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Case femaleForum: developing women's leadership opportunities in work life

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Abstract

The development of female leadership and entrepreneurship has evolved into an important theme around the world. This paper has two objectives. Firstly, we introduce a comprehensive training program called femaleForum, which combines education, development and research following the principle of lifelong learning. The program includes various modules which are designed to support the leadership and entrepreneurship opportunities of many different women. Secondly, based on an empirical interview study with 20 women, we discuss what kind of impact one of the modules in the program, a female MBA, can have on women's attitudes and careers. The results show that the participants' attitudes became more positive about an all-female group in leadership development. We discuss the reasons for this change. Several career changes—both horizontal and vertical—were also realized.

Key words: Woman leader, leadership development, attitude, career, qualitative research

Case femaleForum: developing women's leadership opportunities in work life

A crucial determinant of a country's sustainable competitiveness is its human talent, and women account for one half of the potential talent base throughout the world. However, according to *The Global Gender Gap Report (2015)* produced by the World Economic Forum, which ranks 145 countries according to gender equality, no country in the world has achieved gender equality in terms of economic, educational, health-based and political indicators. The report makes clear that even though overall gender equality has progressed slightly from 2006 till 2015, stubborn inequalities persist (*The Global Gender Gap Report, 2015*). One enduring problem is that women have problems advancing into positions of leadership and decision-making in work life. Women also face problems starting up in business and becoming entrepreneurs. These problems are well known in the literature, and most of the research on women's problems and challenges in work life are centered on the so-called glass ceiling phenomenon—a metaphor for an invisible barrier that prevents women from advancing into leadership positions (Powell & Graves, 2003).

A great deal of research has been conducted on the problems encountered by women, but factors that promote their opportunities and functioning in work life have been given less attention. One important mechanism that can advance women's opportunities and help close the gender gap is leadership training (Simpson, 2000; Sturges, Simpson, & Altman, 2003; Lämsä & Savela, 2014; Flynn, Haynes, & Kilgour, 2015). For instance, the results of a study on MBA education by Sturges et al. (2003) indicate that the competencies gained from MBA programs reduce the career barriers perceived by women and improve their career opportunities. A study of female managers and entrepreneurs by Lämsä and Hiillos (2008) suggests that women perceive a high level of competence gained from education as an important factor in leadership success. However, even though the importance of leadership training for increasing women's opportunities and equality in work life in general has been acknowledged, despite some exceptions (e.g. Simpson, 2000; Simpson

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& Ituma, 2007; Lämsä & Savela, 2014; Flynn et al., 2015) few studies have investigated leadership training from a gender viewpoint. This study therefore focuses on this issue.

This paper is organized in the following way. Firstly, we present the objectives of the paper, and this is followed by a description of a program called femaleForum, which offers leadership training for women interested in leadership and a career in entrepreneurship. Then we explain the results of an empirical study in which we examined the effect of one of the modules in the scheme, namely femaleMBA, on the participating women's attitudes and careers. We also describe the context of our study and research methods and follow this with diagnosis and analysis. Finally, we reach some conclusions and make recommendations.

Objectives

In this article, in focus is a training program that was designed to develop women's opportunities in work life, specifically in leadership and entrepreneurship. The article has two objectives:

1. To introduce a comprehensive only-for-women training program called femaleForum (hereafter fForum), which combines education, development and research following the principle of lifelong learning. The program was developed and carried out in Finland.

2. To present the results of an empirical interview study with 20 women on the impact of one of the modules in the program, femaleMBA (hereafter fMBA), on women's attitudes and careers.

Case: fForum leadership training program

Goals and contents of the fForum program

The fForum is a training program that is designed specifically for women, to promote their opportunities and functioning in work life. Its specific goals are as follows:

- Increase gender equality in leadership and entrepreneurship
- Strengthen women's identity as leaders

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- Encourage women to find their own way of leadership and entrepreneurship
- Support women in career development and finding meaningful work
- Advance women's business management competency
- Support women's professional networking
- Increase co-operation between universities, institutes of higher education and work life

organizations

A crucial consideration in going ahead with the idea was to create a training program that can take its participants' various educational and developmental needs into account. Thus this program, which addresses participants' own particular features and goals, was designed, and four different kinds of modules depending on both the characteristics of the group in question and the lifecycle stage of the business were developed. The fForum program and its modules are presented in Figure 1.

