The influence of coaching on executive women overcoming structural impediments to career advancement

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DECLARATION

I, Thabang Petunia Makgoro, declare that this research article is my own work except as indicated in the references and acknowledgements. It is submitted in partial fulfilment of the requirements for the degree of Master of Business Administration in the Graduate School of Business Administration, University of the Witwatersrand, Johannesburg. It has not been submitted before for any degree or examination in this or any other university.

(Thabang Petunia Makgoro)

Signed at Greenstone

On the ........26 ...... day of ......September ........ 2018..
SUPPLEMENTARY INFORMATION


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DEDICATION

I would like to first and foremost thank my husband for his love and unwavering support during this period and for being the wind beneath my wings. To my kids for sacrificing quality time with me and to my sisters for their encouragement.

To Phetsile Dlamini, my friend, mentor, who was there to cheer me on and for believing in me even when I did not. I thank my aunt for her advice and for challenging me to do better.

Last but not least, my sincere gratitude to Charisse Drobis, my supervisor, who did an amazing work guiding and advising me through the process.
Abstract

Women have the skills and education levels required to lead organisations however this is not reflected in the number of CEO’s leading South African companies. From this emerges a reflection on whether companies understand the barriers impacting women in the workplace and furthermore whether gender initiatives address the right issues?

This paper aims to identify the structural impediments to advancement and to explore and analyse the role of coaching in enabling women to overcome these impediments to upward mobility.

An improvement in retention of female executives necessitates a thorough understanding of the issues faced by women. If organisations are attuned to the reasons which result in fewer women progressing to executive level or high female attrition they can tailor coaching interventions to address the issues.

This study was undertaken using qualitative analysis. Interviews were held with 15 female executives who had previous exposure to formal or informal coaching. The sample was selected using a judgement strategy and the data was analysed by identifying repetitive themes and concepts. The study found that executive coaching was effective in assisting executive women navigate societal impediments to advancement. This effectiveness is to a large extent reliant on the appropriateness of the coaching approach and the dynamics between the coach and coachee especially when comparing internal coaching to external coaching. Internal coaching focuses on operational performance whereas external coaching covers broader topics and aims at getting the coachee to perform optimally across various leadership competencies.

Structured coaching interventions for female executives are valuable in retaining women and for improving upward mobility to ensure companies improve gender diversity at executive level. Company policies alone will not be effective in
managing structural impediments if women themselves do not deal with certain inherent belief systems or behaviours which impede their progression.

The study provides valuable insights on issues impeding women progression to top positions for those companies struggling with gender diversity. It also recommends strategies to help women navigate structural impediments and improve female representation and retention.

Keywords: Executive coaching, development programme, leadership effectiveness, coaching models, impediments, barriers
1. INTRODUCTION

The purpose of this research is to analyse the influence of coaching on executive women overcoming structural impediments\textsuperscript{1}. Many studies have shown that women in leadership positions experience things differently from men (Vinnicombe & Singh, 2011; Johns, 2013; Vinnicombe, Moore, & Anderson, 2013; Wittmayer, 2014) which impacts on their ability to successfully navigate structural barriers in order to succeed.

Johns (2013) categorised artificial barriers to advancement of women into societal barriers, government barriers, internal business barriers and business structural barriers which are detailed below.

- Societal barriers are presented in forms of prejudice and bias, lack of opportunities and attainment, gendered work and prevailing perceptions of women’s roles in society.
- Government barriers refer to the lack of enforcement of policies such as affirmative action. This government policy which is based on section 16 of Employment Equity Act was designed to ensure equal opportunities for all and non-discrimination in the workplace ("Employment Equity," 2018).
- Internal business barriers are demonstrated by lack of mentors and sponsors, access to networks of informal communication, mismatches between conventional feminine qualities and qualities necessary for leadership roles and gender communication styles.
- Business structural barriers encompass promotion bias and pay gaps between females and male workers.

It is mentioned in Vinnicombe and Singh (2011) that as women progress upwards they experience isolation from both male colleagues and other females in the

\textsuperscript{1} The word impediments will be used interchangeably with barriers in this research proposal
organisation. Other studies (Schein, 2001; Vinnicombe & Singh, 2011; Johns, 2013) highlight psychological issues as potential hindrances to career advancement.

An increasing number of corporate organisations use coaching as a tool to advance leadership competencies such as interpersonal skills and professional performance (Thach, 2002). However, most of these studies (Kombarakan, Yang, Baker, & Fernandes, 2008; Fillery–Travis & Lane, 2014; Grover & Furnham, 2016; Joo, 2016) look at the impact of coaching on both genders, without analysing how coaching affects men and women differently. Other studies focus on leadership competencies such as communication skills, interpersonal relationships, people management and goal setting (Thach, 2002; Kombarakan, et. al., 2008; L. Baron, L. Morin, & D. Morin, 2011) and productivity (Kombarakan et.al, 2008).

Although some of these studies focus on coaching and its impact on female attributes necessary for success, they fail to investigate the effect of coaching in helping women in corporate environments to overcome internal and external structural barriers. Therefore, this study will specifically analyse the influence of coaching on women in executive positions, in order to understand the role of coaching in overcoming structural impediments to career advancement.

Interventions aimed at helping women to navigate structural impediments in the workplace should be deliberate on a social, organisational and individual level. The social level focusses on the cultural and socio-historical background; organisational level will encompass organisational culture and established structures whereas the individual level will include personalities, attitudes around culture and gender identity and behaviour (Nkomo & Ngambi, 2009).

While organisations implement policies aimed at addressing gender inequalities in the workplace, women have to find spaces where they feel safe to develop their leadership skills and personal purpose (Ibarra, Ely, & Kolb, 2013) and to break through the perceived ‘glass ceiling’ (Rindfleish & Sheridan, 2003)
majority of women lack the required confidence ((Johns, 2013; Moodley, Holt, Leke, & Desvaux, 2016)) to ask for promotions and furthermore, doubt their ability to succeed in leadership roles (Vinnicombe, Moore, & Anderson, 2013). Coaching plays a prominent role in many leadership development programmes (Hawkins & Wright, 2009) and has been proven to successfully change preconceived assumptions and attitudes which result from their respective background and experiences.

Corporations spend millions recruiting and training females (Hoobler, Lemmon, & Wayne, 2011; Ibarra et al., 2013), however, only 23% of South African female executives are represented in senior positions; and 39% of South African businesses have no senior female leaders as revealed by the ‘Women in business’ report (Thornton, 2016). Furthermore, only 5% of women in a study done in African countries occupy CEO positions (Moodley et al., 2016).

With the growth of executive coaching as a tool to develop leaders in the workplace it presents the opportunity for the nurturing of female talent and retention of female executives if structured appropriately. Companies can greatly benefit from diverse employee groups and realise savings from constantly having to recruit or replace employees if they place more efforts on diversity management (Shen, Chanda, D’netto, & Monga, 2009). In a webcast for the society of Human Resource management, it was estimated that between hundred and three hundred percent of an employee’s base salary is spent in the replacement process.

Based on the compelling evidence of gender-based issues in the workplace (Meyerson & Fletcher, 2000; Johns, 2013; Nandy, Bhaskar, & Ghosh, 2014) and their effect on the success of executive women, this study will analyse the influence of coaching (or lack thereof) on executive women’s perception of gender related barriers in the workplace. The purpose of the research is to investigate the influence of executive coaching on executive women’s navigation of structural impediments.
2. LITERATURE REVIEW

In undertaking the literature review the researcher firstly looked at various published studies on the structural impediments which affect women in the workplace that results in unequal gender representation at executive level. Furthermore, an analysis of available literature on effectiveness of coaching as a leadership developmental tool and the various coaching approaches, frameworks and models was undertaken to understand the discipline. This section ended with a review of literature on coaching competencies to give clarity on the aspects of a coach which impact on coaching success.

