizations are looking at the model of a “quadruple bottom line” which includes economic opportunity, safe communities with social equity, transparent and accessible governance, and the environment with sustainable assets (Sutter, p. 5). Sustainability is a type of balancing act as it involves all these aspects together. The research found for this project referred to the environment more than the other pillars of any sustainability plan or corporate social responsibility. Corporate social responsibility for an organization is so much more than having pure water, uncontaminated lands, and fresh air. The more I investigate this, the more I see how complicated the subject really is. This is something I feel strongly about, and my experiences make it understandable that I have a bias, but it also illustrates my passion for this topic.

### **Introduction**

One reason for the research is to determine if there is a difference between the leadership of the different genders and how they deal with sustainability initiatives. Studies revealed there are many elements needed to achievement CSR within organizations. My intention is to expand into these other avenues as well. This project will take a combination of the individual research disciplines of leadership, gender studies, and environmentalism to develop a model or structured plan by which an organization can create a strong corporate leadership configuration to have the right people in place to support implementing sustainability policies. The merged individual studies will produce an interdisciplinary paper.

The disciplines of leadership, gender studies, and environmentalism work together in trying to solve the issue of how can women leaders promote and attain support for sustainability

initiatives within their organizations? Let me start with the impact of gender on leadership which has been studied from different avenues. There are conventional opinions on how each gender views one another, but research shows that we think stereotypically of ourselves as well, which can limit our abilities (Rovira-Asenjo, Pietraszkiewicz, Sczesny, Gumi, Guimera, & Sales-Pardo, 2017). A study by Longman and Madsen states that traits found in most females such as relational, compassionate, and passive characteristics are not acceptable as leadership qualities. The gender differences and overused attitudes just described involving the leadership of companies can create an issue for internal and external stakeholders to be supportive of any type of change. Stakeholders are important to companies in many ways but in this instance, they are valuable because they can either advance or diminish corporate policy. (Davis-Peccoud, J., Stone, P., & Tovey, C., 2017) Another observation of the influence of gender on leadership is the need to have a diverse top management team (TMT) which can help to support strong corporate social responsibility (CSR) (Alonso-Almeida, Perramon, & Bagur-Femenias, 2016). Studies going beyond the TMT into the firm's Board of Directors have shown that not only a diverse board, but a board with interlinked female members, promises to advance CSR more than those companies with less diverse members (Glass, Cook, & Ingersoll, 2016). This type of diversity can help to create internal and external stakeholder buy-in which can maintain the firm's interests in cultural changes; including sustainability initiatives.

The primary objective of this project is to determine how a woman CEO can drive sustainability initiatives within their organization. I will be utilizing a secondary analysis approach with a postpositivist worldview. The reason behind using a postpositivist worldview is that I believe the experience, knowledge, and values of the researcher (me) may influence what is being observed. Secondary analysis is the best way to accomplish this project by consolidating

research that has been done on the disciplines of leadership, gender studies, and environmentalism to create a model of a company's management structure which will be the best for promotion and achievement of sustainability initiatives or CSR. Leadership is important in the determination of a firm's culture but so is the top management team, members of the board, and all stakeholders; internal and external.

There are limits to the research that was completed for this project. The different articles are only a small sample of all that is available. Review of the vast amount of studies and information that has been published on the subject could not be accomplished by just one person. This limited my discoveries to only the studies that were retrieved. Another limit is the lack of control of what research was done because others completed it. Finally, the information was not done on my specific question, so I needed to combine different research projects to find the resolution that will be presented in this paper. All these limitations will make my findings restricted and may not give an accurate result.

### **Description**

It is important to protect our environment because it provides us with the benefits that are vital to our quality of life and survival. Corporate leaders need to be aware of this and more vigilant towards sustainability which includes the environment as well as having economic stability, transparency, and community engagement. What companies do affect the communities they are a part of now and in the future. They need to be open and inclusive to help promote policies and tools for effective and efficient management. To do this they must create strong CSR plans with the support of not only the CEO, but the top management team (including the CSR Officer), Board of Directors, and all stakeholders. Having a written plan of the type of management structure that is needed to produce the type of workplace culture useful to many

organizations as corporate social responsibility is often being demanded by stakeholders. According to the study done by Wiengarten, Lo, and Lam the persistence from stakeholders has intensified for company's performance to be sustainable in all areas that are included in corporate social responsibility, not just economically accountable.