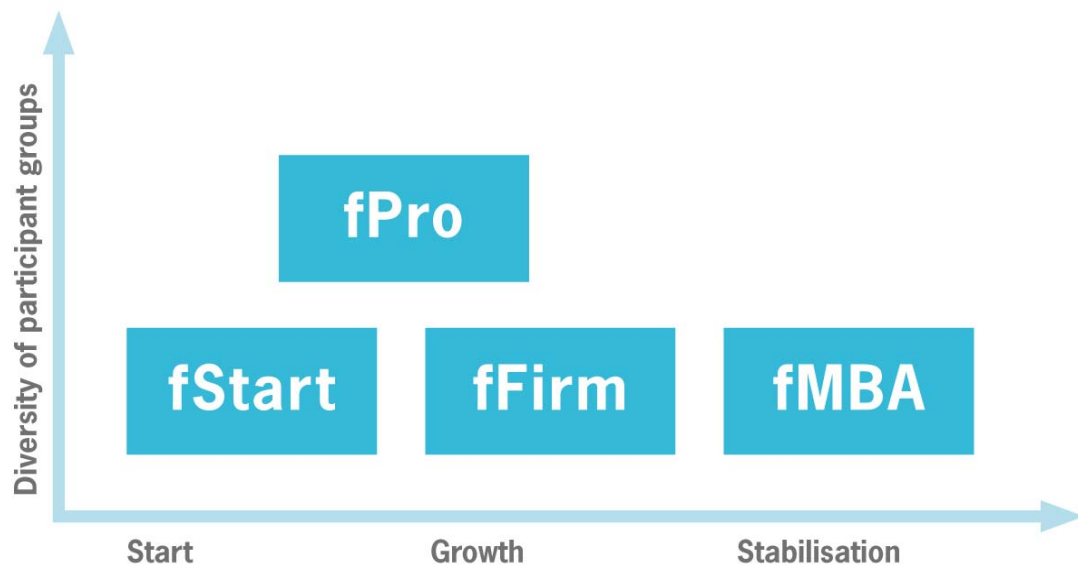


Figure 1. The fForum scheme.

A horizontal dimension in Figure 1 highlights the trajectory of the business in which the participants work. The trajectory is divided into three stages: the start-up phase, growth phase and

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stabilization. The start-up phase refers to the beginning of a business, when someone develops, evaluates and tests her business idea and considers her own interest in and capability as an entrepreneur. In the growth phase, business opportunities are expanding and the entrepreneur needs to focus on how to take advantage of the changing situation and adapt successfully to new circumstances. Finally, in the stabilization phase women are working either in a large organization as professionals or managers, or are themselves owners whose business has been going on successfully for a long time. The context of these women's work can be described as structured and organized. When designing the program it was thought that the educational and development needs and expectations of people in the different phases are different, and therefore it is necessary to customize the modules in this way.

A vertical dimension in Figure 1 refers to the diversity of the participants in terms of their ethnic background. Three groups in the scheme are made up of Finnish participants and one group is for foreigners who do not speak Finnish as their mother tongue, although they can speak and write Finnish at least to the extent that they can understand teaching and teaching materials in Finnish. This last group is made up of immigrants. Research results obtained by Lähdesmäki & Savela (2006) suggest that such ethnic groups need specific support in education which, in addition to imparting the usual knowledge about business and leadership, takes into consideration the participants' challenges in cultural and language knowledge. Each of the modules includes two main components: 1) training in subject-specific topics such as leadership behavior, strategic management, marketing, human resource management, business ethics, finance, and so on, and 2) guidance on personal development in leadership and entrepreneurship such as coaching, mentoring and getting on in a career. Let us now look more closely at the modules in the program.

The *fStart* is targeted at women who are planning to take up entrepreneurship or those in the very early stages of an entrepreneurial career. The duration of the module is four months and it consists of courses on planning the business idea and preparing a business plan, setting up a

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company, and developing leadership skills. In this module, each participant prepares a business plan for her own company and in order to do this she is given personal advice on how to make a successful business plan and on evaluating one's own strengths and weaknesses as an entrepreneur. A central idea of this module is to give training that is highly practical by nature and allows participants both to evaluate whether or not they want to start their own business and, if they do and are interested in setting up a company, how to develop a sound and credible business plan.

The target group of the *fFirm* module is women who are already acting as entrepreneurs and want to make their business grow and/or are facing an expanding market. These women's needs for training are related to their own personal development, as well as to knowledge of business development and expansion and leadership in times of change. The module takes two years to complete. During the module each woman participates in a mentoring relationship in which an experienced entrepreneur acts as mentor to the *fFirm* participant, providing knowledge of and support in organizing change, networking, and personal growth.