Structural Impediments

Structural impediments experienced by executive women in the workplace was highlighted in a study by (Maskell-Pretz & Hopkins, 1997) as imagined or actual. Imagined impediments include prejudice, bias and the ‘glass ceiling effect’. ‘Glass ceiling’ is the term used for intangible barriers within the work environment which hinders women from progressing to senior positions (Nandy, Bhaskar, & Ghosh, 2014). Actual impediments on the other hand refer to prevailing gender pay disparities, organisational practices and dual roles (Rindfleish & Sheridan, 2003).

Companies spend substantial amounts of money recruiting and training women only to have them leave (Desvaux, Devillard, & Sancier-Sultan, 2010). Policies and programmes implemented to redress gender inequalities are not sufficient on their own to curb the trends (Rindfleish & Sheridan, 2003). The study in Desvaux et al. (2010), cited structural impediments faced by women as the main reason for lack of gender diversity at the top echelons of leadership.

Various studies (Desvaux et al., 2010; Nandy et al., 2014; Ward, 2014) identified the ‘double burden’ syndrome and expectations for senior leaders to be available for work twenty-four hours, seven days a week as major hurdles to gender diversity at executive levels in the workplace. According to an article in Women Matter, ‘double burden’ syndrome is the dual role played by women in managing
expectations at work and home (Desvaux et al., 2010). There is an old perception highlighted in Latchanah and Singh (2016) that women are not effective as leaders because of the expectations linked to the dual role of working and being a mother.

According to Nandy et al. (2014) gender stereotypes in the workplace result in women being appointed into support roles such as human resources and marketing whereas men are given strategic roles (Nandy et al., 2014). These gendered roles are further perpetuated by feminine and masculine gender stereotypes and role conformity (Nandy et al., 2014). Furthermore, the evaluation criteria used to assess performance tends to be biased favouring male employees (Ibarra et al., 2013). Women are generally given relatively higher scores by their line managers on task related components compared to relational components. In an article by Wittmayer (2014) it is mentioned that married women with families were less likely to work than those who were in the same group but had no families. Research by Wittmayer (2014) also highlights that women more often opt to leave their jobs because of lack of support as opposed to being pushed out.

Men’s informal networks continue to benefit them in accessing sponsors and promotions, whereas women struggle to find influential colleagues to connect with (Ibarra et al., 2013). Informal networks are key in the corporate world, therefore, according to (Desvaux et al., 2010) and (Ibarra et al., 2013) and endorsed by Berry and Franks (2010) lack of access to role models and networks are disadvantageous for executive women.

Another barrier is the inhibited nature of most women and lack of female voices in the executive board rooms (Ibarra et al., 2013; Moodley et al., 2016). Women hesitate to raise their hands for promotions, which inhibits their progression. Some of the traits linked to women such as emotional and soft heartedness (Heilman, 2012) are seen as counterproductive to effective management of teams (Nandy et al., 2014).
Structural impediments, real or imagined, have been established as issues which affect women in the workplace and hinder them from progressing to senior roles. The literature highlights that these barriers exist as part of cultural norms and values, the way organisations conduct business and are also inherent in the female psyche.

**Executive Coaching**

Available literature offers some valuable insights into the use of coaching as a leadership developmental tool. In view of the under-representation of women in executive roles (Desvaux et al., 2010) and the low retention of talented women, coaching within organisations can be applied to significantly impact upon a wide range of issues including overcoming structural barriers and enabling the success of female executives.

Coaching as a practice has been on an upward trajectory fuelled by the demand from corporates and individuals battling to manage job related stress levels (Gyllensten & Palmer, 2005). R. R. Kilburg (1996) pg 134, describes executive coaching as “a helping relationship between a client who has managerial authority and responsibility in an organisation and a consultant who uses a wide variety of behavioural techniques and methods to help the client achieve a mutually identified set of goals to improve his or her professional performance and personal satisfaction and consequently to improve the effectiveness of the client’s organisation within a formally defined coaching agreement’. The coaching models and approaches mentioned in literature articles include use of reflection to improve performance through improved self-awareness (Kombarakan et.al., 2008) gaining of new insights and conscious action driving new behaviours (Rock & Schwartz, 2006).

Studies on the effectiveness of executive coaching indicates that individuals who are exposed to coaching tend to succeed in their leadership roles (Baron & Morin, 2010) because coaching focuses on leadership behaviours and the transfer of
those behaviours in the work place, which manifest in improved productivity. Other research studies undertaken across different sectors have demonstrated that executive coaching programmes can enhance leadership competencies (Feldman & Lankau, 2005; Louis Baron, Morin, & Morin, 2011; Mackie, 2014).

In a study by Evers, Brouwers, and Tomic (2006), it is mentioned that mentoring is different from coaching in that it is based on a relationship between an individual who is an expert in a particular subject matter and this expertise or knowledge is passed on to someone less experienced, whereas in coaching the relationship is an equal one built on trust and confidentiality. In coaching the person being coached will set the agenda (sometimes together with their line manager) and the desired outcomes of the coaching, furthermore there is no requirement for the coach to be familiar with the environment or industry in which the coachee works (Evers et al., 2006).

Evers et al. (2006) refer to executive coaching as an organisational discipline aimed at helping senior managers to gain new skill sets and facilitates different ways of thinking. Kombarakan et.al., (2008) studied the effect of coaching programmes on the leadership development of executives. They found that the coaching programmes enhanced individual personal strengths and developed areas of weaknesses; improved relationships between the executives and their peers, direct reports and line managers; and lastly, equipped the executives with skills to coach others. Behavioural changes from the coaching were linked to communication, job effectiveness and improved leadership styles Kombarakan et.al., 2008.

A study by Medland and Stern (2009) done in the medical fraternity in the Midwest, USA, investigated a model which supplemented new manager classroom training and in-service training using a qualified coach. The coaching sessions improved the performance of the participants and contributed to retention of the managers (Medland & Stern, 2009).
Many studies are consistent on improvements resulting from coaching across the following five areas: people management; relationships within the organisation, communication skills (Leonard-Cross, 2010; Vinnicombe et al., 2013), target setting (Kombarakan et al., 2008; Baron & Morin, 2010) and lastly job satisfaction and productivity (Kombarakan et al., 2008).

Another study by Baron and Morin (2010) investigated the relationship between executive coaching and self-belief; and the relationship between coaching and situational variables such as utility judgement (value), target setting and organisational commitment and support mainly from line manager and peers. It was found that coaching is directly linked to self-efficacy, and furthermore upfront emotional commitment increases development of self-efficacy. Coaching participants' positive perception of the developmental programme was also found to increase belief in their own ability to succeed (Baron & Morin, 2010).

Women leaders interviewed in a study by Moodley et al. (2016) across countries such as South Africa, Kenya, Nigeria, Gabo, Senegal and Morocco cited their success to ongoing support structures such as mentors and sponsors, goal setting, risk taking and commitment to professional development. Even though the study does not explicitly mention coaching as a support structure goal setting and commitment to professional development are mentioned in various studies (Feldman & Lankau, 2005, Passmore, 2007; Zenger & Stinnett, 2010; L. Baron, L. Morin, & D. Morin, 2011) as important in coaching success.

*Coaching and Return on Investment (ROI)*

In light of the increase in executive coaching and the general acceptance that coaching should impact the ‘bottom line’; Phillips and Phillips (2005) also found it pertinent to include a calculation of financial return on investment as an additional measure for coaching success.

A study by McGovern et al. (2001) on the effectiveness of coaching as a development tool evaluated the traditional four paradigms of coaching and an additional level on Return on Investment (ROI). It was found that eighty four
percent of participants reported that the ROI was much higher than the effort and cost associated with the coaching, while seventy four percent of stakeholders i.e. line managers, peers and human resources, reported that the programme was effective.

