

Leadership Lessons from Female Executives in the South African Oil Industry

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Abstract : In this article, observations are drawn from a number of interviews conducted with female executives in the South African Oil Industry in 2017. Globally, the oil industry represents one of the most male-dominated organisational structures as well as cultures in the business world. Some of the remarkable women, who hold upper management positions, have not only emerged from the science and finance spheres (equally gendered organisations) but also navigated their way through an aggressive, patriarchal atmosphere of rivalry and competition. We examine various mythology associated with the industry, such as the cowboy myth, the frontier ideology and the queen bee syndrome directed at female executives. One of the themes to emerge from my interviews was the almost unanimous rejection of the 'glass ceiling' metaphor favoured by some Feminists. The women of the oil industry rather affirmed a picture of their rise to leadership positions through a strategic labyrinth of challenges and obstacles both in terms of gender and race. This article aims to share the insights of women leaders in a complex industry through both their reflections and a theoretical Feminist lens. The study is located within the South African context and given our historical legacy, it was optimal to use an intersectional approach which would allow issues of race, gender, ethnicity and language to emerge. A qualitative research methodological approach was employed as well as a thematic interpretative analysis to analyse and interpret the data. This research methodology was used precisely because it encourages and acknowledged the experiences women have and places these experiences at the centre of the research. Multiple methods of recruitment of the research participants was utilised. The initial method of recruitment was snowballing sampling, the second method used was purposive sampling. In addition to this, semi-structured interviews gave the participants an opportunity to ask questions, add information and have discussions on issues or aspects of the research area which was of interest to them. One of the key objectives of the study was to investigate if there was a difference in the leadership styles of men and women. Findings show that despite the wealth of literature on the topic, to the contrary some women do not perceive a significant difference in men and women's leadership style. However other respondents felt that there were some important differences in the experiences of men and women superiors although they hesitated to generalise from these experiences. Further findings suggest that although the oil industry provides unique challenges to women as a gendered organization, it also incorporates various progressive initiatives for their advancement.

Keywords : petroleum industry, gender, feminism, leadership

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