After running the module for the first time, however, it was found that even though the *fFirm* module was experienced as useful by its participants, it was also experienced as rather long. Additionally, the focus of the module tended to be too broad and vague from the business point of view, and some of the participants were more interested in developing their personal characteristics than their business. The module was therefore reorganized as structured business coaching (with about eight participants in a group with an experienced coach) with the explicit aim of supporting the growth of the business in both the domestic and foreign markets, with clear-set business targets and activities for business development. The length of the coaching module was six months, which proved to be a sensible length of time for business coaching. The current version of the module aims to recruit high-potential performers (Coutu & Kaufman, 2009) whose goal is to run a business with expanding possibilities.

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The *fMBA* program is targeted at women who already have a significant amount of skills and experience in work life. These women are in the mid-career phase, either in charge of their own business or working as a professional or manager in a larger organization. This phase in a woman's life has been called 'recalibration' (Gordon & Whelan-Berry, 2005), meaning that women are searching for new alternatives in life and also reformulating their values and frameworks in their work context. The duration of the *fMBA* module—which is a whole program in itself— is two years and three months. For personal development an autobiographical career guidance approach is applied, which aims to support the participants find solutions to their career and business challenges, and help them to reflect on their career to date and increase the sense of meaningfulness in their lives (Lämsä & Hiillos, 2008).

Organization

Each of the training modules in the *fForum* program is based on a combination of classroom and distance learning methods. This kind of combination is important, since professional women who actively involved in work life and therefore need, on the one hand, a clear structure and plan for their studies and, on the other, flexibility in the training arrangements. The modules include varying number of classroom days and seminars (the number depends on the length of the module), remote assignments related to the themes covered, team work assignments, personal guidance, and a development assignment that is related to the participant's own work context. In the *fFirm* and *fMBA* modules, we lead student-funded study trips abroad. The study trips include learning about local business, expert services aimed at newly established enterprises, local culture, and the operations and challenges of both Finnish and local enterprises.

Until now, the *fForum* training program has been carried out by the Business School of the Oulu University of Applied Sciences (herefter OAMK) in cooperation with the University of Jyväskylä, School of Business and Economics (hereafter JSBE) in Finland. The planning and implementation of the program was financed mainly by the European Union Social Fund, based on

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a larger European-level goal of promoting social equality. The implementation of the program focused specifically on gender equality in work life in the context of leadership and entrepreneurship in the Northern Ostrobothnia region in the north of Finland. The participants' organizations and the participants themselves contributed financially to the training.

Cooperation between the academic partners was organized around the principle of mutual benefit. This means that the partners were interested in and willing to combine their competencies and strengths in development, education and research. Since the primary task of the universities of applied sciences in Finland, such as OAMK, is to focus on education and regional development, OAMK was responsible for this part of the project. The main task of universities, on the other hand, is to do scientific research, and so the main role of JSBE was in this area. In other words, OAMK was in charge of the program overall and had responsibility for its management, planning, organization, finance, implementation and evaluation, while JSBE took charge of research activities (e.g. Lämsä & Savela, 2014) and provided expertise and consultancy in gender and leadership issues in the program. A JSBE representative was also in charge of the steering group.

Empirical study

Methods

The number of women in immediate supervisory roles in Finland has increased in recent years (Lehto, 2009), although there has not been a comparable increase in the proportion of women at higher levels of responsibility and decision-making (Nordic Gender Equality in Figures, 2015). Currently, approximately one third of all supervisors, managers and entrepreneurs in Finland are women (Nordic Gender Equality in Figures, 2015; Statistics Finland, 2015).

The empirical study was conducted in the fMBA program. The fMBA is a high-level academic, research and development program in business leadership for female entrepreneurs and women in challenging expert and managerial roles in organizations. An MBA is seen as a crucial way to open gates into positions of leadership. Previous studies show that an MBA can have

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positive results for participants' competencies, career success and networking (Baruch & Peiperl, 2000; Simpson, 2000; Sturges et al., 2003; Lämsä & Savela, 2014). However, despite these benefits, in practice there is a tendency for the majority of participants in MBAs to be men (Sturges et al., 2003; Simpson, 2006; Kelan & Dunkley Jones, 2010; Flynn et al., 2015). In Finland, no research has been done about women's share in MBAs, but from our experience and knowledge as instructors on various MBAs in Finland, the situation in terms of gender composition in MBAs is similar to that mentioned in the international research above: there are more men than women.

The data for the empirical data comprises 20 open-ended interviews with women who completed the fMBA. Their average age was 47 years, and their work experience was on average 24 years. All had positions in work life as professionals and managers at different levels and as small business owners. The data was collected about 18 months after the end of the program, when it could still be remembered but when the so called honeymoon effect (Boyatzis, 2008) of the program had disappeared. The duration of the interviews varied from one to two hours. All of the interviews were recorded with the respondents' permission. The recorded interviews were subsequently transcribed word by word. Content analysis was used to analyze the interview data (Tuomi & Sarajärvi, 2009).