Executive coaching is undertaken mainly for personal and professional development in order to acquire specific skills required for the role and performance improvement (Witherspoon & White, 1996). The three coaching objectives by (Grant, Passmore, Cavanagh, & Parker, 2010) identified slightly different approaches to achieve agreed outcomes. Skills’ coaching requires the coach to demonstrate a behaviour or skill for role modelling and feedback to the individual. In performance coaching, an initial analysis of potential underlying issues resulting in non-performance is done prior to commencing with the coaching whereas developmental coaching demands that the coachee undertake some introspection for gathering of insights and good listening skills (Grant et. al., 2010)

Organisations continue to use coaching as an alternative to traditional methods of training directed specifically at senior managers (R. Kilburg, 2004). South African corporates such as VODACOM (Vodacom, 2013) and Discovery have introduced coaching into their leadership development programmes. Ernst and Young (EY) continue to grow their team of coaches which is evidence of the demand for coaches (Hawkins & Wright, 2009). Coaching has evolved from a tool used to address performance issues to an enabler for executives to excel in their leadership roles.

Literature on management by Feldman and Lankau (2005) highlights that coaching is premised on 360 degree feedback as a basis from which to set objectives, give guidance on work related matters and improve executive effectiveness. Executive coaching is growing in popularity as a leadership development tool however these leadership programmes are generic and are rarely, if ever, tailored specifically for women (Hopkins, O’neil, Passarelli, & Bilimoria, 2008).
Transformational leadership behaviours are enhanced three times as much by coaching according to the data obtained from a study that was undertaken using a control group (MacKie, 2014). There was also an increase in transformational leadership ratings for the control group which MacKie (2014) states is as a result of the 360 degree feedback process and anticipation of being on a coaching programme. The self-ratings of leadership outcomes for the control group stayed the same, whereas skills acquired from the coaching were found to have been applied in the workplace according to data obtained from the multi-rater feedback (MacKie, 2014). The 360 degree feedback methodology and full rage leadership model (FRLM) are both effective tools for measuring coaching effectiveness in the workplace, the resultant leadership improvements and organisational performance respectively (MacKie, 2014).

In conclusion these studies are useful in demonstrating the value that coaching can bring to individuals and organisations given the focus on gender specific issues.

**Transformative learning theory and coaching**

Organisations enlist the services of coaches to develop their senior managers and these coaches utilise various methods of behavioural practice. Adult learning is underpinned by actions which facilitates individual thinking and results in transformative behaviour that is based on personal experiences.

Transformative learning results in changes in our outlook and experience of the world through self-reflection and results in the development of new or improved skillsets and insights (Mezirow, 2003). Transformative learning is premised on a frame of reference which includes allocating meaning to experiences and responses to those experiences which leads to a concomitant change in beliefs and views (Mezirow, 1997). Habits of mind are ways of thinking, seeing and feelings towards situations and other beings, based on personal biases which leads to certain points of view or opinions (Mezirow, 1997). To facilitate transformative learning the ‘teacher’ assists the ‘student’ to gain greater self-
awareness and to critically evaluate long held beliefs and assumptions and change behaviour based new insights (Mezirow, 1997), which is why this learning theory works for coaching. Transformative learning can therefore be applied in coaching to change perceptions (held by both men and women) that women are less effective as leaders and furthermore that they are also only suited to certain roles (Moodley et al., 2016).

More recent research on transformational learning has over the years shifted to analysis of factors such as context (Taylor, 2017), relationships (Madsen & Cook, 2010), and reflection (Mälkki, 2010) which influence the transformative learning experience and practical development of transformative learning.

**Coaching approaches, frameworks and models**

Various coaching approaches have been documented clearly demonstrating the diverse fields from which coaching models are drawn. Furthermore, the past few years have seen an evolution in the purpose of coaching as a management development tool with wide ranging frameworks and models (Fillery-Travis & Lane, 2014). The following are some of the documented approaches:

The behaviour-based approach pioneered by behaviourists such as B.F. Skinner and J. Watson (Subedi, 2004) looks at the complexity of human beings and the environment in which we live according to Ives (2008). People must function in this complex environment, learn from their experiences and translate the lessons into new situations. Focus for these coaching sessions is on the desired future and behaviour changes in real-life situations, ensuring individuals find fulfilment both personally and professionally.

The adult learning approach uses theories drawn from adult learning theories including transformational learning (Mezirow, 1997). The concept of andragogy which deals with ways to help adults learn was introduced by Knowles (1996). This concept is premised on certain assumptions in the transition process of becoming an adult:
i) People move through stages of transitioning from being dependent beings to a stage whereby they are responsible for their own actions, ii) Amassed life experiences create knowledge and forms the basis for new learning iii), Learning becomes focused more on development of tasks in social settings. iv) Attitudes towards learning change from postponement of actions to instantaneous action (Knowles, 1996).

Individuals construct meaning from their experiences (Pratt, 1993) and from interacting with others (Bachkirova, 2012). Learning as a concept is experiential and premised on how people understand their experiences from feeling and thinking followed by the transition into new ways of doing things and active experimentation (Kolb, 1984). It is however argued by St Clair (2002) that the theory of andragogy is lacking in highlighting insights into the adult learning process and only offer assumptions about learners and that this form of learning cannot be applied all the time to adult learning.

The humanistic approach to coaching focuses on the inherent strengths displayed by the coachee and more emphasis is placed on the importance of coming up with solutions rather than analysis of the problem (Grant, 2003; Ives, 2008)

Cognitive-behavioural approaches to coaching psychology are premised on the linkage between the four dimensions of human experience which are feelings, thoughts, experiences and the environment (Grant, 2003). It focuses on the coachee’s conscious thinking, with the objective being to change prevailing mindset around the four above mentioned dimensions in such a way that the new thinking results in feelings of greater positivity and effective behaviour (Feldman & Lankau, 2005).

The goal oriented coaching intervention’s main objective is the attainment of goals by focusing the coachee on self-regulation. This includes the identification of goals and articulating an action plan directed at achieving those goals. There is a clear drive in this approach to coaching to improve effectiveness through the
driving of the agreed actions and very little focus, if at all, to the individuals emotional state (Ives, 2008). This type of coaching is usually structured over a very short period because the focus is limited to achievement of the predetermined goals.

Systems’ coaching is an approach which takes a holistic view to understand the behavioural patterns and the underlying reasons which could influence the issue (Ives, 2008). It encourages the coachee to be open and honest about themselves, to grow from the experience and be creative in moving forward. This approach views the equilibrium between stability and instability as critical to performance improvement (Ives, 2008).

The positive psychology approach is similar to solutions-based approach only in so far as the identification and nurturing of inherent strengths, however its ultimate aim is to stimulate feelings of hope and happiness (Kauffman, 2006). Its effectiveness as an approach is premised on the concept that being in a happy space has a positive effect on personal intellect and inner balance which is translated into improved performance (Ives, 2008).

Narrative coaching, on the other hand as identifies by Drake (2015), allows the coachee to tell their story to convey the crux of the issue. As the story unfolds it guides discussions for personal development and engagement with their surroundings. The transition is made by a change in mindset, focusing on the desired stories and bringing those into life. This style of coaching incorporates individualistic and psychological aspects with collective and sociological concepts (Drake, 2015). There is a conscious shift from looking at how the past has an influence on the present, to how the future is shaped by the current state.

Boud, Keogh, and Walker (1985) point out that the way in which people respond to experiences is based largely on previous experiences and the lenses through which they see the world. Effective learning requires conscious reflection on experiences which ensures appropriate actions or decisions are taken. The conscious process of evaluating experiences is highly effective through reflective
processes such as journal taking or talking to someone (Boud et al., 1985; Gray, 2006)

The different perspectives on coaching, although different, are not altogether mutually exclusive. Each of the approaches have different strengths and weaknesses which makes it imperative that there is clear understanding of the objective of the coaching so that an appropriate approach can be undertaken. It is also highlighted in Ives (2008) that coaches use approaches which can either dictate or not dictate, and have either a therapeutic or performance driven outcome. The above mentioned approaches are evidence of the evolution of coaching as a discipline, particularly when compared to the emergent stages of coaching which was primarily goal achievement oriented (Ives, 2008). The growth of coaching has also resulted in a wide-range of models and frameworks of practice (Fillery-Travis & Lane, 2014).