Having a planned approach to use as guidance could help to sustain and promote sustainability as part of a company's TMT formation and workplace culture. This resolution will benefit firms who want to create CSR policies in their organization where none exist, or they can use this planned approach to enhance CSR strategies already in place. The way to be a catalyst for change is through the individuals in place that are the drivers of corporate policy. This resolution is part of corporate change. Others who could benefit from an organization's strength in CSR is the world population. With increased CSR policies, the benefit will not only create a cleaner environment and economically sound company but healthier communities (Davis-Peccoud, et al, 2017). This is a benefit for us all.

### **Leadership and Gender**

The best leadership styles to possess to be most effective when striving for CSR are transformational and dual leadership. Women more than men tend to have these types of leadership styles or can develop them easily as stated in the study by Alonso-Almeida, Perramon, and Bagur-Femenias. Both are good but research showed transformational leadership can increase the creation of environmental policy within an organization (Alonso-Almeida, et al., 2015). Women leaders, generally, put more emphasis on community building which helps to drive their passions for the environment and the ethical behavior of social responsibility (Glass et al., 2016). This does not pertain to all women because, as we know, each person has their own unique characteristics. Research helps to explain the aspect as to why women leaders are more



likely than men to act ethically and why women are more the motivating energy behind sustainability initiatives (Glass, et al, 2016). It all has to do with women identifying with community engagement, welfare of employees, and social justice issues more than men (Alonso-Almeida, et al., 2016). At times, these women may have a struggle to get CSR initiatives into the implementation phase at their company because stakeholders don't always support their leadership. Women with characteristics defined as feminine are considered weak leaders by some (Weingarten, Lo, Lam, 2017). More women need to be willing to create the culture that is needed for the transformation to happen where they are not considered less of a leader because of their gender's characteristics. Data from research is starting to show that increasing women leaders to a level that is equal to the number of men leaders can improve environmental policy (Li, Zhao, Chen, Jiang, Liu, Shi, 2016) and the view of the leadership of women.

There is a preconception on how a leader of a certain gender should behave. It is thought that "when women conform to feminine stereotypes and behave in ways that are consistent with expectations they are liked, but not well-respected" (Longman and Madsen, p. 103). Women CEOs are thought of as weaker leaders than men but typecasts are not always an accurate portrayal of any CEO and their quality of leadership (Weingarten, et al, 2017). Women leaders, when faced with gender bias, are uncertain how to engage in effective leadership behaviors (Longman and Madsen, p. 103). Research has shown that men are more frequently appointed to executive positions which makes it more difficult to discredit the bias which is apparent. Without women being found regularly in top corporate positions, it is difficult to study the hypothesis that men are stronger leaders. There just isn't enough comparison. Men are more numerous as CEOs, so their leadership is important but there is the necessity to advance the cultural change for having more women in leadership positions. It is in the hands of corporate leadership; man or

woman. My research found examples of women leaders in Michigan who are starting to make changes in the corporate world. Patricia Poppe CEO of Consumers Energy once said, “My role in an organization is to create a path for the women coming after me. Other women have cleared the way for me in my career, and I am always thrilled to be able to do the same for the future generations of leaders.” (Belchak, 2018). Another example is from the Rosalyn Bliss, Mayor of Grand Rapids, who was quoted in saying, “Leadership is a journey; it’s never over. . . Transitions are really opportunities for transformation. . .Regardless of your age, you have the opportunity to make a difference. . .” (Lobo, 2018). Powerful statements which can start to alter the view of corporate leadership. Finally, one more Michigan women leader found in the research is the CEO of General Motors, Mary Barra who stated, “Diversity is a key part of the formula to be successful in business. Cultivating diversity isn’t about taking a gender count when you walk into a room. It’s about valuing all ideas and building teams with different backgrounds and experiences.” (Nagash, 2015).