Analysis and diagnosis

Regarding the participants' attitudes towards an MBA module exclusively for women, it was found that before starting the module many respondents (9 persons) felt that an all-women's group was an encouraging and motivating educational context. However, five participants had a conflicting attitude: they thought that such a program could have both positive and negative effects. Finally, six participants mentioned that their attitude was definitely skeptical. These women, whose attitude was basically negative, said that they were doubtful of the value of a leadership program that was targeted only at women. Consequently, they felt that it devalued what women do. This leads one to wonder why, with their negative ideas, they decided to participate in the program at all.

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The most usual reason they gave was that someone whom they respected—typically a male supervisor or spouse—had recommended participation. Thus, the women had adapted their attitude to the attitude of this significant (male) other. Only one woman mentioned that she had reflected critically on her negative attitude for herself and come to the conclusion that her attitude was stupid and stereotypical, and that she had to work on herself and change it.

However, after completing the module the participants said that it had been a very inspiring and empowering experience. None of them any longer had any doubts about an all-woman training group. The respondents mentioned that the learning environment and atmosphere were much better than in the mixed groups where many of them had studied before. In other words, the women's attitudes became clearly positive toward an all-women's group once they themselves had some experience of such a group. According to the interviewees, one important reason was that in the all-female group all of the participants could speak out freely and share various, even difficult, experiences with one another in a trusting, relaxed and open atmosphere. All of the respondents said that after going through the module they would be happy to recommend a similar program to their female colleagues and friends.

The fMBA module had a significant effect not only on the participants' attitudes but also on their careers. Five of the interviewees said that before the module they had had career transition as an objective for participating in it. While two of the women wanted to have vertical promotion, for example to a top management position in an organization or board membership, three of them were targeting a horizontal change, meaning changing the content of their work on the same level. In general, the respondents did not emphasize that before joining the program they were actively looking for new responsibilities, but they had thought that they were open to new opportunities in the future.

After completing the module, 17 of the respondents (n=20) said that they had changed their job, either in their own company or in their place of employment. Of these 17, 16 mentioned a link

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between the career change and the fMBA. One respondent said that the reason for the change was something other than the effect of the module. All of the 16 women who experienced a career transition and linked it to the fMBA mentioned that the transition was voluntary. In other words, they were not forced to make the change as a result, for instance, of downsizing or dismissal, but they had themselves actively decided on the career change. Table 1 shows the career transitions with the respondents’ perceived connection with the fMBA.

Table 1

Career transition connected with the fMBA module

Organization Direction	In current organization	In another organization	Total
Vertical (upward) career transition	5 persons	5 persons	10 persons
Horizontal career transition	4 persons	2 persons	6 persons
Total	9 persons	7 persons	16 persons

Nine respondents moved to a different position or significantly changed their work in the same organization, while seven respondents moved to a different organization. Four of the SME entrepreneurs had modified their responsibilities within their own firm, while one had moved to another firm. About two thirds of the career changes were vertical: the respondents said they had advanced in the hierarchy and in terms of status. In addition to vertical career progress, six interviewees mentioned horizontal career changes. Such changes were said to have made their work more interesting, meaningful and motivating. The majority of respondents who had experienced a horizontal career change said that they still had their earlier title at work but they had been given more responsibility than previously.

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The majority of horizontal moves took place in the interviewees' current organizations, with only two of those who experienced a horizontal change moving to a different organization. The respondents held somewhat different views on the importance of the fMBA in the career change. Some considered the role of the module in their career transition to be rather minor, despite mentioning the connection. Others, however, viewed the role of the fMBA training as significant, in some cases even as critical, meaning that without the MBA this new career opportunity would not have been available to them.

Overall, the proportion of interviewees who reported a career transition was high. None of the respondents who mentioned a connection between the career transition and completing the fMBA understood the transition to be a negative one, but rather they saw it as a positive development from the hierarchical point of view or in the sense of giving them the possibility of motivating and meaningful new tasks. A closer analysis of the reasons which were perceived as important in promoting the career change produced the following list: increased competence (8 persons), improved self-awareness and confidence (8 persons), and increased recognition and credibility (6 persons).