The most widely known model is the “GROW” model which is centred around the goals to be achieved, current realities, available options and action to be taken (Whitmore, 2010). The coach acts as an exploration guide and facilitator, and the coachee decides on preferred options to achieve the desired outcomes. With more research the Grow model has however advanced to ACHIEVE which stands for assessment of current situation, creation of alternatives and options, honing of the goals to be achieved, initiation of alternatives, evaluation of the options, valid programme of actions and encouraging the momentum (Dembkowski & Eldridge, 2003) The grow model is simplistic in nature and the logic can be easily followed, however the downside is that it will fail the coach in instances where the coachee is unable to progress to the next phase in the model. It is also preferred by certain people being coached to get some level of advice or guidance from the coach which is contrary to the Grow model.

The Fuel model by Zenger and Stinnett (2010) follows a step by step process of framing the discussions and agreeing on the purpose of the coaching and desired outcomes, exploration phase to gain insights and self-awareness, articulation of the desired outcome and critique and prioritisation of available options to get the
desired results and lastly identification of detailed actions and mileposts for checking in.

The integrative coaching model (Passmore, 2007) includes six aspects to the coaching based on the development of the coaching relationship; ongoing maintenance of the coaching relationship; focus on behavioural change, cognitive behavioural coaching by challenging the coachees feelings, beliefs and thinking; and unconscious cognition which looks at feelings responsible for the creation of personal meaning of which the coachee is not consciously aware. Lastly, it is critical according to (Passmore, 2007) that these stages of coaching take place within a cultural context.

Cox (2006) developed the Impact model for coaching which she argues is a rewarding model offering extensive information that both coach and coachee can draw from throughout the coaching process. The model is broken into six categories, namely the identification of stage in life cycle; making sense of transitions; planning; acting on the plan; deliberating and tracking of the results. The process has a strong focus on self-reflections which underpins transformative learning (Cox, 2006).

The above models (Passmore, 2007; Whitmore, 2010; Zenger & Stinnett, 2010) are based on firstly ensuring a strong relationship through communication, trust and confidentiality and thereafter setting pre-determined goals and agreeing on expected outcomes and lastly probing to improve self-awareness and insights. The Impact model differs slightly in that the initial focus in the coaching process is on identification of distinct periods in the coachee’s life and making sense of the changes from one period to the next (Cox, 2006).

These models and approach signify the broadening scope of coaching. There is no single approach which is best; instead what is important is the appropriateness of each in relation to the needs of the client. It is evident from the literature that the principles behind the approaches sometimes overlap.
Coach competencies

The supply of coaches has increased over the years in line with demand; and the transition from goal oriented coaching to more psychotherapeutic approaches (Ives, 2008) has increasingly put stringent criteria such as educational background and certification in screening potential coaches (Wise & Voss, 2002). Gaps related to lack of professionalisation and regulation of the industry (Wales, 2002) were previously identified and remedial actions put in place to somewhat address these concerns.

Executive coaches now require industry knowledge, business acumen (Wasylyshyn, 2003), psychological knowledge or understanding of human behaviour (Ennis et al., 2005; Passmore, 2015). A study by Liljenstrand and Nebeker (2008) investigated the relationship between educational background and coaching practices and approaches. Insights collected via a web based survey indicated that coaches from different educational backgrounds differed in coaching methods applied and clientele (2008). There is a general preference by corporates when appointing coaches for strong educational background, specifically training in psychology (Liljenstrand & Nebeker, 2008).

Careful consideration should be given when selecting coaches as, depending on the goals to be achieved, the coach’s lack of psychological training could be detrimental (Berglas, 2002). Coaches also have to ensure some competency in behavioural models which range from basic to more advanced models (Passmore, 2015). Coaches with a background in industrial psychology have good experience in the use of behavioural and assessment tools such as 360 degree feedback (Liljenstrand & Nebeker, 2008).

Coaches with an academic background are hired more for junior employees whereas coaches with a psychological background are mainly enlisted to help an employee to build trust, improve listening skills, enjoy effective work relationships, delegation and adapting to change, which are mainly leadership competencies.
(Kombarakan et al., 2008; Baron, & Morin, 2010; Mackie, 2014; Corie & Lawson, 2016).

(Wise & Voss, 2002) highlighted personal attributes such as effective communication, listening (Sherman & Freas, 2004) and relationship skills (McGovern et al., 2001) as critical in ensuring coaching effectiveness. Trust and transparency inculcate a good relationship between coach and coachee (Gyllensten & Palmer, 2005) whereas solid insight and the ability to ask probing questions are guaranteed to unearth issues to be addressed by coaching (Sherman & Freas, 2004). Furthermore, previous corporate experience and the chemistry between the coach and coachee are key determinants of success (Sherman & Freas, 2004). de Haan, Duckworth, Birch, and Jones (2013) argue that personality traits play less of a role on the effectiveness of the coaching programme and that working alliance is more of a factor than the personal traits of the coach.

A study by Wales (2002) found that coaching offered a secure environment and allowed the coachee to share deep rooted fears; and personal and work-related anxieties. Lastly, according to McGovern et al. (2001) coaching is impactful when there is organisational support for the process and where the coach follows a structured programme including ongoing feedback to the coachees.

Organisations sometimes use line managers to coach subordinates however, based on a study by Wise and Voss (2002) sixty percent of coachees rated coaching from internal coaches as below par. There was often misalignment between the coaching and individual objectives as reported by fifty six percent of respondents. Fillery-Travis and Lane (2014) compared the effectiveness of coaching using internal and external coaches. External coaches are highly accessible, more objective and focus on the needs of the coachee (Wise & Voss, 2002). Coaching by an external coach covers a wider range of objectives and results in both tangible financial outputs and intangible benefits such as team efficiency and enhanced decision making, whereas coaching using an internal
coach (Wise & Voss, 2002), focuses more on outcomes linked to tangible benefits.

It is critical to have a good match between the coach and coachee which is partially addressed through ‘chemistry sessions’ which allow an initial meeting between potential coaches and the coachee. The ‘chemistry’ or ‘like-mindedness’ from the initial session is used to choose the best suited coach. The effectiveness of coaching is directly linked to competence of the coach and therefore it is critical to put effort into selecting a suitable coach.

**Conclusion**

In conclusion, although there has been an increase in efforts to retain women in the workplace and increase female representation at the top, there is very little traction (Wittmayer, 2014). There are various reasons underpinning gender inequality in the executive ranks of the workplace and evidence points to ‘dual roles’ as one of the biggest inhibitors to progression of women (Desvaux et al., 2010; Wittmayer, 2014). The same barriers which affected women in studies done more than 20 years ago (J. L. Johnson, Adler, & Izraeli, 1995) continue to prevail (Meyerson & Flectcher, 2000; Vinnicombe & Singh, 2011; Ibarra et al., 2013; Johns, 2013; Nandy et al., 2014). Although many corporates increasingly invest in executive coaching as a developmental tool to equip leaders to be more efficient (Gyllensten & Palmer, 2005) women still opt out because of external and internal pressures (Meyerson & Fletcher, 2000). External coaching according to Wise and Voss (2002) is much more effective in developing leaders to be well rounded individuals as opposed to internal coaching which is mainly focussed on operations and less on self-reflection and gaining of insights to personal development.
3. RESEARCH METHOD

In this section the research design and the methodology which was used to study the research question is detailed. The section commences with the research paradigm and research method. An outline of the population and chosen sample is outlined. The research instrument and the process followed in the data collection are presented, followed by the method for the analysis and interpretation of the data. The last section outlines the research limitations in terms of aspects of validity and reliability.

This study was undertaken using the qualitative research method. Patton and Cochran (2002) define qualitative research as the achievement of depth and establishment of details around the study. Because the nature of the research question was exploratory, this qualitative method of research was selected as it would provide data which create richness, context, wisdom and clarity.

Patton and Cochran (2002) mention that qualitative research differs from the quantitative method in that the research is inductive; theories are developed from the narration; methods of collecting the data is flexible; samples can be small; and the data is based on the meaning of what is being said as opposed to being ‘numbers driven’. The researcher in qualitative method is considered as a research instrument and impact of his/her presence on the study cannot be ignored (Patton & Cochran, 2002).