Despite these examples, women executive leadership has become stagnant with equality of gender predicted to be reached in 2085 as stated in an article by Alicia Marie Belchak. In the same article Belchak states women are only 25 percent of top level corporate positions. “Of S&P 500 companies, only 5 percent are led by female CEOs and a mere 19 percent of board seats are filled by women” (Belchak, p. 2). Studies show that men can be reluctant to push women’s initiatives forward, so it is hard to determine the time line as when full gender diverse leadership will occur (Haig, 2016). Our culture needs to understand the difference between leadership, power, and authority. Women need to attain the skills of how “authority and power impact their ability to speak up, act courageously, engage with others, and navigate through difficult situations” (Longman and Madsen, p. 102) as leaders.

## **Gender and Board of Directors**

A company's Board of Directors needs to be a part of the sustainability strategic plan if the TMT wants to make it successful. More women on the board coincide with the fact that they are strongly committed to stakeholders as well as the environment. Glass, Cook, and Ingersoll stated that women have a stronger sense of community which can explain their strength in this aspect of being a board member. The study done by Shoham, Almore, Lee, Ahammad found that having just one woman on the board of directors can have a positive effect on attitudes toward sustainability. Other studies have found gender diversity on a board really helps to advance the sustainability plan because of the women members (Li, et al., 2017). Along with gender diversity on the board another quality of these women members that strengthen sustainability strategic plans is when they are interlinked. An interlinked board member is someone who has the experience and knowledge of being on more than one board within their community. This quality found in female members can help to move a firm forward to incorporate environmental policies easier and with more support because of the member's engagement with the community. Having interlinked female board members has shown to increase stakeholders support in many ways including increased customer purchasing (Glass et al., 2016).

## **Stakeholders**

Glass, Cook, and Ingersoll state there has been evidence showing application of best practices, which can include CSR, can increase stakeholders' engagement. Research on eco-savvy consumers states that women (who are assumed to be the primary shopper for the household) can be agents of change for shifting the sustainability landscape of companies when these consumers purchase products that are environmentally friendly, biodegradable, not tested on animals, recyclable, reusable, and safe for the wildlife (D'Souza, Taghian, 2016). These

consumers (external stakeholders) will provide brand loyalty to a company because of their sustainability policies. Social media used by external stakeholders can create free and positive publicity for those companies who engage in customer focused CSR. Research states that men leaders are more fixated on external stakeholders than women leaders (Alonso-Almeida et al., 2016). Alonso-Almeida, Perramon, Bagur-Femenias also states that men leaders are more intent on financial bottom lines which would explain their passion towards the customer.

One study has shown that only two percent of sustainability programs achieve or exceed their goals (Davis-Peccoud, Stone, Tovey, 2017). Davis-Peccoud, Stone, and Tovey continue to inform through their study that one central cause for this is because leadership, which includes TMT and the Board of Directors, don't realize there may be issues when trying to implement new procedures within the organization. The strongest force that can hinder a company's goals are the employees (internal stakeholders) who may not be fully informed about the TMT's passion for change. There is confusion as to the complete plan which leadership needs to clearly explain in full detail to everyone. Straightforward messaging with all the internal, as well as the external, stakeholders needs to be part of the plan to achieve success. A clear and concise strategy needs to be brought forward so everyone understands the importance of the revision in the company's culture and policies that are taking place (Davis-Peccoud, et al., 2017).

### **CSR and Sustainability**

Information has been found showing positive effects on the company when a new position of Chief Executive Officer (CEO) of CSR has been created. Stakeholders who include employees, customers, governments, and shareholders view this as positive move towards sustainability. It helps to create a positive reputation for the company which can show strong financial performance. Studies demonstrate that when creating this leadership role, it is important

to realize a woman makes a better chief CSR officer when promoting an employee from within the organization (Wiengarten, Lo, Lam, 2017). The reason is because she already has internal stakeholder support and can easily continue to move forward. A CSR officer can become an important team member in the TMT and can focus on the firm's strategic plans for sustainability which can allow the rest of the TMT to focus toward other corporate strategic areas.