The answers of respondents who reported a career change were examined to see what career transition aims they mentioned having had before starting the fMBA. Of the five respondents who had set career change aims beforehand, four reported having achieved a career transition while one did not. Of the four who had set career transition as an aim and subsequently experienced career change, three mentioned that the change was of a different nature from what they had originally hoped for: two of them had a hierarchical change instead of a horizontal change, while one who had set hierarchical change in her own organization as an aim had a hierarchical change to another organization. It is worth mentioning that 11 other respondents mentioned having had a career change and connected it to the fMBA, even if they had not set it as an aim before entering the program.

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In sum, the majority of the respondents who completed the fMBA indicated that they had subsequently experienced a career transition. The majority of the transitions were vertical, upward moves in the organizational hierarchy and status. Horizontal transitions were also frequently mentioned by the respondents and viewed as positive. The horizontal moves were perceived as having made work more varied and motivating.

Discussion and conclusion

In general, the fForum project can be considered an innovative practice promoting women's opportunities specifically in business leadership and entrepreneurship. Instead of offering one program for one specific group, the project offers a development model aiming at different women target groups, and it takes into consideration the possible different stages in the lifecycle of the women's business as well as personal background characteristics, specifically ethnic background. The fundamental idea of the program can be described through the metaphor, '*one size does not fit all*': we recommend that in women's leadership and entrepreneurship development the training needs to be customized.

It can be concluded that a crucial strength of the fForum program is that participants can move from one module to another. Thus, the range of modules offers a life-long learning path to women's leadership development. The program provides flexibility not only in the organizing of each individual module but also between the modules. For example, a woman who has taken part in the fFirm module, which focuses on the growth of the business, may later, when the business has grown, consider it important to participate in the fMBA to develop her knowledge and understanding of leadership from a more theoretical and academic viewpoint. Alternatively, a woman who has completed the fMBA might now, after a career in another organization, decide that she wants to start her own business. In this case, after the fMBA she would choose the fStart module. Various training paths are possible. In practice, several variations on the order of completing the modules have already occurred. A clear problem with the program is funding. Most

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of the finance has come from the European Union Social Fund, which means that the continuation of the program will be project-based. .

One goal of the development of the fForum program is increased cooperation between universities and other institutes of higher education such as universities of applied sciences. Currently, cooperation between universities of applied sciences and universities is encouraged politically in Finland and they are in fact growing in number, but models for such cooperation are still needed (Pelkonen & Nieminen, 2015). The planning and organizing of cooperation can be based on large-scale structural and organizational projects, which are important officially and strategically, but usually take a long time to be realized in practical and mutually rewarding activities among actors at grassroot levels—not to mention the time it takes to bring about changes in organizations' cultures. In the fForum program the principle of cooperation between the partners can be described as *'take a chance and get on with it'*. In other words, we recommend that it can sometimes (often, even) be more useful to take small steps forward when one can than wait for any big strategic decisions, although it is sometimes possible to anticipate what these will be and plan accordingly when taking the smaller steps. Opportunities for fruitful and innovative cooperation can be lost if one waits too long for a decision about top-down change - and such decisions and changes usually take a very long time to happen.

In this case the main benefits of the cooperation can be summarized as follows. The university partner, JSBE, got access to an excellent context for gathering interesting empirical data on the topic and, through research, could participate in and advance the development of the program from this point of view. OAMK, on the other hand, as the representative of the universities of applied sciences, received systematically investigated knowledge on gender and leadership issues as well as scientific information and consultancy on them. Additionally, both partners' attitudes toward cooperation became positive and a firm relationship for future cooperation was established

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between them. An important reason for this was that the partners got to know each other and their preferences and ways of acting while working together on the program.

Given that leadership training such as an MBA can have positive effects on participants' expertise and career, and that leadership positions are segregated by gender vertically not only in Finland but globally, so that women have more problems in attaining decision-making positions (The Global Gender Gap Report, 2015), we recommend that women's share in leadership development, particularly MBAs should be higher if attempts to increase gender equality in work life are to be successful.

Finally, some comments concerning the empirical study conducted in the fForum program, specifically the fMBA, are worth discussing. As shown in the analysis and diagnosis part of this article, the women who completed the fMBA had originally set rather modest aims for their career advancement. However, the progress they actually made in their careers after completing the module was much higher than that; the women subsequently seemed to experience significantly better advancement in their career than they had expected. There might be several reasons for this, but one important reason must be the historically rooted social and cultural expectations for women. According to traditional assumptions of womanhood, women should not show too much ambition, but rather should be modest in their behavior and goals (Heilman, 2001; Lämsä & Hiillos, 2008; Lämsä & Savela, 2014). These expectations may have affected the participants' ideas and hopes for the training when they originally formulated their career aims; participating in the program allowed them to realize their untapped potential.

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