According to Creswell (2015) assumptions influence the researcher’s approach to qualitative research. These assumptions are categorised into the role that personal values or beliefs play in the research process; the manner or articulation of information gathered from the research; the methods and approaches applied in the research project; understanding the context within which the data is collected and the importance of the environment in which the interview is being conducted; and lastly the researcher’s attitude towards reality or existence. The researcher’s life experiences, assumptions and personal values influences the manner in which a research study is approached (Creswell, 2015, p. 21).
Benefits of qualitative research

Qualitative research is best utilised to gather information on participants’ experiences in the workplace, their individual viewpoints and the meaning assigned to those experiences. The intent with qualitative research is to get close enough to the participants to be able to capture what is said and how it is said. This method of research is preferable because it enables deeper probing of issues by means of open ended questions (Choy, 2014). Furthermore, the interviews allows for a deeper understanding of beliefs and preconceived ideas (Choy, 2014). The aim of qualitative research is to extract significance in themes which emerge from the discussion with the individuals and not to find significance in numbers. Citing Marshall (1996) qualitative research aims to provide clarity and understanding of often complex psychosocial issues and are also the utmost beneficial for answering the ‘what’, ‘why?’ and ‘how?’ questions in research.

Limitations of qualitative research

The research process can be extremely time consuming (Choy, 2014) and the information cannot always be reliably used to generalise the findings (Carr, 1994; Choy, 2014). The interviewer may not always possess the skills and experience required for qualitative research (Choy, 2014). Researchers’ “lenses” through which they see the world has the potential to impact the research process and interpretation of the data (M. K. Johnson, 1988). The experiences of the participants are varied; therefore, a semi-structured questionnaire is appropriate to ensure there is further probing in instances where the information shared is insufficient. It also usually takes more time to collect data in qualitative research compared to quantitative studies.

Research Approach

According to Marshall (1996) the appropriateness of a sample size for a qualitative study is dependent on the ability to adequately answer the research question. Single figures in terms of sample sizes are adequate for simple
questions or very detailed studies. The actual number of participants required for a qualitative study also becomes evident as the research study progresses and if there are no new themes or enlightenments emerging from the data.

The aim was to identify and interview female executives occupying executive roles based on the position/ or employee grade level systems used in the workplace.

The sample size was based on a judgement strategy based on Marshall (1996) description of naturalistic sampling techniques which include convenience, judgement and theoretical sampling. Convenience sampling involves using participants that are easily accessible to the researcher. Judgement sampling is purposefully selecting a sample based on the research question, literature review. Lastly theoretical sampling includes a realisation of interpretative theories from the emerging interview data and continuing the research by reviewing and tweaking the sample to build on this theory (Marshall, 1996).

The executives that were interviewed reported directly to the CEO (including both line and support management roles) or held the CEO position in their organisations. They ranged in age between 32 and 50 years of age. Seven were African, two white, 5 Indian and 1 Coloured and all resided in Johannesburg. Fourteen of the women had postgraduate degrees and one did not go further than matric.

**Research Method:**

The sample of people to be interviewed was chosen using judgement sampling and snowball sampling. Interviewed participants were requested to refer to their networks for potential candidates in similar roles. One on one in-depth semi structured interviews were conducted between May 2018 and August 2018 from women employed in seven different sectors including financial services, logistics, electronics, automobile, hospitality, advertising and property. Seven out of the fifteen women were all from the same financial services company.
All the interviews were face to face and conducted by the researcher and 90% of the interviews were held at the respondents place of work in order to ensure that the setting for the interviews encompasses a natural, comfortable and safe setting (Marshall, 1996). The researcher tried to understand the impact that timing, setting and mood might have on the participants and their relaying of past experiences (Marshall, 1996).

The research topic was shared with the participants prior to the interviews. The aim of the interview was explained to the participants at the beginning of each interview and surety was given around the confidentiality and anonymity of the information collected. Before commencing with the interview, the four questions were shared with the participants and the researcher explained that the questions would be used to guide the discussion and that the researcher would interject if further clarity was required. Permission was also requested from the participants to record the interview. The researcher took notes and the interviews took an hour each on average.

**Data Analysis**

The research data was analysed using a coding system which grouped common themes or experiences coming out of the interviews (Thorne, 2000). A review of the recorded interviews was done to understand the individual journeys and experiences. Thereafter recurring common issues were identified and grouped into themes to allow for some structure in the analysis.

The starting point was using the four questions below from the questionnaire to derive pre-set codes using Microsoft Excel:

1. What structural impediments do you face in your job as an executive female?
2. How was coaching introduced (360% feedback, part of developmental programme, proposed by line manager, own request)?
3. What was the coaching experience like for you?
4. What was the outcome of the coaching?
A second set of codes emerged from listening to the recordings of the interviews and analysing the notes.

Reliability and Validity

The validity and reliability of the findings in qualitative research can be affected by researcher bias, as a result bias management is one of the most critical aspects in ensuring credibility of findings (Noble & Smith, 2015). To ensure that the analysis is fully comprehensive the whole data set was coded. The researcher replayed the recordings a minimum of two times to ascertain that all issues were noted and coded. In analysing the data triangulation was used to compare the findings from different interviews and this data was compared to previous studies. Issues that came out from the interviews which were not aligned to the conclusions were further analysed and linked to existing and new literature. The use of triangulation further confirmed the validity and reliability of this study.

4. FINDINGS

To illustrate the impact of coaching on executive women overcoming structural impediments interviews were conducted with 15 women in executive positions.

The purpose of this study was to uncover structural barriers experienced by women executives and furthermore whether coaching was effective in helping them overcome these structural barriers.

Impediments Faced by Executive Women

The following themes emerged from the question: Which structural impediments do you experience, or have you experienced in the workplace.

The barriers expressed by the women executives that were interviewed fell into three categories: personal (societal) barriers, business barriers and psychological barriers.
Societal Barriers

The most cited societal barriers were gender stereotype (80%), dual roles 67%, culture 53%, gender bias 53% and race 40%.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Societal Barriers</th>
<th>Respondents</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Gender Stereotypes</td>
<td>80%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Gender bias</td>
<td>53%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Race</td>
<td>40%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Dual Role</td>
<td>80%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Culture</td>
<td>53%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Isolation</td>
<td>27%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Table 1: Societal Barriers

Gender stereotype

Gender stereotypes refer to the generalisation of male and female attributes (Heilman, 2012). Stereotypes result in bias in decision-making (Heilman, 2012) which creates ‘glass ceilings’ or unseen barriers and therefore hinder upward progression of women as suggested by Nandy et al. (2014). ‘Glass elevator’ is a metaphor for women in leadership positions appointed in highly risky positions, thereby setting them up to fail (Sabharwal, 2013) whereas ‘glass cliff’ is a metaphor women in senior positions who face isolation or pronounced scepticism and less support, thereby ending up going over the edge.

Some of the respondents shared the following experiences:

‘I am constantly judged and compared to my predecessor because I am black, female and young’ and ‘I feel like people are waiting for something to go wrong’.

‘I always found myself the only black female in a room full of men and they would think it fitting that I always take the coffee orders. I was constantly told that I was in exco because I was black and not because I deserved to be there even though I had more education and experience that most of the people on that exco’.

In Heilman (2012) descriptive male attributes are characterised by agency; which is linked to attributes such as competent, ambitious, assertive, decisive and
logical; whereas women attributes are communal i.e. caring, friendly, considerate, obedient, collaborative and understanding. These characteristics are applicable across different cultures and backgrounds (Heilman, 2012) and therefore men are generally perceived as more suited for managerial roles (Schein, 2001) by virtue of sex typing of the position. Furthermore, gender stereotypes are prescriptive (Heilman, 2012) in that they result in certain expectations on gender specific behaviour. Because being assertive is linked to agency, women seen to be portraying this attribute are frowned upon (Heilman, 2012). It is these character associations which manifest in women being overlooked for senior positions compared to their male colleagues even though (Hopkins et al., 2008) indicates that four out of the seven leadership elements for effective leadership has qualities which are typically associated with women. In Vinnicombe and Singh (2011) the appointment of women in specialist and support roles as opposed to operations and line management perpetuate gender inequality at senior levels. Based on the comments below the women interviewed reflect their internalisation of what was learned whilst growing up (Chugh & Sahgal, 2007), which creates personal barriers for their advancement. A respondent shared some of her experiences growing up:

‘I was not raised for the board room. The boys watched the news with dad whilst the girls did the dishes with mommy’.