According to S. Steffe's study, firms who have sustainability policies release CSR reports on a regular basis. Creating these reports show that the firms feel being transparent to stakeholders is important, they feel that having these policies might give them a competitive edge, the plan improves their risk management proficiencies, and stakeholders are demanding they see the policies and progress of the firm's initiatives (Steffe, 2013). Organizations are still trying to figure out how to be environmentally sustainable in a cost-effective way (Shoham, Almor, Lee, Ahammad, 2017). The strategic plan for sustainability is a long term plan and not every organization wants to take the time to wait for results after putting the finances towards the goal.

### **Resolution and Conclusion**

What I wanted to prove through this research is that women are the drive to promote corporate social responsibility within their organizations over men. In a way, women are the passion behind CSR but there are still obstacles in their way which include the lower number of women in leadership roles. Other obstacles are how to achieve support from the top management team, the Board of Directors, internal stakeholders and external stakeholders. Many elements of the company's management structure work together in hopes to create a cohesive organization.

The accumulated research that has been completed suggests that a CEO with dual or transformational leadership characteristics paired with a gender diverse Top Management Team and Board of Directors is the best approach to achieve support toward a corporate social

responsibility policy within an organization. Women are more likely to try to involve sustainability practices within a strategic plan because of their qualities of being more community focused. Men are more concentrated on what is financially best in the immediate future of the organization while women are more dedicated to the community and stakeholders as stated in a study done by Alonso-Almeida, Perromon, and Bagur-Femenias. Research that discusses stereotypical gender bias reveal the thoughts that a good leader is a man. This type of thinking will continue to make it a struggle for women to become CEOs (Haig, 2016) which in turn slows the CSR initiatives.

My resolution to the issue of how women leaders can promote and attain support for corporate social responsibility (sustainability initiatives) within their organization is plausible and at the same time it isn't. If there were more women in leadership roles and as board members, the strategic framework to help move forward with CSR could be more attainable. At Fortune 500 companies in Michigan "women hold 25 percent of board seats, up from 14 percent in 2007 and higher than the 22.2 percent national average" (Walsh, 2017). In Walsh's study he stated that in the top 100 companies in Michigan there are 31 that don't have any women on their boards and 47 don't have any women executive officers. This is not to say that organizations aren't striving for CSR today because some of the differences between men and women leaders in some areas of CSR could be less than one percent (Glass, et al., 2016). This may be because stakeholders are wanting companies to be more transparent (Weingarten, et al., 2017) so leaders regardless of male or female are implementing CSR. This project did make it clear to me that CSR is becoming more a popular corporate norm. In today's corporate world the three women leaders within Michigan I listed previously in this paper are excellent examples of this. Patricia Poppe, CEO of Consumers Energy, Mary Barra, CEO of General Motors, and locally, Rosalynn

Bliss, Mayor of Grand Rapids are making room for more women to follow them into leadership roles and they are promoting strong corporate social responsibility within the organizations they lead.

The organizational chart which could be how to support CSR is complex. Dual or transformational leadership characteristics are the best style. Leaders having the ability to be flexible with their leadership style is preferable when seeking what is best for all stakeholders. Women have more concern for all stakeholders per the studies I found which would deduce a women CEO would be the individual to drive CSR (Glass et al., 2016). The study completed by Alonso-Almeida, Perramon, Bagur-Femenias stated a preference for having gender equality in management to be ideal because of the complimentary styles the different genders generally possess. A diverse top management team with equal number of men and women as well as a diverse Board of Directors would have the most support for CSR initiatives. Female interlinked board members create an even stronger support toward the initiatives. In fact, the study completed by Glass, Cook, and Ingersoll found diverse boards supported CSR regardless if the CEO was male or female. A bonus to the top management team would be the CSR Officer who would have the main job to focus on CSR policies and procedures. This organizational model can be used as a strategy to help overcome obstacles an organization is facing as it tries to implement CSR.

With the ever-changing thoughts on this subject more in-depth research is needed to really comprehend it all. I have only begun to understand what elements are important. This project has reached its end, but I need to do more because I have uncovered more questions. This is only the beginning as I move into another phase of my ever-continuing passion for knowledge as a lifelong learner.

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