As stated by Chugh and Sahgal (2007) Most cultures instil a way of being and behaviour which hinders progress. It is interesting that the two respondents who did not perceive gender stereotyping and bias in the workplace mentioned the following:

‘I was not brought up to play female roles’ and

‘I was brought up as a human first and not a girl or boy’.
Gender stereotypes (Heilman, 2012) leads to unwarranted bias in the workplace. Gender bias denotes the expectations for females to behave in a certain manner because of beliefs (Heilman, 2012). Pronounced criticism and constantly being under the spotlight make women susceptible to ‘glass elevators’ and ‘glass cliffs’ (Nandy et al., 2014). Women are expected to be soft and understanding they tend to be directed to supportive roles which are less challenging whereas there is a preference to appoint men in leadership roles (Vinnicombe & Singh, 2011)

**Dual Roles**

Eighty percent of the women interviewed highlight the dual roles of working mothers as a continuous struggle to manage. Although more women continue to enter the corporate world, Nandy et al. (2014) suggests that there is still an expectation for working mothers to maintain their prime responsibility of caring for children and managing the household.

One respondent mentioned ‘I had to leave home before 6 every morning for two years even though I had small kids’

while another one said ‘

‘I had to quit my job after my husband put his foot down because I was working until late and neglecting my family’.

‘My boys are grown up now, but I had to make personal sacrifices when early on in my career to progress’.

The demands of the two roles create conflict and stress for working mothers (Cheung & Halpern, 2010) and indicates the tough choices successful mothers have to make between work and family life (Cheung & Halpern, 2010). Eighty six percent of the women who cited dual roles as an impediment mentioned that they are highly reliant on their helpers or family members to manage and lessen the load. Women are also penalised for taking time off when they have children and the added responsibility of raising small children. One respondent mentioned that
'when women come back from maternity leave there are no programmes to support them ease back into things, instead they are expected to use annual leave to take the baby to the clinic and they are judged harshly for always being on leave or out of the office'.

The researcher’s sentiment is that this is a significant impediment faced by working mothers, as based on the findings from numerous literature sources (Ibarra et al., 2013; Sabharwal, 2013; Latchanah & Singh, 2016) and endorsed by this study. All women who have children are expected to juggle the two roles and depending on immediate expectations the balance is not always a perfect one. It is important to note that of the three women who did not mention this as an impediment, two do not have children. Some of the women

‘I don’t have children and my husband is quite accommodating and has no expectations for me to cook every night’.

‘I am not married and don’t have any children, therefore I have no pressure to leave the office at a certain time’.

Race

Race was highlighted as an impediment by forty percent of the women executives as they felt it was sometimes used to stereotype and discriminate against them. Racial tensions in South Africa are improving but still prevail, which explains the emotions that came through from the women who mentioned race as an impediment. In an American study by Combs (2003) it is stated that race adds an extra layer and increases the likelihood of discrimination in the workplace. Latchanah and Singh (2016) agree that African women employees also feel the effect of the double whammy. One executive even went further to say ‘I looked like their helper at home and because I am a product of Bantu education they could not close their eyes and pretend that I was one of them’.

Booysen (2007) states that intergroup discrimination in South Africa happens on three levels encompassing categorisation by race or looks; comparison between
different groups resulting in positive elevation of the group where one belongs; and lastly association with certain individuals. It is also highlighted in Berdahl and Moore (2006) that minority groups in general experience the most discrimination and as corporate is still predominantly white male dominated, black women will often be in the minority.

The racial issue did not seem to impact the two white women who were part of the sample. In fact, one of the white women mentioned that she finds black men to be much more supportive towards her compared to men from her own race. This could be a result of our history and how black people were indoctrinated. Further research would be valuable in understanding the dynamics between males and females from different cultural backgrounds.

**Isolation**

There are feelings of isolation for women at the top brought about by being one of the few, the stereotypical expectations linked to gender and the demanding nature of managerial roles (Growe & Montgomery, 1999). Women find themselves in senior roles with no support and not enough women that they can relate to or share experiences. This results in feelings of loneliness and alienation (Thornton, 2016). Twenty seven percent of the executive women interviewed noted feelings of isolation as they progressed up the career ladder. One respondent mentioned that ‘*the higher up I go the more my relationships with colleagues change and people don’t share with me anymore which is alienating*’.

There was general mention of the underrepresentation of women in senior roles by the respondents; however, the numbers were not compared on a case by case basis.

**Business barriers**

Participants identified discriminatory structural barriers relating to ‘boys networks’, lack of support, corporate structures and lack of mentors as impediments to upward career trajectories. Women feel strongly about
organisational culture in terms of treatment of employees and non-discrimination. They are less likely to stick with a company which has a culture that does not match their personal values (Broughton & Miller, 2009).

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Business Barriers</th>
<th>Respondents</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Boys Clubs</td>
<td>60%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Corporate culture</td>
<td>47%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Lack of Access to networks</td>
<td>60%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Gender Pay discrepancies</td>
<td>33%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Table 2: Business Barriers

**Boys Clubs**

Women are excluded from men’s circles and mostly (60%) felt that ‘boy’s clubs’ were frustrating and isolating. The ‘boys club’ also tended to spill over to the boardroom with the men supporting each other and the women being expected to go with the flow.

‘My colleagues are always invited by the CEO to events where I am constantly excluded. It is sometimes clear in the boardroom that deals were agreed on the golf course and the boardroom discussion is just to confirm the decisions’.

However, Forret and Dougherty (2004) highlighted different types of networking behaviours which had varying impact on career progression and promotions. The study found that increasing visibility internally by putting one’s hand up for critical projects and belonging to professional groups is usually more effective in career progression than ‘socialising with the boys’.

However, there is a counter argument which highlights that belonging to these social networks will help women connect with their colleagues on a professional level, thus making it easier to put up their hands for projects; therefore women must try and infiltrate these male networks if they want to progress at work (Broughton & Miller, 2009).
Forret and Dougherty (2004) also concluded that socialisation with peers increases the sense of belonging and perception or being successful. Although most women want to be part of the boys networks, these sessions mostly takes place after hours and time is an inhibitor for women due to family responsibilities (Broughton & Miller, 2009). In a research study by Nandy et al. (2014) women commented that the men can afford to play golf the whole day and get home and rest whereas they are expected to manage children and the household in the evening in line with role expectations.

**Corporate culture**

Male dominated industries perpetuate a culture which is not supportive of women (Martin & Barnard, 2013a) and entrench gender segregated status quo. Non-existent guidelines pertaining to promotions and reliance on relationships to secure roles will continue to side-line women (Schwanke, 2013). Corporate culture (Johns, 2013) was highlighted as a possible impediment by forty seven percent of the women particularly where it is not used positively to support progression and equality in the workplace. Most corporations have outdated policies which have not changed with the increase in female representation and which do not cater to changing needs of employees (Latchanah & Singh, 2016).

It is inferred from the interviews that male dominated organisations make it difficult for women and increases a culture which discriminates against women, where late meetings are promoted and where there is a general disrespect for women. These were some of the comments from the interviews: ‘*the men are always rude and challenging when they deal with women*’ and ‘*you are labelled an angry black woman when you speak up*’. Some of the respondents felt that the men did not take well to strong assertive women and this manifested in negative behaviour towards the women.

Encouraging feedback from one of the respondents highlighted the positive impact of deployment of robust diversity programmes and rigorous monitoring driven by top management in the company for which she works. There were no
negative incidents (inside or outside the boardroom) related to gender bias experienced by this respondent and it was noted that the company culture was one of embracing diversity and nurturing talent. She mentions:

‘My organisation has a big culture of training, mentoring and coaching and the budget for development of employees stays constant regardless of business situation. The company supports minority groups and there are deliberate initiatives driven by top management which are tracked and monitored. There is also ongoing communication to employees around company values and ethics’.

Lack of mentors / sponsors

Despite evidence from literature (Latchanah & Singh, 2016) that access to mentors and sponsors are valuable it is interesting that some of the women did not see the need to have one.

Networking is highly valuable as career management strategy and can be used as a tool to support desired career path (Forret & Dougherty, 2004). Access to support structures is critical for career advancement, especially gendered approaches to developmental tools such as mentoring (Latchanah & Singh, 2016). Some of the women interviewed responded (60%) that they see having a sponsor or mentor as valuable for upward progression, and even more so the higher you go in your career as illustrated by the following comments:

‘If it was not for this particular person I would not have been able to make the move to this role because most people were generally opposed to the move as they felt I lacked the necessary experience’.

‘It is important to get a sponsor otherwise you get nowhere. My mentor shaped me and changed my life’

However, two respondents mentioned that they prefer their work to show for itself as opposed to using sponsors for career advancement.
'I do not think it is important to have a sponsor as I believe that my work should speak for itself'.

'I have never thought about having a mentor and I managed to progress to this point regardless'

Latchanah and Singh (2016) noted that upward mobility is reliant on adequate exposure to mentoring and coaching programmes, especially where women find themselves in male dominated industries or roles (Martin & Barnard, 2013b). Mentors are instrumental in sharing knowledge to develop others; motivating and they can also be a sounding board when you require a second opinion. Sponsors on the other hand advocate for you when you are not in the room and their aim is to see you progressing or reaching new heights.

*Gender pay discrepancies*

Thirty three percent of the women mentioned gender pay discrepancies as a factor which further discriminated against women. This issue is quite contentious and one that the women brushed over possible because remuneration is so confidential. Either there is good progress being made in this space or further research needs to be done to understand the issue and its impact on women opting out of the corporate world. It could also be as a result of the fact that remuneration is not publicly shared and, in most instances, women are not even aware of the discrepancies.

Contrary to previous studies (Alkadry & Tower, 2006) which found that gender pay discrepancies were sometimes attributable to human capital, women still earn considerably less than men regardless of level of education, skill and experience (Kulich, Trojanowski, Ryan, Alexander Haslam, & Renneboog, 2011). This experience was shared by one of the respondents:

‘Although I came with much more experience than some of the men in the room it took two years to be made a permanent member of Exco and my salary was not adjusted for months after the promotion’.
In a study by Kulich et al. (2011) it was found that female executives’ remuneration is nineteen percent less than that of their male counterparts.

Organisational culture contributes to these pay discrepancies (Kulich et al., 2011) in that men are perceived to be better leaders due to agency (Heilman, 2012). Furthermore, as organisational performance is attributed to male leaders, it will have an indirect impact on reward and remuneration (Kulich et al., 2011).

**Psychological Barriers**

Women are brought up to behave in a certain way and these behaviours are entrenched from a young age (Nandy et al., 2014). Dickerson and Taylor (2000) found that women create limitations for themselves by having low self-efficacy. This results in less women electing to apply for leadership roles because they either feel they are incapable of leading others or just lack the confidence to apply for such roles (Dickerson & Taylor, 2000). Furthermore, the added pressures that women have whereby they constantly try to prove themselves promote glass ceilings in the workplace.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Psychological Barriers</th>
<th>Respondents</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Low self-confidence</td>
<td>53%</td>
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<tr>
<td>inadequacy</td>
<td>40%</td>
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<tr>
<td>Guilt</td>
<td>33%</td>
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<tr>
<td>work life balance</td>
<td>53%</td>
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</table>

*Table 3: Psychological Barriers*

Fifty three percent of the women interviewed mentioned that they struggled with confidence and it was something that they had to learn. Johns (2013) suggests that developmental approaches designed to help women improve leadership skills including confidence levels and being more risk takers can improve upward mobility. The feelings of guilt, personal sacrifices and lack of work-life balance experienced are mentioned by the women as factors which make it difficult to
manage these two roles. If women constantly live with these feelings it is not surprising that women decide to opt out of the corporate world.

Another emerging theme from the interviews was the relationship between personality traits and psychological barriers. Three of the women do not struggle with confidence which might be attributable to their outspoken personality types.

It is evident from the above-mentioned findings that gender stereotypes and dual roles are the biggest impediments experienced in the workplace followed by boy’s clubs and lack of access to networks. Fifty three percent of the executive women mentioned gender bias, culture, self-confidence and work life balance as hindrances.

If organisations want to retain and have higher representation they should focus on these impediments. The approach will have to be multi-pronged because these emanate from a variety of causes

*How was Coaching Introduced?*

The respondents were asked how they became involved in coaching programmes and below are the results. Some of the executive women (27%), decided to source a coach for personal development whereas another twenty seven percent were introduced to coaching by their line managers. Coaching was recommended by (Human Resource) HR personnel for forty seven percent of participants in line with the company policies on management of talent.

![Figure 1: How was coaching introduced?](image)
The executive women who were introduced to coaching by HR or at their own request mainly underwent formal coaching (80%) by an external coach (Fillery-Travis & Lane, 2014) to increase work related effectiveness based on either personally identified performance shortfalls or feedback from line managers (Feldman & Lankau, 2005). Twenty percent of the women who had coaching introduced

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>How was coaching introduced</th>
<th>Formal or Informal</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>HR</td>
<td>Own request</td>
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<td>Respondent 1</td>
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<td>Respondent 14</td>
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<tr>
<td>Respondent 15</td>
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Table 4: How was coaching introduced?

by line managers were either coached by the same line manager or someone senior in the same organisation. The agenda for the informal coaching sessions were set by the line manager and it focused on business and operational efficiencies as evident from the following comment:

‘I was moving from one role to another and needed to have a thorough understanding of the technical aspects of the business and my line manager recommended that I be coached by one of the Exco members’.

Internal coaching (Fillery-Travis & Lane, 2014) by a colleague is seen to be subjective and results in the coachee taking away only what resonates with them. In Wise and Voss (2002) internal coaching was found to enhance tangible
benefits such as productivity although it sometimes blurred the work or coaching roles, whereas external coaching allows for the space to gain greater self-awareness and insights to crystallise the desired outcome from the coaching and is also perceived as more objective (Wise & Voss, 2002). Internal coaching is valuable as a tool, although it has some limitations.

What was the coaching experience like?

The executive women were asked to reflect on their coaching experience. The coaching experience was generally positive and effective for eighty seven percent of the executive women interviewed. The feedback from sixty six percent of the women who found the coaching experience useful included phrases such as:

‘action and task oriented, introspection, task driven, smart goal approach, brought things into perspective, allowed me to view myself as a whole being, self-awareness’.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Respondents</th>
<th>1</th>
<th>2</th>
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<td>Training based</td>
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<td>Self reflection</td>
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<td>Brought things into perspective</td>
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<td>Focussed on strengths</td>
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<td>SMART Goals</td>
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<td>Viewed myself as a whole being</td>
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Table 5: Coaching experience

Transformative learning (Mezirow, 1997) is premised on improved self-awareness, critical reflection and change of mind set which leads to a change in assumptions and behaviour linked to those assumptions and moreover promotion of self-directed thinking. Secondly for learning to take place, the process requires
taking action based on the insight and evaluation of the outcome (Mezirow, 1997). It is interesting to note that Baumgartner (2001) highlights the importance of authentic relationships to transformational learning and Taylor (2017) asserts that it is especially more important for women.

Furthermore, gaining insights and self-awareness requires being mindful (Bishop et al., 2004) and the following statements from the respondents illustrated the intensity of the sessions:

‘The coaching sessions took place over a period of two years and we would spend two hours at a time and I found the sessions emotionally draining such that I requested to move the meetings to morning so that I could be fresh for the sessions’

‘Initially I found the sessions invasive and threatening because I needed to open up’

Two out of the fifteen women did not have positive experiences. One of the executive women mentioned that her first coaching experience was unsuccessful:

‘I felt as though I was damaged and requested that we discontinue the coaching sessions’.

Another interviewee stated: ‘it was not helpful, and I felt that the coaching style did not work for me’.

The parties to the coaching intervention all have a responsibility to ensure that coaching is a success (Sherman & Freas, 2004). It is stated in Berglas (2002) that companies have to ensure they hire coaches with the right credentials and skills. McGovern et al. (2001) found that participants commitment to the process, lack of support, ineffective communication and availability of the participant negatively impact coaching outcomes.
The other female executive who had internal coaching specifically mentioned that ‘the sessions were training based and there was no structure to the sessions’.

Unless the coaching relationship is built on trust and confidentiality (McGovern et al., 2001) with structure and set objectives then the line becomes blurry and might result in a mentoring exercise rather than coaching (Evers et al., 2006). Although Joo, Sushko, and McLean (2012) argues that the two disciplines are similar as a result of leadership styles in knowledge based organisations changing from directive to supportive.

One of the women said although the experience was positive, it felt incomplete. ‘There were only four sessions and the focus was on enhancement of strengths’.

However, Ives (2008) asserts that goal-oriented coaching is very short, and the aim is more on utilising identified capabilities in accomplishment of goals, and less on emotional wellbeing. Coaching approaches which are goal oriented are vastly different to coaching which interrogates the coachees personal state of being; or personal-development approaches both in terms of the role played by the coach and the outcome requirements (Ives, 2008).

The coaching approaches used in the formal coaching included probing to get the coachee to gain greater insight and self-awareness, target setting, identification and setting of tasks aimed at changing actual behaviour to desired behaviour. The formal coaching interventions were aligned to the earlier mentioned Fuel and integrated coaching models (Passmore, 2007; Zenger & Stinnett, 2010) whereas internal coaching from line managers or senior colleagues were more conversational and focused on business operational objectives.

**Outcome of the Coaching**

A few themes came out as positive outcomes from the coaching interventions. These included increased courage and confidence, speaking up, setting boundaries, clearer identity of self, self-regulation, clarity of purpose, focus on
what matters, improved communication, improved effectiveness, goal orientation, focus on things under the respondent’s control and increased perspective.

Table 6: Outcomes from Coaching

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Respondent</th>
<th>Outcome of the coaching</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Respondent 1</td>
<td>Learned courage</td>
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<tr>
<td>Respondent 2</td>
<td>Learned to speak up and disagree if need be</td>
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<tr>
<td>Respondent 3</td>
<td>Negative</td>
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<tr>
<td>Respondent 4</td>
<td>It did not work for me</td>
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<tr>
<td>Respondent 5</td>
<td>Not to compromise on the things that are important to me</td>
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<tr>
<td>Respondent 6</td>
<td>Taught me to think before I talk</td>
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<td>Respondent 7</td>
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<tr>
<td>Respondent 8</td>
<td>Helped me have a clearer identity of self</td>
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<tr>
<td>Respondent 9</td>
<td>It was energising but too short</td>
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<tr>
<td>Respondent 10</td>
<td>Clarity of purpose</td>
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<td>Respondent 11</td>
<td>It was positive</td>
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<tr>
<td>Respondent 12</td>
<td>It was a positive experience</td>
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<tr>
<td>Respondent 13</td>
<td>It taught me to focus on the things that I can control</td>
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<tr>
<td>Respondent 14</td>
<td>Communicate effectively</td>
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<tr>
<td>Respondent 15</td>
<td>Helped me to focus on the things in my control</td>
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</tbody>
</table>

Eighty percent of the respondents had some positive outcome from the coaching, whereas the other twenty percent either had negative experience or no outcome experienced from the coaching. Some of the feedback from the women included:

‘Coaching taught me to raise my hand and to take back my power’. ‘I realised that I was just a good as everyone else sitting around the table and had value to add’.

‘Although I had ensured that no one understood my business more than I did, I felt like people were constantly waiting for me to put a foot wrong. I had to learn to ignore certain people and not to internalise issues’.

One of the women had a very negative coaching experience which resulted in the coaching programme being terminated early. She mentioned:

‘The coaching made me feel there was something personally wrong with me and I felt damaged. I later found out that the organisation stopped using her as a coach’. This again highlights the importance of reference checking and criteria for enlisting coaches.
Coaching has been proven to improve leadership effectiveness in the area of people management, communication skills, relationships with colleagues (Vinnicombe et al., 2013).

5. Discussion and Conclusion

Women continue to experience societal and business and psychological impediments to career progression in the workplace. Executive women deem dual roles, boys’ clubs, gender stereotypes, access to mentors, gender bias, organisational culture, lack of self-confidence and work life to be the top impediments to their advancement. Impediments emanate on a social level, business level and individual level, therefore corrective measures need to be appropriately applied.

Exposure to formal and informal coaching had some level of effectiveness in addressing some socio cultural and psychological issues impacting women. Studies have found that coaching is effective as a leadership developmental tool, however, it is critical to set objectives upfront to ensure the intervention focuses on the critical areas for development.

Coaching is more effective than training due to the acknowledgement of the coachee as an individual first (Sherman & Freas, 2004), especially to establish the cause of the weakness. The internal coaching was mainly on business effectiveness and very rarely on linking behaviour to insights to improve business effectiveness.

Coaching effectiveness differed based on internal coaching or coaching by a line manager compared to formal coaching because of the external coaching approaches used. The internal coaching interventions were performance driven whereas external coaching by a qualified coach included mindset and behaviour changes.
Although coaching is effective in effecting mindset and behavioural changes necessary in overcoming societal impediments, internal business structural barriers remain critical in impeding the advancement of women executives (Johns, 2013). Despite continuous coaching executive women continue to experience gender bias and lack of support in the workplace. If women continue to be denied access to key networks and promotional bias are not dealt with effectively, the odds will continue to be stacked against women. HR policies are key tools to address business impediments linked to gender stereotyping and lack of access to networking; and can furthermore supplement coaching in helping women navigate structural impediments such as managing dual roles and improved work life balance.

It is also evident from the research that external coaching is more effective in helping women overcome perceived impediments if transformational learning (Mezirow, 2003) is used as part of the intervention.

It is clear from the study that the impact of coaching on women overcoming structural impediments can only be effective if the coaching objectives are clearly articulated and there are deliberate tasks or goals set to help women learn how to navigate structural barriers. Although the sample is small, and the data limited, the evidence from the data supports this conclusion. This highlights the complexity of the coach’s role and tasks as key factors to be addressed in the design and evaluation of executive coaching programmes for women.

What is also key for coaching impact measurement is that the context within which the female executive operates is instrumental in dictating the behaviours that are necessary for women to increase their business effectiveness. Overall sentiment from coaching interventions was that it resulted in a new perspective and insights which impacted the women’s outlook on life.

The results of the study indicated that coaching can assist executive women to overcome perceived societal and psychological impediments if applied correctly.
Future Implementation and Research

The study indicates that as much as it is imperative to have coaching to help women overcome the perceived structural barriers, focusing only on changing mindsets and behaviour without simultaneously addressing exclusionary policies and practices will not help women executive overcome barriers and succeed (Johns, 2013), as most business structural barriers are policy oriented (Shen et al., 2009). There is a lack of programmes and policies in some companies which are specifically designed to address the breaking down of structural impediments compared to corporations where they are strictly driven and monitored for effectiveness.

These could include policies such as flexible working arrangements, non-discriminatory promotion and compensation policies, paid maternity and adoption leave, back up child care, and formal women’s networks to alleviate the loneliness experienced by women executives (Johns, 2013). Organisations should furthermore consider policies which also foster a ‘culture of mentoring’ (Latchanah & Singh, 2016).

Further research should be undertaken to assess the effectiveness of coaching programmes specifically tailored to assist women challenge gendered structures in the workplace. Additional research can greatly benefit from a greater representation of women to allow for the assessment of indirect links of personality traits, cultural background and family dynamics to how women perceive and navigate structural impediments.
REFERENCES


References:


