CHIEF OFFICER NARRATIVES:

LEADERSHIP PERSPECTIVES ON ADVANCING WOMEN TO THE C-SUITE

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CHIEF OFFICER NARRATIVES:
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DEDICATION

To every woman of any race, culture or background who desires to lead
in top senior executive level roles with titles that begin with “C.”
ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

To my daughter, who is the driving force of my life, my profound hope is that, one day, you will understand that my immeasurable love for you is the reason I do what I do;

To my mother, whose unwavering love and support, particularly throughout the dissolution of my marriage and during the completion of this dissertation, has motivated and inspired me to greater heights;

To both my older sisters, I hope that this achievement, which at times seemed impossible, reflects my gratitude for your love, prayers and encouragement, which brought me through some of the darkest hours of my life;

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ABSTRACT

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Robert Moore

Since the women’s liberation movement in the 1970s, the number of women in the American workforce has increased dramatically; however, the percentage of women in the C-Suite—those who reach the status of chief officer—remains below 10 percent nationally (Soares et al., 2013). This disparity, sometimes called the “glass ceiling,” remains, even though many companies have adopted important initiatives to promote women’s advancement. Although research has identified a complex set of factors involved in women’s achievement of the highest levels of success in contemporary corporate settings, including measurable achievements, such as education, experience, and technical proficiency and intangibles, such as emotional intelligence, leadership styles, and communication skill, a significance
difference in women’s ability to break through the glass ceiling has still not been made.

Aimed at bridging that gap, this qualitative study gathers, through personal interviews, the experiences and perspectives of 17 individuals, both men and women, of different races, cultures, and backgrounds, all of whom have reached the level of chief officer. Respondents were queried about their perception of the factors necessary to reach the C-Suite, as well as any factors required especially for women to arrive at that destination. The data gathered in the interviews included the subjects’ experiences from the process of their own advancement to the C-Suite and their observations of others’ experiences. The data were coded and analyzed according to recurring themes and patterns in the interviewees’ answers. The results point to a complex, nuanced, dynamic set of factors in the life of an otherwise qualified individual. Namely, four (4) such factors play a primary role in propelling aspiring women into the C-Suite: 1) executive traits; 2) preparation; 3) networking; and 4) engaging organizational culture. The findings offer an empowering promise that women can not only identify and gain the tools they need to accomplish their C-Suite goals, but also actively pursue and cultivate these assets in a way that offers success in both life and career.
# TABLE OF CONTENTS

**DEDICATION** iii  
**ACKNOWLEDGMENTS** iv  
**ABSTRACT** v  
**LIST OF ILLUSTRATIONS** x  
**CHAPTER ONE: INTRODUCTION** 1  
  Statement of the Problem 5  
  Research Questions 6  
  Rationale 6  
  Organization of Chapters 10  
**CHAPTER TWO: LITERATURE REVIEW** 14  
  History of the Problem 15  
  Outline of Research 16  
  Benefits of Advancing Women to the C-Suite 17  
  The Glass Ceiling and Other Barriers That Women Encounter 18  
  Organizational Culture As A Barrier 20  
  Perceptions of Gender Differences in Leadership and Communication 21  
  Styles as a Barrier 21  
  Current Strategies To Advance Women In The C-Suite: What Works and What Doesn’t 24  
  Mentoring 26  
  Coaching 30  
  Sponsoring 34  
  “Unstated Criteria” as a Conceptual Framework 37  
  Conclusion 39  
**CHAPTER THREE: RESEARCH METHODOLOGY** 41  
  Theoretical Foundations 42  
  Research Questions 44  
  The Respondents 44  
  Site Selection 49  
  Methods of Data Collection 49  
  Methods of Analysis 51  
  Validity Issues 52  
**CHAPTER FOUR: CHIEF OFFICER NARRATIVES: FINDINGS AND ANALYSIS** 53  
  Finding One: Executive Traits 55  
  Confidence 55  
  Assertiveness 59
Interpretations 126
Beneficiaries of Research and Recommendations 128
  Women Pursuing C-Suite Roles 128
  C-Suite Executives 129
  Human Resources Officials and Supporters of Women’s Advancement 130
Researcher Reflections 132
Suggestions for Further Research 134
Summary 135
APPENDICES 137
  Appendix A: Interview Protocol 137
  Appendix B: Dissertation Interview Invitation Letter 140
REFERENCES 143
LIST OF ILLUSTRATIONS

Figure 1: Conceptual framework. What are the barriers to women’s success in the C-Suite?

Figure 2: Participants’ profiles.

Figure 3: Frequently cited factors and qualities to help women advance to the C-Suite

Figure 4: Major themes

Figure 5: Conceptual framework. Formula for greater numbers of women in the C-Suite
CHAPTER ONE: INTRODUCTION

This dissertation examines the problem and causes of the under-representation of women in executive positions in the American corporate world: under 10 percent in the highest levels of management and under 20 percent on executive boards (Soares, Bartkiewicz, Mulligan-Ferry, Fendler, & Wai Chun Kun, 2013). The top level of management in organizations is commonly called the C-Suite, an abbreviation for “chief suite,” because it contains the offices of “chief” officers, such as the chief executive officer (CEO), the chief operating officer (COO), and the chief financial officer (CFO) (Guadalupe, Li, & Wulf, 2013). Approximately 57 percent of U.S. women are in the workforce, and, compared to previous decades, many are succeeding in reaching management levels, as more than half of management, professional, and related positions in 2012 were held by women (U. S. Bureau of Labor Statistics, 2015). However, women are still not reaching the top tier in numbers proportionate to men.

When individual women reach the C-Suite of major corporations, as Mary T. Barra at General Motors and Sheryl Sandberg at Facebook have, the high level of gender-based news coverage these women receive demonstrates that such events are rare. The 2013 Catalyst Census revealed that women held only 16.9 percent of board seats at Fortune 500 companies that year (Soares et al., 2013). Additionally, less than one-fifth of companies had 25 percent or more female directors. Ten percent of companies had no women on their boards, and women of color held only 3.3 percent of board seats (Soares et al., 2013). This
is problematic, given the fact that companies profit from gender diversity at both
the board and the executive level (e.g. Meyerson & Fletcher, 2000; Kanter,
2010; Carter & Wagner, 2011). Those with high board representation of women
outperformed those with low representation, with 84 percent more return on
sales, 60 percent more return on investment capital, and 46 percent more return
on investment (Carter & Wagner, 2011).

Although women have made important gains in many areas -- the global
gender gap has nearly closed in health and education -- economic and political
opportunity and participation continue to lag (Bekhouche, Hausmann, & Tyson,
2013). Women’s advancement in economic participation and opportunity in the
United States, in particular, rose from eighth in the world in 2012, to sixth in
2013 (Bekhouche, Hausmann, & Tyson, 2013). Corporations are more aware of
the economic benefits of inclusion, and many have instituted training and other
programs (Carter & Wagner, 2011; Meyerson & Fletcher, 2000). Yet, in many
places, the “glass ceiling” remains intact (Barreto, Ryan, & Schmitt, 2008). As
the women’s movement enters its third generation, the low number of women in
the C-Suite has become an urgent concern for both women and corporate
leaders (Soares et al., 2013). The findings of this dissertation conclude that
more change needs to happen, not only in society and in corporations, but also
in the lives of individual women in order for higher numbers of women to reach
the C-Suite.

Much of the conversation about increasing the role of women in the C-
Suite invokes the image of “breaking the glass ceiling” (Barreto et al., 2008;
Cotter, Hermsen, Ovadia, & Vanneman, 2001; Hymowitz & Schellhardt, 1986; Weyer, 2007). This includes important discussions about gender equality in hiring (Bosak & Sczesny, 2011), pay equity (Grey-Bowen & McFarlane, 2010), promotion (Bohnet, Van Geen, & Bazerman, 2012), and other aspects of corporate life such as educational attainment and labor force participation (“On pay gap”, 2013). The existing body of research focuses too narrowly on women’s measurable achievements (degrees, promotion) or organizations’ practices (hiring, pay, and promotion). It has also failed to generate any significant change in women’s ability to progress to the C-Suite.

Very few women are able to achieve the top rung because the organizational culture in many companies has the effect of discouraging women’s advancement beyond a certain management level (Tsai, 2011). Programs for individuals and changes in organizational culture, such as diversity initiatives and the adoption of inclusive leadership styles, have helped women progress up the corporate ladder—but only so far. As Figure 1 shows, the number of women who reach the C-Suite remains disproportionately low, even though more women have entered the pipeline and, theoretically, should have advanced to that level.
Figure 1. Conceptual framework. What are the barriers to women’s success in the C-Suite?

Guadalupe et al. (2013) have classified categories in the C-Suite that were described by other researchers – including value creation and loss prevention, finance, HR, systems, manufacturing, logistics, sales, and support – as front-end and back-end functions in the increasingly complex environment of the C-Suite. In any particular organization, only those who have reached the C-Suite are privy to its culture’s requirements for entry. While these are all important considerations, leadership should be based solely on the abilities, skills, and knowledge of leaders, rather than on social and cultural attitudes and beliefs that might give preference to specifically masculine leadership styles and ways of thinking (Beeson & Valerio, 2012). These so-called unstated criteria – hard enough to pinpoint, let alone meet – are yet another hindrance to women gaining entry into the chief suite. This topic is addressed in further detail in Chapter Two.
Over the years, organizational culture has changed in many ways to promote women’s leadership success, both with specific programs that target this goal and, in many places, with changed attitudes that recognize the value of women’s participation (Branson, 2011; Kim, Kalev & Dobbin, 2012). For example, many organizations that once prized masculine-identified traits such as assertiveness now value more gender-inclusive traits such as passion, and women are more frequently placed in management positions that have the potential for promotion to the top level (Carter & Wagner, 2011). Many organizations have also instituted programs of mentoring, coaching, sponsorship, and other initiatives and programs, such as leadership training, designed to help women advance into senior executive roles, but the results of these efforts, undertaken over the past four decades, have been mixed (Branson, 2011; Kim et al., 2012). While some are beneficial, others have not been gainful, and none have significantly increased the proportion of women who reach the C-Suite (Blake-Beard, 2001; Hewlett, 2013; Starman, 2007; Travis, Doty, & Helitzer, 2013).

Statement of the Problem

A large part of the problem is that, from their early years on, women are not steered towards the C-Suite track in the same ways that they often are to other career paths such as law, medicine, or science, technology, engineering, and mathematics (STEM) fields (Fitzsimmons, Callen, & Paulsen, 2013). Because companies profit from gender diversity at both the board and executive
levels, this dearth of women at the C-Suite level is not only a social and cultural problem; it is also a business problem (Carter & Wagner, 2011). Therefore, more research is needed to determine how we can level the playing field in the chief suite. One way of increasing the likelihood of more women in the C-Suite is to demystify the chief officer trajectory by soliciting the advice and personal experiences of actual C-Suiters.

**Research Questions**

This study seeks to answer the following research questions:

1. What do current corporate officers believe will enable *anyone* to advance to the C-Suite of their organization?
2. What do current corporate officers believe will enable *women* to advance to the C-Suite of their organization?

**Rationale**

The findings of this dissertation fill an important gap in the understanding of these well-known issues. The existing body of research focuses mainly on women’s measurable achievements (degrees, promotion) or organizations’ practices (hiring, pay, promotion). As well, contemporary business initiatives designed to redress the gender imbalance in upper-level management—like mentoring, coaching, and sponsoring—are based on two assumptions: first, that there exists a certain set of measurable skills necessary for advancement to the
C-suite; and second, that these skills can be effectively transmitted through structured programs. As the literature has shown, however, these efforts have achieved limited success (e.g. Nohria & Khurana, 2010; Tsai, 2011; Beeson & Valerio, 2012; Hewlett, Marshall, & Sherbin, 2013; Cooney, 2015). The research presented in this dissertation instead focuses on the perceptions and experiences of 17 chief officers and offers a broad, holistic account of the factors that led to their success and that of their peers. The recurring themes that surfaced in the semi-structured interviews are considered here not only as individual, isolated variables but also as elements of a larger narrative where they interact in complementary, dynamic ways with existing measures to facilitate advancement to the C-Suite.

Therefore, research that seeks a more comprehensive understanding of the individual and organizational factors that can play a role in the advancement of women is necessary. Beeson & Valerio (2012) suggest this is critically important, as women are likely to receive less effective feedback than men on these issues. These built-in biases can exaggerate perception of their de-selection factors, and the lack of adequate opportunities to demonstrate their capabilities can keep them from demonstrating the core selection factors (Beeson & Valerio, 2012).

The research for this dissertation seeks to identify the actual experiences of and the skills possessed by individuals who have reached the C-Suite and the organizational culture that promotes the success of women in the C-Suite. One way of uncovering such information is through personal narratives. As
psychologist Dan McAdams (2008a) writes, “Our stories spell out our identities. But they also speak to and for culture. Life stories sometimes say as much about the culture wherein they are told as they do about the teller of the story” (p. 21).

This study centers on personal interviews with successful leaders in the C-Suite. The interviews gather the corporate officers’ perceptions of the skills and experiences that enable a person to reach and succeed in the chief suite. These discussions collect the interviewee’s personal story of advancement to the C-Suite, their description of others’ advancement, and their general opinions. In addition, the interviews seek to understand organizational culture and its influence on an organization’s top level, including both stated expectations and unstated criteria. The interviewees describe both general principles and the particular characteristic of specific organizations where they have worked.

The objective of this investigation is to learn more about these abstract criteria by critically examining the careers of the respondents, then comparing and contrasting their perceptions with their individual skill sets and their early career experience, as well as the organizational culture above the glass ceiling in the C-Suite. Such analysis aims to uncover which are the most desirable attributes for one in the chief suite—and which might be missing during the early career stage of some hoping to reach the C-Suite. Discovering how those elements can be provided to help women aspiring to become chief officers, including skills, behaviors, actions, experience, and organizational culture, is a primary goal of this dissertation.
The interview questions were aimed at gathering a broad perspective from the executives, including information, data, and anecdotal stories that provide insight into the process by which people, including women, reach the C-Suite in their organization. Gathering responses to open-ended questions enables a researcher to understand and capture the points-of-view of other people without predetermining those points-of-view through prior selection of questionnaire categories (Patton, 1990).

This qualitative approach considers that the individual elements of C-Suite life are best understood not in isolation but in their dynamic interaction as experienced on a daily basis by the men and women with such responsibilities. The respondents’ stories about routine and exceptional activity, how decisions are made, the way people communicate, how meetings are conducted, how the person achieves life-work balance, and other topics provide fuller insight into the ecosystem of the C-Suite. A narrative locates each of those responsibilities and activities of chief officers in their real-life relationship with each other. The material gained from the interviews was analyzed to make conclusions and identify avenues for further research.

A growing body of research indicates that the presence of women in the C-Suite accelerates business success (Carter & Wagner, 2011; Meyerson & Fletcher, 2000). Failure to advance women to that level in anything close to their proportion in the population and workforce is preventing progress economically and socially (Carter & Wagner, 2011). Most of the studies and strategies to accelerate that advancement have been quantitative efforts focused on specific
skills or other factors, and they have not provided effective solutions to the problem. This research takes a qualitative approach that desires to identify a fuller range of tangible and intangible factors and to elucidate how their dynamic interaction can propel individuals, especially women, to the top rung of the corporate ladder.

The men and women who have reached the higher corporate levels can provide the full range of insights necessary for others to understand what is required for success at that level and to equip themselves for breaking through the barriers. For women who aspire to the C-Suite, this research provides a holistic perspective that empowers them to develop both the professional skills and personal characteristics necessary for success. The results can be transformational for individual women, and for the businesses that will benefit from the presence of more women at the top level of decision-making.

**Organization of Chapters**

Five chapters make up this dissertation. This introduction, Chapter One, provides a detailed explanation of the problem of the underrepresentation of women in the American C-Suite and lays out the rationale for the study. The goals, objectives, definitions, and scope of the research are also presented in this chapter. The research methodology, which will be fully detailed in Chapter Three, is also briefly discussed herein.

Chapter Two, the Literature Review, plumbs the existing body of research that has been conducted on the chronic American problem of women not
reaching the C-Suite in proportionate numbers. Most of the existing studies have been quantitative efforts focused on specific skills or other factors, like education and experience, and they have not provided effective solutions to the problem. Strategies designed to move greater numbers of women into the C-Suite, such as mentoring, coaching, and sponsoring, as well as diversity and inclusion initiatives, have fallen short. This failure of previous research and strategies to provide insight or guidance helpful to effectively advance women to the chief officer ranks in anything close to their proportion in the population and workforce is evidence that further investigation is needed, effectively validating this present examination.

In addition to describing the complete study design, Chapter Three presents the theoretical underpinnings of this qualitative study. Interpretation of interview data is informed by concepts drawn from a number of literatures, including poststructuralist feminism (Randall, 2010), Erikson’s theory of generativity (Erickson, 1963), and MacAdams’s theory of Narrative Identity (McAdams, 2008b). An explanation of how these three concepts in particular influenced this research is explained in this chapter.

Without revealing their identities, the Respondents section of Chapter Three profiles each of the interviewees -- 4 men and 13 women -- all of whom are current corporate officers. A racial breakdown is also included in the respondents’ blind biographies. These participants were selected because they have firsthand experience in the C-Suite. Six hold the title of Chief Executive Officer, and 11 have other C-level positions. They are each in a position to
provide the perspectives sought in the research questions. Open-ended interview questions allow for a comprehensive picture of a person’s life and career, and invite holistic descriptions of how one advances to the C-Suite, including the complex relationships between the different factors divulged by the corporate chiefs.

Chapter 4 presents the main findings of the research. This chapter reports and analyzes the recurring themes that inform the interviewees’ perspectives on the wide range of topics and their interrelationships, as well as identifying some of the less widely recognized and often unstated criteria for advancement to the C-suite. These are the so-called intangibles: non-negotiables, de-selection factors, and core selection factors. Also, the executives speak to the importance of the individual’s personal achievements, such as education, work success, and hard skills, as well as the value of programs to help the individual advance, like mentoring, coaching, sponsorship, or training programs.

In the conclusion, Chapter 5, the themes uncovered in the interview data are compared with those discussed in the review of existing literature (see Chapter 2). A central point in the interpretation of the data is that the interview respondents in this study—unlike most of the studies in the literature review—were not focused on those individual factors in isolation. Instead, they described the interrelationship of those factors in comprehensive stories of individual advancement and in descriptions of the combinations that position a person for
success. Recommendations for future research, as well as limitations of the present study, are also offered in the final chapter.
CHAPTER TWO: LITERATURE REVIEW

Gender imbalance in the C-Suite is a chronic problem in the United States for several reasons, one being that by holding women back, American businesses are failing to take full advantage of the skills and abilities of a large portion of the workforce (Padavic & Reskin, 2002). In 2012, women represented over half the professional managerial workforce, yet they represented less than 15% of senior leadership roles (Soares et al., 2013). The research in this literature review covers the various methods developed to combat this problem, shows that many of those methods have proven ineffective, and points to newer methodologies that state how women can and should help themselves in obtaining access to the C-Suite.

Much existing literature on this issue takes a quantitative approach to studying individual topics, such as communication, leadership, mentoring, and sponsoring, but a qualitative approach to gain the perspective of successful C-Suite executives on the factors that contribute to success is needed (e.g. Branson, 2011; Kim et al., 2012). So far, most studies have focused on how organizations should change (e.g. Barreto et al., 2008; Cotter et al., 2001; Hymowitz & Schellhardt, 1986; Weyer, 2007). Instead, those involved in corporate culture need to know how women themselves can effect change in their careers (Sandberg, 2013; Cooney, 2015).
History of the Problem

The issue of American women’s limited access to the C-Suite has a long and well-documented history. In 1976, McKinsey Quarterly director James E. Bennett wrote that businesses looking honestly at the advancement of women in their own organizations would uncover gender-bias issues despite the feeling among male executives that the Women’s Liberation movement had solved those issues (Bennett, 1976). Thirty-eight years later, A McKinsey Quarterly survey (Devillard, Sancier-Sultan, & Werner, 2014) referred to Bennett’s article after having surveyed 1,421 global executives and finding that cultural attitudes and gender bias were still key players in the lack of diversity at the corporate level. The survey showed that the issues flagged by Bennett are long-lived and pervasive (Devillard et al., 2014).

Alexiadis (2013) points out the United States did not have its first female CEO until the death of Melville Bissell, inventor of the carpet sweeper, in 1889. His wife and business partner, Anna Bissell, became CEO of the Bissell Company, which, to this day, is a thriving, family-run company (Alexiadis, 2013). Notwithstanding Anna Bissell’s successful CEO tenure—and that of noteworthy female business chiefs of the modern era, such as Ursula Burns of Xerox and Hewlett-Packard’s Meg Whitman—the number of women in the C-Suite has been consistently disproportionate to the number of women in the American population (Soares et al., 2014).
Outline of Research

This literature review begins with a brief investigation of how businesses benefit by advancing women to the C-Suite and why the lack thereof is not only a social problem, but also an economic problem (Carter & Wagner, 2011). Barriers that women currently encounter advancing to the C-Suite are examined, including the “glass ceiling,” a term used to describe barriers that have prevented a disproportionate number of women from advancing to the highest level in corporations, even though women have achieved notable success in the education and workforce pipelines (e.g. Barron et al., 2008; Cotter et al., 2001; Johns, 2013). Other barriers examined include the idea of gender-based leadership and communication styles, the bias for men’s leadership, and the idea that there is no sharp gender-based distinction in leadership styles (Beeson & Valerio, 2012).

Strategies that organizations have adopted to promote the advancement of women, including mentoring, coaching, and sponsoring, are investigated along with effectiveness of those strategies (e.g. Blake-Beard, 2001; Starman, 2007; Branson, 2011; Kim et al., 2012; Hewlett, 2013; Travis et al., 2013). While such approaches have been effective for women in some levels of the corporate organization, they have not led to a notable increase in the numbers of women in the C-Suite after decades of practice (e.g. Tsai, 2011; Nohria & Khurana, 2010; Beeson & Valerio, 2012). Further research highlights a complex environment of unspoken assumptions, called “unstated criteria,” that do not appear on job descriptions or performance reviews, but have a strong impact on a woman’s
ability to advance (e.g. Patton, 1990; Nohria & Khurana, 2010; Beeson & Valerio, 2012).

**Benefits of Advancing Women to the C-Suite**

The benefits of women obtaining executive positions have been demonstrated in numerous studies (e.g. Ruderman, Ohlott, Panzer, & King, 2002; Appelbaum, Audet, & Miller, 2003; Christman & McClellan, 2008), and the general business benefits of including women in a company structure are widely documented (e.g. Meyerson & Fletcher, 2000; Kanter, 2010; Carter & Wagner, 2011). Carter and Wagner (2011) note that as Baby Boomers retire, the global workforce will shrink, creating a scarcity of human capital. Hiring and training women can make a significant difference in overcoming that scarcity, both globally and in the United States (Carter & Wagner, 2011).

Companies profit from gender diversity at both the board and executive levels (Carter & Wagner, 2011), but the 2013 Catalyst Census revealed that women held only 16.9 percent of board seats at Fortune 500 companies that year, and less than one-fifth of companies had 25 percent or more women directors (Soares et al., 2013). Ten percent of companies had no women on their boards, and women of color had only 3.3 percent of board seats (Soares et al., 2013). Carter and Wagner (2011) showed that the presence of women at the highest levels of a corporation boosts performance. Companies with high numbers of women on their boards were compared to those with the least, revealing that those with the most outperformed those with the least by a 16
percent return on sales and a 26 percent return on investment capital (Carter & Wagner, 2011). Companies with at least three women on their board of directors for at least five years outperformed companies with low representation by an 84 percent return on sales, a 60 percent return on investment capital, and a 46 percent return on equity (Carter & Wagner, 2011).

Researchers at the University of British Columbia (Kanter, 2010) found that male executives tend to make more aggressive and less cautious decisions, which can have negative consequences. In contrast, Kanter (2010) points out research data from a World Economic Forum/Harvard Kennedy School conference, which noted that women are “more trustworthy, risk averse, and altruistic, at least in the sense of negotiating more effectively for other people than for themselves” (p. 3), demonstrating the value women can bring to the C-Suite.

**The Glass Ceiling and Other Barriers That Women Encounter**

The phrase “breaking the glass ceiling” became commonplace in the 1980s as a way to talk about advancing women past the invisible barrier to the C-suite (Cotter et al., 2001). Gay Bryant initially coined the term during a 1984 interview in *Adweek* and then reused it in her book *The Working Woman Report, Succeeding in Business in the 80s* (Frenkiel, 1984; Bryant, 1984). The metaphor became widely known after making headlines in a *Wall Street Journal* special report (Hymowitz & Schellhardt, 1986). By 1991, the U.S. Department of Labor had adopted the term, defining the glass ceiling as "those artificial barriers
based on attitudinal or organizational bias that prevent qualified individuals from the 'glass ceiling' advancing upward in their organization into management-level positions" (Martin, 1991). This bias involves an important set of issues about gender equality in hiring, pay, promotion, training, and other aspects of corporate life (Barreto et al., 2008). Even before the 1980s, the problems associated with the lack of women in high levels of corporations had become more public when the widely-acclaimed book Men and Women of the Corporation published in 1977, focused on the inequality of gender roles (Kanter, 1993; Barreto et al., 2008).

In 1996, Catalyst undertook the first large-scale national study of women executives and CEOs of Fortune 1000 companies and surveyed 1,251 executive women who held titles of vice president or above in Fortune 1000 companies and all of the Fortune 1000 CEOs to identify barriers. The glass ceiling was found to be a major barrier in preventing women from utilizing their full potential in the workplace (“1996 Catalyst census”, 1996).

In the New York Times, Justin Wolfers (2015) described the glass ceiling as a nagging gender imbalance in the C-Suite and an indication of what he characterized as the “impermeability of the glass ceiling” (p. 1). Wolfers (2015) further argued that the insufficient numbers of women beyond the glass ceiling in corporate America “point to an important truth — that in many important decision-making areas of American life, women remain vastly outnumbered” (p. 3). Wolfers (2015) created a satirical “Glass Ceiling Index” to bring attention to
the paucity of female chief officers, especially when compared to other areas, such as higher education, corporate boards, Congress, and the Supreme Court.

Among chief executives of S&P 1500 firms, for each woman, there are four men named John, Robert, William, or James. We’re calling this ratio the Glass Ceiling Index, and an index value above one means that Jims, Bobs, Jacks and Bills — combined — outnumber the total number of women, including every woman’s name, from Abby to Zara. Thus we score chief executive officers of large firms as having an index score of 4.0. (Wolfers, 2015, p. 1)

The stated intent of Wolfer’s (2015) jocular Glass Ceiling Index was to answer the question “How thick is the glass ceiling?” (p. 2).

**Organizational Culture as A Barrier**

Organizational culture includes the values, beliefs, attitudes, behaviors, and other intangible elements of business that have developed over time through the interaction of its members (Tyson, 2003; Tsai, 2011). This culture, which often operates independent of social culture, can be a major barrier to women’s advancement, especially when that culture includes gender bias (Tsai, 2011). Nelson & Levesque (2007) pointed out that negative organizational culture has driven away some women who have achieved the C-Suite. This is often due to a combination of their family commitment (“pull factors”) and their negative feelings about the culture of their workplace (“push factors”) when there are issues of gender inequality (“Catalyst 2012 census”, 2012).
Hofstede, Hofstede, & Minkov (2010) argued that the existence of “masculine organizational culture,” which values stereotypical male traits including “independence, internal competition, self-promotion, overt ambitiousness, decisiveness, aggressiveness, as well as the creation of power and status,” is less welcoming to women than a culture of socialism that values “cooperation, harmony, [and] participation” (p. 576). Tyson (2003) argued that although most cultures are vibrant and continuously changing, there are doubts as to the existence of this dominant masculine culture. Business cultures are merging because technology and globalization are changing the ways we communicate and interface.

Weyer (2007) showed how the “Social Role Theory and the Expectation States Theory” – structural/cultural models that describe differences between the genders – explain why women were still blocked from the upper levels of business because of bias, female stereotypes, and gender differences. Weyer (2007) argued that without changes in those broader differences and elimination of stereotypes, women would not progress to high positions.

Perceptions of Gender Differences in Leadership and Communication Styles as a Barrier

A key element of organizational culture is leadership behavior (Tsai, 2011). A significant body of literature has focused on gender-based differences in leadership style, including Judith Rosener (1990), who wrote that women’s
leadership is more transformational and based on personal power, while men’s leadership is more transactional and based on position-based power. Deborah Tannen (1995) reported similar distinctions and claimed that they result from the different ways that men and women are socialized in childhood and adolescence. Tannen (1995) observed interactions in the workplace environment and found that women are more relationship-oriented and collaborative, while men are more task-oriented and competitive. The historical predominance of men in the C-Suite has made their approach definitive, but the benefits of women’s leadership, as described above, can also make significant contributions to business success as more women reach the C-Suite (Carter & Wagner, 2011; Meyerson & Fletcher, 2000).

In contrast, the analysis by Eisner (2013) of journalistic interviews (Bryant 2010/2011) of 40 male and 40 female corporate executives indicated that while descriptions of male and female leadership styles were confirmed in some ways, they did not agree with many of the realities reported in those interviews. At least 85% of the men and women said they had both personal and positional power and that they valued both “people/relationship emphasis” and “tasks/result emphasis” (Eisner, 2013).

Appelbaum et al. (2003) argued that women’s leadership styles can be more effective than men’s in the increasingly team-based, consensus-driven corporations, and that men and women can learn from each other. For example, Ruderman & Ohlott (2002) noted that women’s ability to perform in leadership roles is actually enhanced because of women’s multiple life roles, which include
practice at multitasking, leading, enhancing interpersonal skills, and other sought-after skills.

Tannen (2001) concluded that gender-based differences in communication styles – both in the workplace generally, and in leadership roles specifically – are often interpreted to work against women’s advancement. As part of her description of gender-based leadership differences based on social development, Tannen (2001) reports that, in general, higher-status boys give orders to lower-status boys and try to one-up each other, while girls look for ways to communicate with each other for connection and avoid being “bossy” to each other. As adults, women continue to focus on closeness, while men continue to focus on status; men are likely to be more direct, while women are more likely to make indirect suggestions; men tease each other with play insults, while women connect to each other with compliments (Tannen, 2001). Women are more likely to build rapport by talking about their problems, their family, and their home, while men are more likely to talk about their hobbies, with a focus on the details and statistics (Tannen, 2001).

In the workplace, Tannen (2001) noted, that a woman is in a “double bind” because when she speaks assertively, she runs the risk of being interpreted by others as being excessively aggressive, but if she speaks more collaboratively, she might be interpreted as lacking confidence or adequate leadership qualities. Survey data from Joy et al. (2007) also found this double bind in that, when it comes to leadership, women are evaluated against a pre-existing standard based on men’s leadership. The survey noted that women are
perceived as too soft or too tough but never just right; they face higher standards and lower rewards than men leaders, and they are perceived as either competent or liked, but rarely both (Joy et al., 2007).

A large body of literature has concluded that women and men display different leadership styles (e.g. Rosener, 1990; Claes, 1999; Mandell & Pherwani, 2003). Dennis & Kunkel (2004) wrote that this perception of a distinction between the leadership styles of men and women persists despite studies (Kunkle & Burleson, 1999; Kanter, 1993) that indicate there are not really significant differences between men and women on emotion-based communication skills.

A study of these paradoxes (O’Neil, Hopkins, & Bilimoria, 2008) pointed out the disconnection between organizational practice and scholarly research associated with women in the corporate setting. Their conclusion was that despite the findings of scholarly research, organizational research and practice continued to focus predominately on the male-defined constructions of work and career success (O’Neil et al., 2008).

**Current Strategies To Advance Women In The C-Suite: What Works and What Doesn’t**

These three parts – top management commitment, individual development programs for women, and “collective enablers” -- encompass human resources processes and policies as well as infrastructure that affect the organizational culture (Desvaux et al., 2010). Such a system should create a workplace where women can achieve success without encountering “gender-specific barriers” (Desvaux et al., 2010).

A 2012 McKinsey report focused on European corporations noted that many companies were succeeding at placing women in more senior positions, especially those with the highest levels of management commitment, careful monitoring of women’s representation, and efforts to address the mindset of both men and women toward gender diversity (Devillard, Graven, Lawson, Paradise, & Sancier-Sultan, 2012).

Wellington, Kropf, and GerkJovich (2003) suggested that many of the skills and much of the experience required to reach the C-Suite level can be achieved through training programs, mentoring, coaching, and similar activities that are part of organizational cultures designed to develop talent. The study concluded that both men and women should be involved in offering these advantages to promote equal-opportunity advancement to the executive office, and female leaders should play an active role in advising and mentoring their fellow colleagues on matters related to leadership (Wellington et al., 2003).

more time and resources in learning how gender issues affect or determine the path of women to top leadership positions. Women should participate in leadership training programs so that they would acquire adequate skills and knowledge in leadership and, therefore, become more competitive on the C-Suite track (Nelson & Levesque, 2007). Sandberg (2013) wrote that true equality in the corporate setting can only be achieved by increasing the number of women in positions of power. She advocated that woman look for ways to help themselves advance (Sandberg, 2013).

Several measures are currently in place and in practice to support the leadership and executive development of the current pipeline of women’s leadership (e.g. Beeson & Valerio, 2012; Mero, 2012; Ely, Ibarra, & Kolb, 2011). Three contemporary business initiatives often viewed as most effective are mentoring, coaching, and sponsoring (Beeson & Valerio, 2012).

**Mentoring**

Haggard, Dougherty, Turban, and Willbanks (2011) described mentoring as a complex interpersonal relationship that is evolving and does not have a single definition. Since 1980, some 40 different definitions have been identified in the literature (Haggard et al., 2011, p. 280). However, Eby, Rhodes, & Allen (2007) described a general frame of reference involving a unique relationship between individuals, including a learning partnership; a process defined by the types of support the mentor provides; a reciprocal relationship that is not
symmetric because the protégé’s benefit is the focus; and a dynamic process whose benefits increase across time (Eby et al., 2007). More concisely, three “core attributes” have been identified: 1) reciprocity in the relationship, 2) developmental benefits, and 3) regular, consistent interaction (Haggard et al., 2011). Because of the complexity of the mentoring relationship, like other interpersonal relationships, the outcomes can range from substantial to superficial, and even dysfunctional (Eby et al., 2007).

Whatever the definition, Allen, Eby, Poteet, Lentz, and Lima (2004) wrote that the benefits of mentoring impact two large categories: professional or career development and personal or psychosocial growth. Different approaches to mentoring can focus on either one or both (Allen et al., 2004). The career benefits are both objective (salary and promotion) and subjective (satisfaction and loyalty). Different styles of mentoring can have varying impacts on each of those areas (Allen et al., 2004).

Mentoring has been a focus of professional and personal development in corporations for more than 30 years and the potential benefits of mentoring for women in the workplace, as both mentors and as protégés, has been widely recognized for decades (Kram, 1985). Mentoring itself, whatever its area of focus, tends to increase commitment to the organization, according to a survey by Payne and Huffman (2005) of more than 1,000 US Army officers. The survey indicated that the mentored officers were more committed and loyal, and less likely to leave the organization (Payne & Huffman, 2005). The outcome was greater when the person was mentored by a supervisor, but there was no
difference between mentoring that focused on career and mentoring that focused on personal growth (Payne & Huffman, 2005). Pompper and Adams (2006) interviewed 40 public relations managers and reported that compatibility and structure of the mentor relationship were both important for successful mentoring outcomes. Pompper and Adams (2006) also found that gender composition is important, and mentoring can enhance careers by providing a supplement to college training, validation and empowerment, deportment, networking and reciprocity.

The presumed benefits of mentoring for objective career success have led many companies to institute formal mentoring programs (Allen et al., 2004). However, research indicates that the benefits are not as substantial as often claimed – protégés receive more subjective career benefits than objective, and the two are not highly correlated (Allen, Lentz, & Day, 2006). Formal mentoring programs are less effective at enhancing both personal and professional growth than informal mentoring programs that occur spontaneously (Eby et al., 2007).

Pompper & Adams (2006) described the formal approach as usually lasting for a defined time period, 6 months to one year, much shorter than informal relationships, which can continue for years. The artificial, required nature of the relationship can sometimes generate a negative reaction in the protégé as that person may feel the relationship is superficial (Pompper & Adams, 2006). Ragins and Cotton (1999) surveyed 352 female and 257 male protégés, finding that those in informal mentoring relationships experienced better outcomes and viewed their mentors as more effective. The formally
mentored protégés had no better outcomes than people who had no mentors at all (Ragins & Cotton, 1999).

Although mentoring can come from outside the company, internal mentoring has a larger effect on career development, partly because the mentor can introduce the protégé into social and professional networks that make them more visible within the organization (Allen et al., 2004). Men perceive that they receive more mentoring when they initiate the relationship, but women perceive more benefit if the mentor initiated the relationship, or if it was initiated mutually (Scandura & Williams, 2001). This access to the mentor’s network is an important advantage, as it can provide invaluable connections for aspiring executives at every level, all the way up to the C-Suite (McAdams, 2006).

Taneja (2007) noted that, because many companies institute formal mentoring programs with the intention of helping women advance, this outcome is especially significant. An organization’s mentorship practices should seek a balance between regulation and the desire to provide a supportive environment for everyone (Taneja, 2007). A potential framework for understanding mentoring relationships considers individual disposition such as self-esteem; environmental factors such as organizational structures; career factors such as goals and experience; and relationship factors such as perceived commitment, as well as the progress and outcomes of the relationships for the participants and the organizations (Young & Perrewé, 2000).

A survey conducted by Dreher and Ash in the Journal of Applied Psychology (1990) consulted more than 300 business school graduates -- 147
women and 173 men. The study’s respondents indicated that mentoring had a positive impact on their career outcomes, both objective and subjective, compared to those who did not experience mentoring (Dreher & Ash, 1990). Even though the women reported significantly lower income than the men, the difference could not be attributed to a difference in mentoring (Dreher & Ash, 1990). To the contrary, women reported that they were integrated into mentoring systems as equally well as the men (Dreher & Ash, 1990).

Likewise, Fagenson’s 1989 survey that studied mentored and non-mentored people at different levels in their organizations showed that mentoring was equally beneficial for men and women. The amount of mentoring received by women was similar to the amount received by men, although women who were mentors might provide more psychosocial support, and men might provide more career-oriented support (Fagenson, 1989). In a study of 80 male and 80 female executives (Ragins & Scandura, 1994), women were just as likely to be mentors and report the same outcomes as men. One major difference is, that women who accept the role of mentor are often adding to a set of responsibilities already larger and more complex than that of their male counterparts such as family and household responsibilities (Taneja, 2007).

Coaching

Joo, Sushko, & McLean (2012) noted that, coaching, another kind of interpersonal relationship aimed at professional and personal development, has become increasingly popular in the corporate world in recent years, with
membership in the International Coach Federation accelerating from 1,500 in 1999 to more than 11,000 by 2012. Coaching is distinguished from training because it focuses on preparing for future advancement rather than mastering skills for present tasks although, in some instances, it can sometimes be used to help address performance issues (as cited in Noe, 2001). Coaching involves learning, development, behavioral change, performance, leadership, and organizational commitment (Joo et al., 2012). It can be provided in-house, especially when managers coach their workers in order to build teams (Joo et al., 2012). Human resources departments in large companies can provide executive coaching, often done by in-house experts, but executive coaching can also be facilitated by external experts (Peltier, 2011; Kampa-Kokesch & Anderson, 2001; Witherspoon & White, 1996).

Joo et al. (2012) wrote that formal mentoring is sometimes considered a kind of coaching – both tend to be short-term, focused on issues or problems, and highly systematic and structured. Ragins & Cotton (1999) noted that, like coaching, formal mentoring controls the frequency of meeting and the topics discussed. Both approaches involve assigned relationships, which do not involve the kind of personal connections typical of informal mentor and protégés (Ragins & Cotton, 1999). In other words, the formal mentor or coach may have less motivation and willingness to support their protégé within the organization (Ragins & Cotton, 1999). However, the formal relationship could be as beneficial as the informal if both the mentor and the protégé are satisfied with the
arrangement, the organization’s commitment, and the progress of the outcomes (Joo et al., 2012).

By the 1980s, corporations had come to place more value on the “intellectual capital” of their CEOs and sought to invest more in their development and retention, around the time that the workplace was evolving into a more team-oriented environment with managers as coaches (Sherman & Freas, 2004). Until about 15 years ago, executive coaching was more often a strategy for solving a particular problem in the C-suite and that goal was more clearly defined than the general aims of personal and professional growth and development that executive coaching seeks today (Sherman & Freas, 2004).

A survey of 140 leading coaches by the Harvard Business Review (Coutu & Kauffman, 2009) revealed a wide range of perspectives, including disagreements about the practice, although respondents agreed that it needed to become more clearly professional. Some respondents suggested that, in the future, executive coaches might be retired CEOs or academic experts, rather than entrepreneurs from other fields (Coutu & Kauffman, 2009).

Executive coaching is an unregulated and lucrative field – with hourly rates up to $3,500 or more – attracting many practitioners from such areas as psychology, psychiatry, adult education, management, and organizational development (Coutu & Kauffman, 2009; Joo et al., 2012). The field had reached $1 billion in the United States alone by 2004, but relatively little research has been conducted on its effectiveness or best practices (Joo et al., 2012). Orenstein (2006) proposed a model for evaluation, based on the long-
established “Empathic Organic Questionnaire.” In her case study, use of the questionnaire demonstrated that executive coaching efficacy could be measured empirically (Orenstein, 2006).

Coutu & Kauffman (2009) pointed out that the success of executive coaching depends, first, on the executive’s willingness to be coached and his/her comfort level with the person doing the coaching. In general, the coach’s experience in similar situations and his/her clear methodology, including the limits they recognize, can indicate a level of professionalism that increases the potential for success – as long as the person being coached is satisfied with the relationship (Coutu & Kauffman, 2009). The 2013 Executive Coaching Survey of more than 200 CEOs found that executives are apparently interested in receiving more coaching than they now experience (Larker, Miles, Tavan, & Gutman, 2013). The Executive Coach Survey results showed that two-thirds do not receive such outside consulting, and nearly four-fifths who do receive coaching said the arrangement was their idea, while others said that the board chair had recommended it (Larker et al., 2013). All of them said they would be open to making changes based on the coaching advice received, and more than 40 percent said they wanted most to grow in conflict management skills to serve different constituencies more effectively (Larker et al., 2013).

Travis et al. (2013) pointed out that mentoring and executive coaching programs have failed to increase the percentage of women in American medical school C-Suites. To overcome this barrier, researchers proposed that
educational institutions specializing in the training of doctors develop sponsorship programs as many corporations have (Travis et al., 2013).

**Sponsoring**

Although the vocabulary of mentoring and sponsoring has been in flux, sponsorship in recent years has increasingly included the dimension of advocating on behalf of the protégé within the company, as well as the interpersonal relationship between the sponsor and the protégé (Hewlett, Peraino, Sherbin, & Sumberg, 2010; Hewlett, 2013; Single & Donald, 2013; Cao & Yang, 2013). The personal relationship between the two is more like a strategic partnership than the relatively asymmetric relationship of a mentor and a protégé, with the sponsor expecting more return (Hewlett et al., 2013).

Mentoring programs are generally conducted in private, while sponsorship is actively public and visible within the organization (Paddison, 2013). While both mentors and sponsors can provide networking opportunities, sponsors are more likely to make more a challenging experience available and to push the protégé to take more risks, while also providing backup to mitigate the danger of those risks (Single & Donald, 2013).

Paddison (2013) described how sponsorship can become a talent management strategy for an organization, addressing diversity concerns, among other things, especially when the program is transparent, expected, and strategic. The real estate firm Cassidy Turley, for example, has a “VP to the C-Suite” mentoring and sponsorship program (Paddison, 2013).
Sponsors have positions of power in the company, so they can advocate and provide opportunities for the advancement of women (Joy, Carter, Wagner, & Narayanan, 2007). Single and Donald (2013) highlighted the importance of such advocacy when they found that those promoted to owner positions had more leadership and practice development skills than those who were not promoted – and the opportunity to gain those skills was attributed to sponsors who provided access to important networks and helped guide the person through them. Their study was undertaken because, although half of the people who enter the accounting profession are women, they hold only 20 percent of the leadership positions (Single & Donald, 2013).

Of the 1,505 women who responded to their survey, about two-thirds reported having had a career advocate, defined as “a senior level professional who uses his or her political capital on behalf of a protégé in order to advance the protégé’s position within the organization” (Single & Donald, 2013, p. 2). About half of those named their immediate supervisor as their advocate, and 88 percent said the advocates were within their organization (Single & Donald, 2013). Sixty-one percent of the women said their advocates were men (Single & Donald, 2013). The advocacy increased the person’s desire to achieve a leadership position as well as their success (Single & Donald, 2013).

Leadership of large, high-visibility projects is a critical opportunity for advancement, and women who lack sponsors are less likely to receive those assignments (Silva, Carter, & Beninger, 2013). The higher up a person moves within an organization, the more important it is to have an advocate for their
advancement within the political structure (Cao & Yang, 2013). Their study (Hewlett et al., 2013) found that women with a sponsor will ask for a stretch assignment (a task beyond their current abilities) 44 percent of the time, compared to 36 percent of the time for women who do not have a sponsor. Only 30 percent of women without a sponsor will confront their boss about a raise, but 38 percent with a sponsor will initiate the negotiation (Hewlett et al., 2013). The study also suggested that having a sponsor provides an overall career benefit of 22 to 30 percent (Hewlett et al., 2013).

The recently introduced concept of sponsorship holds great promise for helping women advance to the C-Suite (Hewlett, 2013; Paddison, 2013). This fresh approach could bring success, after decades of other efforts – including progress in education, training, mentoring, and coaching – have failed to bring about adequate female representation (Hewlett, 2013). At the same time, women must be sure to gain a full set of the specialized qualifications to reach the C-Suite and thrive (Hewlett, 2013). Sponsorship is an especially powerful tool for elevating awareness in women, providing them with the exposure they need and increasing their confidence to act boldly within the company (Cooney, 2015). However, sponsorship mostly has to do with what others do for the woman, not with the individual's growth in their own competencies (Hewlett et al., 2013; Single & Donald, 2013; Cao & Yang, 2013).

Hewlett et al. (2013) noted that some potential sponsors will question if a candidate has the long-term professional commitment needed to reach the C-suite when the potential protégé is a married woman with children. In a study of
employers, Correll, Benark and Paik (2007), found that mothers were assumed to be less competent, and perhaps more importantly, less committed to the job than women without children. Calling this the “motherhood penalty,” Correll et al. (2007) noted men with families were considered to be better workers, as they would be committed to supporting their families through their jobs (Correll et al., 2007). Among their findings, Correll et al. (2007) pointed to several other studies that spoke of the “culture norms” that stated mothers should always be available for their families and that the “ideal worker” would be unencumbered by anything that might compete with the demands of the job (Correll et al., 2007).

“Unstated Criteria” as a Conceptual Framework

One of the greatest obstacles in advancing women to the C-Suite is a set of “unstated criteria” for promotion -- the unwritten requirements and distinct competencies associated with advancement (Beeson & Valerio, 2012). Identified as one of the most significant impediments to the career advancement of women, unstated criteria includes unwritten requirements and distinct competencies for promotion, such as emotional intelligence and team skills associated with advancement (Beeson & Valerio, 2012).

Although the unstated criteria’s specific content varies from organization to organization, Beeson and Valerio (2012) have developed three general categories to describe them. The first are *non-negotiables*, including a strong track record, ethics and integrity, and a drive to lead (Beeson & Valerio, 2012).
The second are *de-selection factors*, including weak interpersonal skills, abrasive or insensitive treatment of others, putting one’s self-interest above the company’s good, and holding a narrow perspective in the business (Beeson & Valerio, 2012). The third are *core selection factors*, including strategic skills, building a strong team, managing implementation, initiating innovation and change, lateral management, and executive presence (Beeson & Valerio, 2012). Women are likely to get less effective feedback than men on these issues; built-in biases can exaggerate perception of their de-selection factors; and lack of responsible opportunities can keep them from demonstrating the core selection factors (Beeson & Valerio, 2012).

Other qualities required for success in business include “emotional intelligence,” defined by Salovey and Mayer (1990) as “the subset of social intelligence that involves the ability to monitor one’s own and others’ feelings and emotions, to discriminate among them and to use this information to guide one’s thinking and actions” (as cited in Salovey, Mayer & Brackett, 2004, p. 5). This relatively new field, with insights into communication, teamwork, consensus-building, and other vital leadership qualities, involves self-awareness, self-regulation, internal motivation, empathy, and social skills (Goleman, 2003). Emotional intelligence is not considered a gender-specific characteristic, and increased emphasis on this can open opportunities for women to demonstrate these valuable qualities that can help them advance (Salovey & Mayer, 1990).
A 2015 Ipsos survey of 2,410 professional working women and 604 college women, commissioned by the auditing firm KPMG, identified building confidence and networks as keys to advancement for women, strongly suggesting that increasing women’s confidence can help propel their advancement up the corporate ladder, all the way to the C-Suite (KPMG, 2015). Fewer than half of the women identified themselves as confident, and 67 percent said they need more support to gain leadership confidence (KPMG, 2015). Ninety-two percent said they did not have enough confidence to ask for sponsors, and more than half said they lacked confidence to ask for mentors, access to senior leadership, new job opportunities, career path plans, promotions, raises, or new positions (KPMG, 2015). Eighty-two percent of the working women said relationships with female leaders, including access and networking, would help advance their careers, and two-thirds said the most important leadership lessons they had learned were from other women (KPMG, 2015).

Conclusion

A review of the literature on women’s access to the C-Suite reveals a persistent problem that has not been solved despite decades of activism and education (e.g. Cooney, 2015; Hewlett et al., 2013; Padavic & Reskin, 2002; Kanter, 2010). The observation that mentoring and executive coaching programs have failed to increase the number of women in the C-Suite applies in almost every line of work (Hewlett, 2013; Travis et al., 2013). The assumption
that education and experience would produce a pipeline of women that would reach to the top has not proven true; women are now educated in numbers greater than men and account for 60 percent of graduate students (Aud et al., 2012). In 2008-2009, women earned more than one-third of the MBAs awarded (Soares, Combopiano, Regis, Shur, & Wong, 2010). Yet in 2013, only 14.3 percent of Fortune 500 executive officers were women, and only 8.1 percent of those companies’ top earners were women (Soares et al., 2013).

Further research into the role of those already in the C-Suite will provide insights into helping more women cross the barrier (Beeson & Valerio, 2012). Cooney (2015) pointed out that men still dominate the C-Suite, and just supporting women in the corporate setting isn’t enough to crack through the patriarchal culture that exists in many companies. Women who have already reached the C-Suite can use their position to address gender imbalance in their companies, and advocate for policies that will help other women gain access (Cooney, 2015).

Women in top corporate positions should also educate male corporate leaders on the challenges women face in gaining access to the C-Suite and get them involved breaking the existing barriers (Cooney, 2015). The mindset of both men and woman toward gender diversity can stand to be updated (Devillard et al., 2012). While women seeking access to the C-Suite should take advantage of programs that may help them, they should also learn what they themselves can do to reach that goal (Sandberg, 2013).
CHAPTER THREE: RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

As the literature review (Chapter Two) demonstrates, women have not been gaining access to the C-Suite level in numbers proportionate to their male counterparts, despite decades of effort by women, corporations, and advocacy groups to advance women’s careers. Most such endeavors have been aimed at levels below the C-Suite, and women have made significant strides in that realm. They are educated in equal or greater numbers to men in many fields, including business, and they participate in mentoring, coaching, and sponsorship programs that advance their careers through middle management – though not to the C-Suite, but for a few exceptions. This means the pipeline of qualified women in the workplace is fuller than ever – and yet the “glass ceiling” seems to remain intact. Women account for more than half of the overall workforce, yet they are in less than 10 percent of C-Suite roles. Little, if any, research has engaged people who have already reached the C-Suite on this issue or has systematically gathered and analyzed their perspectives on the competencies required for success at that level. That is what sets this study apart from the present body of research on the underrepresentation of women in the chief officer echelon.

Based on the premise that valuable lessons can be learned from individuals who have successfully navigated their organizations to achieve C-Level positions, this qualitative study collects and presents the perspectives of
successful corporate officers – both male and female – on what qualities are needed by women who desire to reach the C-Suite. The respondents appreciate, as no one else can, the environment of the C-Suite because they inhabit it every day. They know firsthand how to make the transition from upper middle management to the C-Suite because they themselves have accomplished this transition and therefore are a good fit for this research.

Based on the information gained in the literature review, this research identifies both the measurable features – education, years of experience, kinds of experience (such as management of major projects), participation in initiatives (such as mentoring, coaching, sponsoring, diversity, and leadership training), and the more intangible qualitative elements (such as decision-making, meeting environments, work-life balance) and an array of other unstated criteria.

This research makes an important new contribution to the literature because it examines breaking the glass ceiling “from above,” rather than from below. Identifying the actual experience, skills, organizational culture, emotional intelligence, and other factors necessary for success in the C-Suite can provide an opportunity for women at lower levels of the organization to prepare themselves more effectively for advancement.

**Theoretical Foundations**

Three distinct theoretical perspectives influenced the analysis of the interview data presented in Chapter Four: (1) Narrative Identity Theory; (2)
Erikson’s Life Span Theory; and (3) Poststructuralist Feminism. How each of these perspectives influenced the research is explained below.

This study is based, in part, on McAdams’ groundbreaking work (2008b) on narrative identity, “which refers to an individual’s internalized, evolving, and integrative story of the self” (p. 242). McAdams (2008b), one of the principal architects of this movement in psychology, proclaimed that “the study of stories people tell about their lives is no longer a promising new direction for the future of personality psychology. Instead, personal narratives and the life story have arrived” (p. 242). Therefore, for the purposes of this study, the work stories of 17 chief officers are the focus.

McAdams’ narrative identity theory is rooted in Erik Erikson’s Life Span Theory (1963), in particular his Stage 7: Generativity Versus Stagnation. The 17 respondents in this study are busy C-Suiters whose days usually begin early and end late, often with not a moment to spare in between. Despite their full schedules, all 17 of the executives interviewed were eager to participate and were motivated by the desire to be a part of something larger than themselves. Interviewing and analyzing the perceptions of such highly motivated leaders generated information both immediately useful and indicative of the need for further studies to increase knowledge on this subject.

The primary theoretical framework for this research draws on Randall’s ideas of poststructuralist feminism (2010). This theory challenges the assumption of essential differences between men and women while at the same time accounting for and respecting differences among individual women. In
summary, this research is feminist and poststructuralist because it aims “to let women be heard, to use research to help women and not to reproduce and reinforce existing hierarchical relationships in the particular relationship between researcher and researched” (Randall, 1991, p. 525). This approach guided the composition of research questions designed to invite broad reflection from the interviewees rather than focusing on a predetermined set of narrow topics. The helped shape the environment of the interviews with an openness to rapport and mutual exchange rather than an arm’s length attempt to glean limited answers on specific topics.

**Research Questions**

This study seeks to answer the following research questions:

1. What do current corporate officers believe will enable anyone to advance to the C-Suite of their organization?

2. What do current corporate officers believe will enable women to advance to the C-Suite of their organization?

**The Respondents**

The participants in the study are chief officers currently employed by companies based in the United States, Europe, and the Caribbean. The interview questions were designed to elicit broad descriptions of their career paths, including the different factors that they believe account for their own success, as well as that of others; their perspectives on efforts such as...
mentoring, coaching, and sponsoring; their insights about the organizational culture, including "unstated criteria," in the C-Suite; and their descriptions of what success looks like at that level.

The interviews took place from December 2014 through March 2015. The participants were selected because they have firsthand experience in the C-Suite. Six hold the title of Chief Executive Officer, and 11 have other C-level positions. The executives were promised anonymity, and their identities are not included in the reports of the research so that they were able to speak freely. They are identified as Respondent A, Respondent B., Respondent C., etc. Each participant was interviewed individually -- most by telephone; others, face-to-face. Four are men and 13 are women. Eight are African American, 7 are White, one is Hispanic, and one is Asian. One respondent, a White male, identified as openly gay. Each interview was recorded with the subject’s permission, and a verbatim transcript was generated electronically. Below are blind profiles of each subject.

1. **Respondent A**, a White female, is a Chief Executive Officer who heads a leisure company that she founded in 1997. She is based in Missouri and was interviewed by phone.

2. **Respondent B**, an African American female, is a Chief Executive Officer who heads a California-based technology/business firm, where she has been employed since 2002. She was interviewed by phone.
3. **Respondent C** is a White female Chief Executive Officer who heads a New York media company, where she began working in 2001. She was interviewed by phone.

4. **Respondent D**, a White female, is President and Chief Executive Officer at a technology education company that she founded in 2011 in Washington, D.C. Her interview was conducted face-to-face.

5. **Respondent E**, an African American woman, is President and Chief Executive Officer of a North Carolina social services agency that she joined in 2013. She was interviewed by telephone.

6. **Respondent F**, a White male, is Chief Talent Officer and Senior Vice President of a technology firm headquartered in Massachusetts, where he has worked since 2007. He was interviewed by telephone.

7. **Respondent G** is an African American female who is the Chief Learning Officer at a Maryland-based financial institution. She was interviewed by telephone.

8. **Respondent H**, an African American male, is Divisional Vice-President and Chief Diversity Officer at a pharmaceuticals company located in Illinois, where he began working in 2011. He was interviewed by telephone.

9. **Respondent I**, an African American female, is Vice President and Chief Inclusion and Collaboration Officer at a technology firm headquartered in
California, where she has been since 2011. She was interviewed by telephone.

10. **Respondent J**, an African American female, is a Board Member and Chief Diversity Officer of a human resources organization based in Washington, D.C., where she has been employed since 2006. Hers was a face-to-face interview.

11. **Respondent K**, an African American female, is a Chief Inclusion & Diversity Officer at a Pennsylvania medical institution. She has been employed there since 2008, and she was interviewed face-to-face.


13. **Respondent M**, a White female, is a Senior Vice President and Chief Learning Officer of a New York media company, where she has worked since 2013. She was interviewed by phone.

14. **Respondent N**, an Asian woman, is an Executive Global Human Resources Consultant and Board Member at a technology and business firm based in New Jersey. Her interview was by telephone.

15. **Respondent O**, an African American female, is Managing Director and Global Head of Diversity & Inclusion at a financial conglomerate based in Switzerland. She began working for the company in 2011. She was interviewed by telephone.
16. **Respondent P**, a Latino female, is Chief Executive Officer at a financial institution headquartered in the Dominican Republic, where she has been since 2007. She was interviewed by telephone.

17. **Respondent Q**, a White, openly gay male and Global Head of Diversity at a United Kingdom-based financial multinational institute, was interviewed by phone.

As shown in Figure 2, the respondents, 13 women and 4 men, represented diverse races, cultures, and backgrounds in C-Suite roles.

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*Figure 2.* Participants’ profiles.
Site Selection

The initial list of companies whose executives would be appropriate for this research was generated by an independent project for a magazine article by Diversity Woman that surveyed and studied filings for 80 large corporations. That survey was reported in the Fall 2012 issue of Diversity Woman in a cover story titled “Women Ascendant: Diversity Woman’s 100 Best Companies for Leadership and Executive Development for Women” (Mero, 2012). This aligns with the reading audience of the magazine, professional women of all races, cultures, and backgrounds, and the goal of the magazine to help those women advance in their careers. The companies listed have at least 3,000 employees, with at least 20 percent minorities and 15 percent multicultural women. The magazine also considered the firms’ succession planning, mentorship programs, workplace flexibility, and percentage of female managers and executives.

Methods of Data Collection

Data were collected through individual telephone and in-person interviews with 17 C-level corporate officers. This type of interview is an appropriate and effective method of collecting data for qualitative research (Clark, 2008). The interviewees received 7 prepared questions in advance. (The interview protocol is Appendix A). Most of the interviews were scheduled for one
hour and lasted between 45 and 60 minutes. The longest interview was 75 minutes. The shortest was 30 minutes, with an executive who was limited on time and had prepared answers to the questions but also engaged in follow-up questions and back-and-forth conversation like the others. The scheduling of the interviews was a challenge, and some originally scheduled calls were rescheduled.

The questions were designed to focus the participants on their skills, experience, organizational culture, coaching, mentoring, sponsorship, and unstated criteria. The questions were open-ended in order to gain in-depth responses about the subjects’ own experiences, perceptions, opinions, feelings and knowledge (Patton, 1990). The questions included profile information about the subject, such as education and work history, statistical data and projections about the company, and executive development programs and strategies they have in place to advance women.

During the interview process, the participants and the researcher sometimes talked about shared experiences or expressed mutual understanding of the issues under discussion. The intention of finding ways to advance women in high-level corporate settings was made clear, and the participants expressed strong interest in being part of that effort.
Methods of Analysis

To analyze the data in the transcribed answers, a coding system was developed with thematic words and phrases that were identified inductively, beginning with the categories of the conceptual framework. In Vivo coding (Miles, Huberman, & Saldaña, 2013) was used -- adopting words or short phrases that an interviewee employed. Retaining and focusing on their specific language gave insight into the actual experience of people who have successfully reached the C-Suite. This coding allowed for the direct identification of words and phrases that occurred frequently in each individual corporate officer’s story of their own success and that of others.

As the interviews continued and more data were gathered, the coding system was expanded and refined. When all the interviews were completed and a final coding system was established, all the transcriptions were revisited and coded according to the final system. The coding identified common themes and their frequency across the interviews. These themes are connected to the research questions and to the conceptual framework – identifying the experience, skills, and organizational culture that allow anyone, women in particular, to advance to the C-Suite.

The frequency of each respondent’s use of each theme was analyzed in three ways: whether the respondent mentioned the theme or not; how many times the respondent mentioned the theme in the coded transcript; and how
many times the word(s) associated with the theme appeared in a data-mined count of each total transcript.

Validity Issues

The validity of the results could be limited by the sample size, the specific participants chosen, the ability to collect the full perspective of the participants, and the analysis of their answers.

Since the respondents could identify with the researcher as a fellow business professional, a strong rapport was established that allowed for very candid responses. Because of the open-ended nature of the questions, the responses were very comprehensive. The executives frequently elaborated on their answers to the questions. The responses of men and women of all races, cultures, and backgrounds were unexpectedly similar and consistent. In addition to discussing popular topics, such as mentoring, sponsoring, and education, they often stressed factors less-emphasized in the literature such as confidence, broad learning, and creativity, all of which is revealed in the upcoming chapter, which systematically analyzes the findings of this research.
CHAPTER FOUR: CHIEF OFFICER NARRATIVES: FINDINGS AND ANALYSIS

The first two chapters of this dissertation document the historical -- and continuing -- disparity in the number of women who advance to the C-Suites of corporate America and present literature that offers some insight into this ongoing executive gender imbalance. The literature review in Chapter Two shows the dominance in existing research of quantitative methods, including survey questionnaires, but gives limited insight into what women have actually done to increase their chances of reaching the chief suite. The objective of this research is to employ qualitative methods to provide deeper insights into this important problem.

As described in Chapter Three, 17 corporate chiefs were consulted for insights and for experiences that they felt directly led to their – and some of their peers’ – rise to the C-Suite. This study was designed to answer the following open-ended research questions that were asked of each of the respondents:

1. What do current corporate officers believe will enable anyone to advance to the C-Suite of their organization?

2. What do current corporate officers believe will enable women to advance to the C-Suite of their organization?

This chapter reports the executives’ responses on a wide range of topics – both in isolation and their qualitative interrelationships – including the less widely recognized intangibles: the importance of the individual’s personal achievements
(e.g., education, work success, hard skills) and the value of programs designed
to help the individual advance (in this study: mentoring, coaching, sponsorship,
training programs).

The executives interviewed cited well-known requirements for advancement
to the C-Suite, including education, mastery of hard skills such as profit and loss
(P&L) acumen and forecasting, hard work and success at early-career level jobs,
communication, and participation in mentoring, coaching, and sponsorship
relationships. At the same time, they made frequent reference to less-tangible
qualities such as confidence, emotional intelligence, passion, assertiveness,
leadership, life choices, strategy, vision, and curiosity – in some cases, asserting
that these qualities are at least as necessary for success as the more
measurable skills.

Significantly, the executives did not limit their perspectives to consideration
of these factors in isolation but rather as elements of larger narratives on
advancement to the C-Suite, both their own advancement and that of others.
They made frequent reference to combinations of qualities, such as
assertiveness, collaboration, and emotional intelligence. They also described the
interdependent development of factors, such as relationships that lead to
mentorships that instill confidence and tradeoffs, such as turning down a free
Executive MBA for family reasons but still gaining sufficient experience to reach
the C-Suite without the degree.

The respondents’ stories and experiences show the interrelationship of
these qualities and that combining such factors, rather than concentrating on one
or two, helped propel them to the C-Suite.

For the purposes of organization, reporting, and analysis, the chief executives’ wide array of responses – relative to what qualities are necessary for women to reach the C-Suite, as described briefly above – have been categorized into four major findings: (1) executive traits, (2) preparation, (3) strategic relationships, and (4) engaging organizational culture.

Finding One: Executive Traits

While all of those interviewed for this research discussed the traits of a successful executive, the traits that came up again and again as important for a helping women in particular gain access to the C-Suite were confidence, assertiveness, courage, passion, visibility, leadership, and emotional intelligence. These traits are discussed in detail below.

Confidence

In an on-line article, “Without confidence, there is no leadership,” Dao (2008) defines self-confidence as “the fundamental basis from which leadership grows” and something without which leadership cannot exist.

Fourteen of the 17 executives mentioned confidence as an important element of success in attaining the C-Suite, and many of them suggested that it was a necessary feature, especially for women. They described confidence both as an inner quality – as “this enormous amount of certitude” (Respondent H, February 17, 2015) – and as a behavior style required for leadership. “You have
to have and also build confidence,” Respondent B said (February 25, 2015). “You
know, a leader becomes a leader because people start following them,” she
added. Respondent Q described a successful woman who exercised a balance
of high expectations for herself and for the people who worked for her (March 17,
2015).

A 2015 KPMG study notes that while men will often place too much value
in their strengths, women will often undervalue their strengths. This difference in
valuation standards is described as a “confidence gap” (KPMG, 2015). Women’s
lack of confidence can lead them to underestimate their ability to advance by
overestimating the requirements. “When they look at a job application, and they'll
say, ‘Well, the job says you have to do this, this, this; this is what we're looking
for’ – a woman thinks you have to have every one of those things. A man thinks
you have to have two of them to apply” (Respondent A, January 7, 2015).

Respondent L, who described confidence as “a sense of inner worthiness,”
agreed: “Sometimes I think what people are calling the confidence gap in women
is really more of a worthiness gap, and that is to really understand yourself,” he
said (March 6, 2015). He continued:

And I think that ties in very directly with the other skills more indirect, or
what sometimes people call the soft skills. And that is, I think, for people
who are in non-dominant groups, whether that’s women or people of color
or LGBT or whoever, I think it’s especially important for people to know
themselves and to not allow themselves to be triggered, to not allow
themselves to be diminished by the… cultural conversation around us,
and that means getting the support… having a support team for yourself.
(Respondent L, March 6, 2015)

Confidence is a critical part of women’s communication, said some
executives, including some who also recommended “assertive” and “aggressive” communication. “I would say finding your voice is very important,” Respondent E said (March 6, 2015).

I think that women are silent, like nobody else in corporate America, and we’re silent because men speak more boldly and authoritatively than we do in discussions. Or, literally, people don't listen to us. And I think you've got to find your unique voice, and you've got to become very, very comfortable with it. So I think it’s important to be visible and vocal and find your voice, and not talk to be heard, but talk to add value. (Respondent E, March 6, 2015)

Confidence is also necessary for taking the bold actions that leadership requires.

“I think it also requires someone who is willing to take risks – of course, calculated risks,” Respondent O shared, and she added:

You have to be able to be not just a team player, but a leader in your own right, and be able to stand out on a limb by yourself… someone who's willing to make the tough calls, who is willing to have the difficult conversations, when no one else will, and to bring up those things that everyone else is thinking but no one else might bring up…. You just have to say it and mean it and say what needs to be said and come with a solution, and that's it, and be brave enough to be able to have those conversations. (Respondent O, March 11, 2015)

This indicates the level of confidence necessary to take the required leadership action in any situation.

Likewise, Respondent P said:

I mean, you have to be confident and work hard and not be afraid and you know, know that you have to take educated risks, and that is how you get to places. I think that a leader must definitely possess self-confidence. I think that if you don't believe in yourself, others won't believe in you. You must be credible. If people don't respect you, they will never follow you or give you the right support. (March 9, 2015)

Respondent M, referring to a successful woman she knew, said, “She was really able to make a point succinctly. She did make those quick decisions – you
know, generally good decisions she wasn't afraid of making. She had the confidence, so she wasn't afraid about making bad decisions.” Overall, Respondent M said that women who successfully advance in the corporate world are “women who exude confidence, women who are able to make good decisions quickly” (February 20, 2015). Respondent A described a particular successful woman similarly: “She has a strong sense of self, she's a very confident person. You know, she carries herself well; she's a great public speaker. She is comfortable in lots of different audiences” (January 7, 2015).

These descriptions of confidence suggest that it can be acquired. In the literature for this research, Killelea (2016) writes that confidence can be learned and also be displayed as it’s being learned. Exhibiting confidence can make a woman more visible in the corporate setting and thus, more noticeable to hiring managers and senior executives (Killelea, 2016).

Respondent J’s comments on confidence agreed with the literature that states confidence can be learned:

I don't think you're born with [confidence]. I think we may have potentially the trait… but I think it comes from your early learning. It comes from your upbringing, from your environment, your socialization. My confidence came from [being] an only daughter, and I had three brothers. I'm a daddy's girl… and my dad always supported me. A lot of the things that I did, he was there to encourage me. My mom was the same way, taught me to very strong, very independent, very resourceful, and so I built my own level of confidence. (Respondent J, February 24, 2015)

Respondent M, whose company offers coaching and development programs specifically focused on building skills and confidence in women, said that she gained confidence from an effective mentoring manager (February 20,
He basically gave me the confidence to believe that I could do some of the things that I was a little nervous about – you know, ‘Can I really be good at this?’ And he was very encouraging… basically said, ‘You can do this, you go do this!’ And so I think that was very helpful.... I was the type of person, and still am quite frankly, that really appreciates, you know, the support to build my confidence so that I can succeed. (Respondent M, February 20, 2015)

Respondent P said her confidence grew as she exercised it and achieved more and more success. “So I sort of decided to take my journey and my destiny in my own hands, but I was assertive about what I had earned on merit,” she stated (March 9, 2015).

It was a highly conducive and rewarding environment for someone like myself who tried to surpass the challenges and expectations. You know, this made me very confident, but I was always… acutely aware of my roots, which kept me very humble not to over-reach, yet I was able to thrive within an environment that initially offered tremendous room to grow. I think that a leader must definitely possess self-confidence. (Respondent P, March 9, 2015)

**Assertiveness**

The literature for this research noted that women are often in a “double bind” in that, if they speak assertively, they may be seen by others as excessively aggressive, but if they speak collaboratively, they may be interpreted as lacking confidence or adequate leadership qualities (Tannen, 2001, “The double-bind”, 2007).

While the respondents also noted this double bind, 15 of the 17 executives identified assertiveness as an important quality for women who seek access to the C-Suite. None of them perceived assertiveness as a negative quality or a
detriment to a woman’s advancement, although some made the point that
assertiveness should be combined with a collaborative approach. For example,
Respondent K said, “I also think that, when you’re new to an organization,
assertiveness without collaboration can be seen as, you know, for us as women,
can be seen as aggressive” (February 25, 2015).

So if you’re the first woman on that team, or if you’re the first woman of
color, if you are the first, you’re often going to enter into a space, into
conversations, that they’ve had in some cases without you being there,
and you have to find the courage to say ‘that’s not funny,’ right? Or ‘that’s
inappropriate,’ and the very behaviors that, prior to your arrival, were OK,
certainly not being OK. And how do you navigate that so that they don’t go
have the conversation somewhere else, and not include you? Or they
exclude you for the very purpose that you call them on, the thing that isn’t
appropriate, not right. (Respondent K, February 25, 2015)

Respondent M said that assertiveness, for her as an individual, was more
important in her early career, many years ago, but that networking, relationships
and emotional intelligence have become more important in the past decade. “I
think those are the things that are important today, where in the past I found, you
know, women in my generation, and previous to mine, had to be much more
aggressive and assertive in order to get up the ladder. It’s a lot different than it
was even 10 years ago” (February 20, 2015).

Other women maintained that assertiveness was vital to their own success.
“I basically told the CEO that I had been doing the job and that I wanted to
continue to do it, and I wanted to take the risk and the responsibility,”
Respondent P said (March 9, 2015).

So they gave me an opportunity, and I was able to deliver, so very
proactive. I was assertive about what I had earned on merit. What helped
me was always being assertive, speaking up, giving my opinions. I would
immediately stand up for myself, not let it pass, address it and not accept it. Because, you know, to me, I have zero tolerance for that nonsense. I felt like I prepared, that I over-prepared, but I wanted to make sure I could answer every question, so I earned a reputation for being tough. You know, I’m assertive. I didn’t wait for my promotion to come to me, but rather I would go to my boss and say, ‘Listen, you know this is why I should be promoted.’ (Respondent P, March 9, 2015)

**Courage**

While only two of the respondents noted the importance of courage as an executive trait for one hoping to reach the C-Suite, they made a compelling case for the attribute. This is a notable departure from the literature for this study, which found no such linkage.

The two respondents described courage as what it took to be successful, most notably, being willing to take risks.

It's okay to take risks, and more than okay; it's required. Get out of your comfort zone, take a risk, don't wait until you feel you have absolutely every single aspect of capability, knowledge, background to be able to go after a job. It's okay to go after the job when you're only 70% there. But take a risk if there are opportunities that require you to move or opportunities that may just take you out of your comfort zone. That's when you get stretched, and that's when you do the most learning; when you're comfortable, you're less aware of what's going on around you; when you're in an environment that's uncomfortable, you're much more aware. (Respondent B, February 25, 2015)

Even though most of the respondents did not mention courage, many of them exhibited and expressed this trait in their responses, indicating that courage is one of the traits necessary to be successful in reaching the C-Suite. “The first thing about being a leader is you have to be willing to shoulder the responsibility, and live with the consequences of your choices every single day of your life,”
Respondent C expressed (February 24, 2015). “And that’s it. If you don’t, if you’re not willing to take that responsibility and shoulder that obligation, then you won’t be a C-Suite person” (Respondent C, February 24, 2015). In other words, one is unlikely to become a chief officer by playing it safe.

Respondent O described an exemplary leader by focusing on her courage. “I thought that she was the most incredible female leader and courageous leader I’ve ever had the pleasure to work with,” she said (March 11, 2015).

This woman would stand up to the men in a room like I've never seen before. And maybe she felt that in that role she knew what she was getting into. She knew she was going to be the only woman sitting at that table. And it was a test of wills. She was fighting for her life, and maybe that's what she was dealing with on a day-to-day basis, but she stood up for what was right. (Respondent O, March 11, 2015).

Dao (2008) explained the importance of acting courageously instead of seeking guaranteed safety, a courage that supports the development of confidence:

As adults we try to accident-proof our world by covering all of the bases, but wrapping ourselves in a cocoon of safe decisions is the antithesis of bold leadership. What separates those who need a mountain of statistical analysis (and still can't predict the future) from those who inspire us with their ability to lead us into the unknown is self-confidence. While the fearful will agonize over decisions and always make the safe choice, the confident will take the information that they have and take action. That is the definition of leadership. (Dao, 2008)

Passion

Twelve of the 17 respondents mentioned passion for one’s work as an important personal characteristic for advancing to the C-Suite. This too, is a notable departure from the literature for this study, which did not mention passion
as an important characteristic.

The 12 executives who talked about passion suggested that passion provides the internal drive necessary to overcome significant obstacles in the process. Passion, in general, involves a love for what one is doing, and both its intangible and tangible rewards, as Respondent I said, “And instantly, you know, I kind of fell in love with this work and what this work created for people in this world” (February 18, 2015).

When you get up every day, regardless of how you feel or what the world would say, you’ve got this internal engine that is going to drive you to bring others along to create something that is so much bigger than an individual or group of people. (Respondent I, February 18, 2015)

Respondent I is not specifically talking about the process of her work but instead about the larger changes that are effected by her work, a sentiment shared by Respondents D and L. “My passion was always to make a change and make a difference,” shared Respondent D (March 11, 2015). Similarly, Respondent L added, “I had such a passion for what I was doing. Having a passion for the work and having a purpose-driven focus made a difference for me” (March 6, 2015). In many senses, this passion for one’s work is yet another manifestation of Erikson’s (1963) theory of generativity in that it fuels purpose and vice versa.

“Passion includes finding happiness in the work: I think having fun with what I do; I think having passion for what I do,” Respondent K said (February 25, 2015). This passion can be acquired during the career. “I was open to trying new things,” Respondent J said (February 24, 2015). “Once I found my passion, and it was something that I was really good at, it was something that I was really
invested in personally and I saw where I had a real calling and a purpose to do that.”

**Visibility**

In the literature, Allen et al. (2004) and Paddison (2013) noted how mentoring and sponsorship can help make someone more visible in a company in terms of helping that person get noticed by those in power. The executives interviewed spoke more of what an individual can do to be more visible in the corporate setting.

Thirteen of the 17 executives mentioned visibility as important for making progress to the C-Suite. Visibility, for the respondents, referred to creating exposure for oneself through performance and making the company or those in charge aware of one’s abilities, ambition, drive, and skill set. As Respondent B noted:

> You will stand out, as long as you are good at what you do, you want that kind of visibility. So that's positive. If you're doing what a lot of people can do, then it's hard to [stand out]. (February 25, 2015)

This concept of visibility was often discussed in connection with such factors as relationships, communication, and assertiveness. For instance, Respondent J said:

> You can't always sit around and wait for someone to come find you and to notice you. You've got to do some things yourself to make yourself known, to be a part of the organization and to take those steps and not always expect someone to give them to you. (February 24, 2015)

The need for visibility led her to earn a Ph.D. and to seek out other ways of making herself known volunteering for projects and creating new initiatives:
After going through some of those career setbacks and those areas and times that they marginalize, I wanted to take away those excuses. I wanted to be able to have more experience, more education, and, and be able to show people that, you know, I was able to do those things that they either said I couldn't do or they didn't value it. And so I made friends with them, and I made sure they knew who I was. My other strategy was that I became much more visible in the organization, and I didn't just stay in my office and stay in my cube and wait for someone to come find me. I actually got out and did more projects and got involved in different programs and helped to create sort of new initiatives. (Respondent J, February 24, 2015)

This need for initiative and self-promotion to increase visibility is a common theme among the chief officer respondents. While some women may let the fear of being labeled as aggressive deter them from such assertiveness, it is critical for one hoping to land in the C-Suite according to the executives studied.

“I also knew the importance of networking and letting those people know what I was doing and where, and what my goals were,” Respondent P volunteered. “I didn't wait for my promotion to come to me, but rather I would go to my boss and say, listen, you know, this is why I should be promoted” (March 9, 2015). In other words, the elevation of one’s visibility in the corporation can be enhanced by the strong practice of the executive traits described above, especially confidence and assertiveness. Respondent I agreed: “It’s about them seeing the value that you bring to the table. So early on, it was about performance and my ability to advance so that people noticed me” (February 18, 2015). Likewise, Respondent B said, “It was very important to me to build what I'll refer to as a strong presence and a strong ability to communicate and communicate effectively” (February 25, 2015). These women recognized that it’s not enough to possess excellent skills – they must make those skills known,
becoming *visible* to their superiors.

In addition to the informal networking relationships that a person must develop to advance to the C-Suite, the executives discussed more structured, intentional relationships – mentoring, coaching, and sponsoring. The distinction is the difference between ordinary friendships/relationships and structured setups (mentoring, sponsoring, and coaching) set up either by the individual or the company.

**Leadership**

As noted earlier, Dao (2008) defined leadership as having the confidence to take action when needed. In an on-line podcast “Ram Charan on Leadership” (Michelman, 2007), business consultant Charan noted that leaders exhibit certain traits, which reflect the traits reported by the respondents.

[T]hey are important— the courage, the vision, a cognitive bandwidth, a fearless move, the bold thinking. They are important. Just like an athlete has a raw talent, and that’s important. But if you don't practice those talents, those personality traits into cultivating the skills, in today’s environment, given the failure rate’s so high, that the leaders of tomorrow are not going to succeed. (Charan, in Michelman, 2007)

The literature in this research discussed leadership styles and behaviors, while the respondents were more concrete in their assessment of what leadership actually means. As Respondent H pointed out,

Leadership has to do with the ability to rally people together towards a common cause while being mindful and respectful of the different mindsets they are going to bring that will allow you to reach that common cause. (February 17, 2015)

Much has been written on leadership and while definitions may vary slightly, the
theme is consistent. Leaders are those who know how to achieve their goals and inspire others along the way.

Leadership is discussed here in the context of organizational culture because the requirements for C-Suite leadership are significantly shaped by the individual organization – its expectations, its culture, and its operations. As Respondent J said, leadership relates to every level of any particular corporation and must engage its culture effectively:

I find, as you move to the top, that it's not so much that people are hiring you now for the result(s) that you can get; they are hiring you more so for the expertise and the thought leadership that you have, and your ability to work through other people... Because at the top in the C-Suite, you're not necessarily the one doing all the work. You're actually leading all of the people who are doing the work. And so you've got to have a higher level of Emotional Quotient (EQ) and Intelligence Quotient (IQ) at the top, but it's not so much about the pair of hands, more than it is about the head and the heart. When you've got a pair of hands, they're the ones that are on the assembly line. They're the ones that are on the front lines with the customers. They're the ones that are managing programs and processes and managing policies. That's your front line and your director level, but when you get to that C-Suite level, they want your thought leadership. They want your intellect. It's about how connected you are and how well are you able to lead and inspire and foster innovation through other people.... People at the top have a huge responsibility for leading major initiatives, for launching major change efforts, for inspiring people to get the vision, the strategy, and they literally are leading an entire ship. (Respondent J, February 24, 2015)

Every one of the 17 executives discussed leadership as a vital quality for success in advancement to the C-Suite. Most respondents also mentioned other qualities, such as courage, emotional intelligence, and vision, as components of leadership. They described the internal, personal dimensions of leadership, as well as the dimensions that involve relating to others and building a team.

The literature points to leadership behavior as being a key element of
organizational culture (Tsai, 2011). Much literature has focused on gender-based differences in leadership style (e.g. Rosener, 1990; Tannen, 1995; Appelbaum et al., 2003; Carter & Wagner, 2011). In contrast, an analysis by Eisner (2013) of journalistic interviews (Bryant 2010/2011) of 40 male and 40 female corporate executives indicated that while descriptions of male and female leadership styles were confirmed in some ways, they did not agree with many of the realities reported in those interviews.

The findings based on interviews with the 17 executives agreed with much of the literature, in that while there are some differences in women’s leadership styles, they are in no way detrimental in corporate success. Women leaders provide vital perspectives to an organization because “they are going to see leadership differently because they experience the world differently. They just do,” insisted Respondent H (February 17, 2015).

And that’s not making them greater or lesser, but you do. You experience the world differently. So, you need that perspective around the table because it’s going to bring some additional considerations. So being a student, being open to differing perspectives and viewpoints and being willing to create a team kind of cultured environment, an empowering one in particular – that implies a certain degree of humility, I mean, I know we don’t talk about that very much, but I think humility is really, really important in a leader. The most effective leaders are humble. And one of the reasons they’re humble is because they spend a lot more time talking about the people around them, and their stories and their experiences in their lives, and they’re trying to impact their lives in a positive form and fashion. (Respondent H, February 17, 2015)

In other words, a leader’s personal traits are important for enhancing his or her ability to lead. Leadership depends on maintaining good relationships throughout the organization, and humility is a key to the openness and engagement that can
build and sustain those relationships.

Leadership involves building, directing, and inspiring a team, the C-Suiters stressed. This more collaborative, transformational leadership, different from the top-down command-and-control common in the past, can provide opportunities that leverage many women’s personal strengths.

Many of the respondents said they came to the realization that they had achieved their goals of leadership when they found themselves focusing on the good of others on their team. “I also think the leader needs to know how to motivate, facilitate, and integrate all components to meet long-term goals,” Respondent P added (March 9, 2015).

You have to be firm with your decisions, but always fair. You know, sometimes you have to say things that people don’t want to hear, but you still have to do it. You have to have guts and understand that you can't please everybody. You know you're not there to make everyone happy, [but you must] not be afraid to make tough decisions and be flexible. I think that's important. And how do I compare the relative importance? I think they are equally important. I believe that to be a successful leader, you have to have a balance of both. I think, leadership requires equilibrium and balance and only then the leader can be agile and adapt to the challenge they identify or confront it with. I think that self-awareness of your own strengths and weaknesses as well as for the others are essential to your leadership. (Respondent P, March 9, 2015)

Respondent O said that feedback during a career can help a person to develop leadership: “You take that information and you do something with it. And you make subtle changes here and there to get better. And people will respect you for that. That's what a leader does. That's what a good leader does” (March 11, 2015).
Emotional Intelligence

In the literature, “emotional intelligence” is defined by Salovey and Mayer (1990) as “the subset of social intelligence that involves the ability to monitor one’s own and others’ feelings and emotions, to discriminate among them and to use this information to guide one’s thinking and actions” (as cited in Salovey, Mayer, & Brackett, 2004, p. 5). This field includes communication, teamwork, consensus-building, and other vital leadership qualities, involving self-awareness, self-regulation, internal motivation, empathy, and social skills (Goleman, 2003). Emotional intelligence is not considered a gender-specific characteristic, and increased emphasis on this can open opportunities for woman to demonstrate these valuable qualities that can help them advance (Salovey & Mayer, 1990).

Ten of the 17 executives cited the importance of emotional intelligence, while 13 referred to self-awareness and 8 to empathy, which are both specific features of emotional intelligence. Respondent M, who is retired, mentioned that emotional intelligence is more important today than it was earlier in her career (February 20, 2015). The respondents considered emotional intelligence important both for one’s own individual performance and for the ability to manage others and build a team effectively. Emotional intelligence, which could also be considered an executive trait, is considered here in the context of organizational culture because, like leadership, it involves the important dimension of relating to everyone within the organization.

Many of the respondents focused on the self-awareness aspect of
emotional intelligence. “For me, it's been mostly focused on developing myself as a human being and continuing to learn about myself and continuing to take a deeper look at my mental, my emotional, my physical, and my spiritual self,” Respondent K disclosed (February 25, 2015).

An organizational culture where input from others is valued can help one become more self-aware and grow in emotional intelligence. Respondent H offered this advice:

Learn what you don't know, which can often come to you through introspection, constructive feedback, and a candid assessment of where you are in a stage of your career and then be willing to close those gaps in your own development experience. (February 17, 2015)

Along these same lines, Respondent P offered this counsel:

You need to listen to your people. You know, it is amazing how much you learn when you listen. I think that self-awareness, of your own strengths and weaknesses as well as that of others, is essential to your leadership. (March 9, 2015)

Strong emotional intelligence is also critical to establishing a network of advocates in the organizational culture, as Respondent N said:

I believe if you have that kind of emotional intelligence that, you know, you have to apply that into building strong relationships so that people you know would be attracted by you, and you can build a strong team and you can position yourself very quickly to have a significant influence and negotiation for all kinds of opportunities, and that's involving communication, collaboration, so on and so forth. (March 12, 2015)

Respondent D agreed, saying, “To learn, on the self-awareness side, it is very beneficial if you can use your persuasive skills to build others as your advocates, and that's internally and externally” (March 11, 2015).

But it's not just about personal advancement – it's about paying attention
to the success and growth of every person in the organization. “The success strategy was no longer about me as an individual or just me carrying out orders, but learning to find compassion,” Respondent I said. “And enabling people was where I was going to find success as a manager” (February 18, 2015).

Emotional intelligence can help a leader even in the midst of challenges. “What I have noticed is the ability to maintain calm in the greatest of challenges,” divulged Respondent H (February 17, 2015).

It doesn't mean that there are not those moments of angst and anxiety, but those aren't ever really expressed here in the company or in any other time, you know, like personal. It's more you can see certainly that there's disappointment, but it's always about getting to a solution. (Respondent H, February 17, 2015)

The higher a person advances in a company, the more the importance of emotional intelligence increases.

When you think about the ability to self-manage, the ability to manage others, the ability to be self-aware – all of those things are critical the higher up you go in an organization, particularly if you have an organization that has a culture. (Respondent K, February 25, 2015)

There is a noticeable gap between the attention to executive traits in the research literature and their importance among the executives who participated in this research. The findings from the respondents indicate these traits are the driving force in gaining other qualifications, such as experience and continuing education. Although these traits, such as emotional intelligence and leadership, are not found in job descriptions, this research indicates that female candidates in particular who hope to reach the C-Suite must possess each. These findings indicate that while men may make advances demonstrating a few of these traits,
women need to demonstrate all of them in order to reach executive levels.

**Finding Two: Preparation**

One of the things that emerged as a key element that bolstered the then-prospective chief officers with confidence and assertiveness – and which gave them the self-assurance and passion to know and understand their own value within their respective organizations – was their many years of preparation, a multi-layered phenomenon which is examined here.

Each of the executives surveyed subscribed to idea that “failing to prepare is preparing to fail,” a quote attributed to Benjamin Franklin. They all described how strategy and preparation helped them and others they knew reach the C-Suite.

Outside of education, mentoring, sponsoring, and coaching programs and formal training (discussed in the next section), they adopted and executed plans that included raising their visibility, networking and other relationships, and continuing education outside their specific company. Throughout the interviews, the executives noted how they had made strategic life choices, both individually and with their partners, that would enable them to pursue career paths to the C-Suite.

**Life Choices**

Thirteen of the 17 respondents referred to life choices they made in the
process of advancing to the C-Suite. Many noted the difficulty of finding balance between work and life, sometimes exacerbated by organizational culture, which might demand work before life. Some changed companies or passed up educational opportunities for the sake of their family life. Some, like Respondent L, who is male, negotiated detailed arrangements with their spouse to provide for both home and work life.

I think that's one of the challenges that women have really faced over the course of their, their careers, and that is, that my experience has been that often that women's success is often measured only by what position and title and salary you get. And the net result of that is, for a lot of women, particularly as they're chasing that kind of success, they make a lot of compromises, in terms of their sense of being, their comfort with themselves, their ability to balance family with work. (Respondent L, March 6, 2015)

This description, although it clearly happens in some cases, was not perceived as negative by any of the women whom I interviewed. While these successful executives had to make choices that impacted their lives, none saw these impacts as negative in the long run. They had clear goals for themselves about both work and life, and they carried them out. For example, as Respondent D said:

I think one of the things that we also learned is that being successful in business is not everything, unless you have a good family life and unless you really are committed to a community of some kind, whether it's religion or whether it's charity, [there is a void]. Your life doesn't glow, and for that I think we learn it's really what you want – which is what we say, do your giving while you're living. And if you make money, understand, we have an obligation to share. And I think it's naïve to think that you can have it all, but you’ve really got to learn that balance. And, I think it's very tough, but it's very lonely at the top, as I've watched some top women who sacrificed their family and sacrificed basically personal life just to be at the very top of the C-Suite, with all the money in the world, but they really don't have that
happiness quotient that I hope we have with a better life balance.
(Respondent D, March 11, 2015)

Respondent C, who was the chief earner in her family, left her company and took another job after her first child was born because men in middle and upper management treated her poorly when the child had health problems that required attention. “At some point, I was very disappointed with their treatment of me,” she said (February 24, 2015).

There were all males at the top and the middle and everything. They were kind of dismissive of me. I was very young still, and I was pregnant with my second child, and I thought, ‘You know, I really should go someplace else because they’re not valuing me’… I was not aware of the gender disparity. I knew, obviously, there were all kinds of outright discrimination, but I wasn’t aware of the subtle stuff. But I thought to myself that I should become an entrepreneur. (Respondent C, February 24, 2015)

Later, she turned down an opportunity from her new employer to join an Ivy League Executive MBA program when her children were young.

I couldn’t fit it into my lifestyle, and also I was very dedicated to being home with my kids whenever I could…. So anyway, so I didn’t take him up on it, but he would have paid for that, and that would have been wonderful. So as I look back on my career, you know, I think that would have been a career accelerator for me because I never have had the formal training that a CEO could have, and probably should have. But it's all been on the job training for me. But I don't regret it, because I could not have left my babies at that age anyway. (Respondent C, February 24, 2015)

Respondent C also described a successful woman in a Fortune 50 company who chose to take an international assignment when she still had children at home.

Part of her success – and this is something that a lot of people don't take advantage of – was the willingness to go overseas and work overseas in her career when her kids. They weren't little and they weren't big, you know. They were in the middle. And she did that and she went overseas, and she's very decisive. (Respondent C, February 24, 2015)
It’s clear that personal sacrifices are all too common for C-Suite women, partly because of the traditional perspective that their families should come first and they should settle for lower-level jobs rather than aspiring to the responsibilities of the top level that may keep them from family duties. However, many were also creative in crafting solutions that work for their individual circumstances.

For instance, Respondent K made agreements with her husband, even before they were married, about how to manage their life and careers. She worked late on Tuesdays and Thursdays and came home earlier on Mondays, Wednesdays, and Fridays. “What I found from that was, then, instead of having to negotiate five days, I was actually only having to negotiate maybe one day or no days,” she remembered (February 25, 2015).

Because maybe it was Monday and so instead of having to do Monday, Tuesday, and Thursday, I was only having to say, ‘It’s Monday, I know I’m not supposed to, but I’m going to be about 30 minutes late.’ So I found that instead of negotiating for three days, I was only negotiating for one. And I think that that helped tremendously in the early parts of our relationship, because, I think it’s also important for your family to believe and to know that you are going to be there for them too, and that they’re not the ones who have to give up the flexibility, you know, be the ones flexible in order for this to work. (Respondent K, February 25, 2015)

The literature for this research notes that even women who have achieved higher corporate levels sometimes leave those positions due to a combination of their family commitment (“pull factors”) and their negative feelings about the culture of their workplace (“push factors”) when there are issues of gender inequality (Nelson & Levesque, 2007; “Catalyst 2012 census”, 2012).

However, the female C-Suiters interviewed in this research did not experience the zero-sum pressures of choosing between work and family
because they had made adequate preparation very early in their careers and they chose not to view their choices as negative. They knew up front what they wanted, and they developed a strategy for achieving it. They set inclusive goals for their whole life, both work and family, and none of them expressed the view that they had sacrificed one for the other. Their preparation gave them the ability to make consistent choices on these issues throughout their careers as they met both their personal and business goals.

**Education**

The literature notes that efforts in higher education have failed to bring about adequate female representation in high-level corporate positions (Hewlett, 2013). The assumption that upper-level degrees would increase the number of women reaching the top has not proven true -- women are now educated in numbers greater than men and account for 60 percent of graduate students (Aud et al., 2012). Yet in 2013, only 14.3 percent of Fortune 500 executive officers were women, and only 8.1 percent of those companies’ top earners were women (Soares et al., 2013). The literature also states that women must gain a full set of specialized qualifications, which includes education, in order to reach the C-Suite and thrive (Hewlett, 2013).

The findings from the executive’s interviews also resulted in conflicting views on the value of higher education for women trying to reach the C-Suite. Every member of the sample mentioned education as an important factor in women’s advancement to executive levels, yet there were varying opinions on
the value of a high-level degree. Some emphasized the importance of learning
the business acumen provided by an MBA and the invaluable ability of reading
financial statements and making forecasts. Others emphasized the importance of
having a high-level degree in order for women to gain the attention necessary for
advancement. In contrast, executives such as Respondents C (February 24,
2015) and M (February 20, 2015) argued that earning an advanced degree is
insufficient.

I don't see it making the critical factor in moving us out of the stall that
we're in, because we're already better educated, and yet, when we
graduate and we come into our positions, we get slammed with bias,
unconscious and conscious, from the very beginning. And it all comes out,
you know, just a couple years after graduation; you can start to identify it
numerically. And your degrees don't help you, I don't think, to get over that
hump of, you know, really competing directly with the boys. (Respondent
C, February 24, 2015)

Respondent M agreed. “I think the MBA is important for advancement as a
business person,” she said. “Do I think it is going to alleviate the disparity? No”
(February 20, 2015). While participants did not devalue the importance of an
MBA, they felt that having a high-level degree will not necessarily make a
difference in helping women achieve the C-Suite.

Several of the executives suggested that the importance of education, and
the MBA in particular, is in a transition period because of new skills required in a
fast-moving global economy and because of the increasing costs of education in
the face of its diminishing value. They noted that the importance of education
varies significantly from industry to industry depending on the skills needed for a
particular job.
I think that, you know, you should seek the education level that you need in order for you to be successful in the industry that you have selected and what, and to complement your skills. So, if you are a person who had an undergraduate degree in art or music, and you are working in business, it might make sense to go and get a business degree. (Respondent A, January 7, 2015.)

“It’s really important to know your industry, to know how much it [education] is going to help you,” stressed Respondent K (February 25, 2015).

In order to get what she felt was the right degree for her, Respondent B reported that she had applied to only one school, the top business school in the country, because she decided that was the best path to achieve her goal of becoming a CEO. She was successful in achieving her goal of entering the C-Suite (February 25, 2015).

Respondent E felt that the importance of a higher-level depended partly on the industry. “If the top engineers in the country all have a Masters and you don’t, what do you think’s going to happen to your application?” she said. “It’s like now every CPA in the country has a Masters. So you cannot expect to be a CPA with a BA or a BS; it ain’t going to happen. So, I think it depends on the playing field. We have to do what is required to get on the court” (March 6, 2015).

Ten of the respondents mentioned the importance of business analytical skills, such as P&L analysis, for success in the C-Suite.

“Having a master’s or an MBA today, let’s be honest, will lateral you into an organization at a level that an undergraduate degree won’t,” Respondent Q said (March 17, 2015). Respondent P said she got an MBA to expand her opportunities. “I felt that I needed that in case I wanted to change careers or even
advance from where I was then. And when I think about what factors in my career did prepare me to reach this level, I think getting a good education was definitely the foundation,” she reasoned (March 9, 2015).

The interviews with the executives also uncovered the fact that there may be limits to the benefits conferred by an advanced degree. For example, Respondent I described a 28-year-old woman with no college degree who had experienced “rock star” success in building and selling billion-dollar companies. “I think she is the emergence of what's going to happen in the knowledge economy – it’s going to be a value-creation economy, based on the experience you bring to the table,” Respondent I said (February 18, 2015).

Beyond the specific skills gained by formal education such as communication skills and business acumen, some respondents said that possession of a degree increases visibility and adds to the perception that a candidate is serious. It can also assist in overcoming biases based on race or gender by demonstrating hard work, intelligence, and success at achieving a goal.

Respondent N said a degree would “shut up those men [and prevent them] from seeing you as ignorant” (March 12, 2015). Respondent L agreed: “I think education’s always important, and I think it's probably true that any time you've got a group that's, you know, a non-dominant group, they may be held to higher standards. And again, I don't think that’s right, I'm certainly not saying it’s right, I'm just saying it’s what so” (March 6, 2015). This emphasizes the intangible value of the degree, in addition to its specific knowledge content.
Changes in the global economy could transform the role and significance of education, some respondents said. “I think we’re going into an interesting period in our, in our collective global history,” said Respondent L. “And it'll be fascinating to see what happens relative to education, because what I’m seeing is that there are two sort of very strong forces which may ultimately change the nature of how we see education” – the rising costs and the availability of online learning (March 6, 2015). Respondent M agreed:

I think people are questioning the value of education today because, yeah, it's gotten very expensive. And I think that more and more I'm seeing, like organizations, for example, like your big professional services firms... I think they were always looking for MBAs, but I think today that's changed. I mean, they're looking for some MBAs, but they're also finding it more important that the person has a well-rounded, even a more liberal arts education. (February 20, 2015)

So while not all the executives agreed on the level of importance of earning high-level degrees, they all felt that higher education was still important for women on the path to the C-Suite.

Early-Career Success

All 17 of the executives discussed the importance of early-career success for advancing one’s career to the C-Suite. High-quality performance such as making record sales or bringing in new clients in the earlier stages of the career provides both the experience and the visibility for promotion. “Without achievement, you’re not going to have a great foundation for your next role,” said Respondent Q (March 17, 2015). Respondent H said such success is at least as important as education:
But I think that there’s a companion part to educational attainment, the attainment of something else that women, I think, have traditionally been denied, and that's experience. Experience is at minimum as important as any degree that you're going to attain. (February 17, 2015)

According to the respondents, women should take advantage of opportunities to demonstrate their value. "My boss progressively gave me more and more responsibility… like managing clients and company-to-client relationships… and I was ready for it," Respondent P said (March 9, 2015).

Respondent B added, “You know, one of the things I tell people all the time is, you have to make sure you're doing the current job you have really well before you start worrying about what the next job is” (February 25, 2015). Respondent A, who hired a woman as CEO of her company when she retired, said, “It was her resume that attracted us to her [and that convinced us] to bring her on as our CEO” (January 7, 2015).

Early-career success, like education, is an important part of preparation for advancement to the C-Suite. People who find themselves successful in their later careers regularly report that it was because early-career success. They made choices that prepared them for the future.

Respondent A felt that obtaining an education in one’s industry is key to success on the job.

I think you should seek the education level that you need in order to be successful in the industry that you have selected and to complement your skills. If you are a person who had an undergraduate degree in art or music and you are working in business, it might make sense to go and get a business degree. It just depends on each situation and each company is different. Companies that require you know investment banking, you have to have that, but if you're in retailing you don't have to have it. It depends on what skills you brought to the job. (Respondent A, January 7, 2015)
Respondent C’s explanation was somewhat different in that she felt, for her personally, experience had been a better education.

I do believe that early in my career, it was more like the wild west and the fact that I didn't take off a lot of years to get an MBA because I knew I wasn't a good student, so why would I do that? Instead I did my on-the-job training. And so for me, that was very successful. (Respondent C, February 24, 2015)

**Broad Business Learning**

All 17 of the executives discussed the importance of continuing one’s learning beyond formal education and training programs for their own or others’ advancement to the C-Suite. Similar to continuing education, this learning often involved taking personal initiative to seek out experiences beyond the department or job description – “just making sure that I was constantly learning, having new experiences, and being visible,” Respondent K revealed (February 25, 2015). Respondent H remarked, “That is at the core of my career progression – the willingness to know what I didn’t know and to learn about it, and that is, first and foremost, to be a student of all different parts of an organization” (February 17, 2015). He continued:

You cannot say, ‘Well, I am singularly responsible for legal finance.’ You have to be willing to learn about different dimensions of that organization if you expect to be in the C-suite. The other thing I'd say is that, in my life experience, the very adversity that I thought disqualified me actually qualified me. It was my willingness to be a student, and to learn what I did not know. And there are two stages to that process: first, you have to be willing to admit that there are some things that you don't know, and the second is that you have to be willing to learn about them and invest in them accordingly which is what I did. (Respondent H, February 17, 2015)

This process of remaining open and learning new things is vital for advancement
in the corporation. Respondent A said that the broad experience gained by actions such as stepping up to do other jobs outside one’s own, might come more effectively at a small company where people have diverse responsibilities. “I was always willing to learn and I was willing to do just about any job,” she said (January 7, 2015). She elaborated:

And I think sometimes people get too worried about doing this job or that job – ‘Well, that's beneath me, they think.’ Nothing was beneath me, and I don't think anything should be beneath you. I think a good place to get a start in a career is to go to a startup where everybody gets to do a lot of different jobs because everything needs to be done, from making coffee to sending out the bills every month. So I think those kinds of things are just really great ways to learn a business, or to become somebody's right hand person, somebody's, basically, chief of staff, chief bottle washer. (Respondent A, January 7, 2015)

The interviews with the executives show that the role of a CEO is not the job of a narrow specialist, but requires broad understanding of all aspects of their business. Academic qualities and technical skills such as P&L are valuable, but are not as important as the executive traits described above and the ability to remain open, to learn, and to be able to relate to a broad range of people within the corporation in a way that values and leverages their skills.

The literature on advancing women in the corporate world focused more on initiatives by the organization such as management commitment, development programs, and collective enablers (Desvaux et al., 2010). The respondents, in contrast, focused on the initiative of the women to succeed and tied the approach to their ability to work within the organization.

The participants noted that without broad business learning and without accumulating an understanding of not only their own functional expertise but also
how everything interrelates in an organization, they could not effectively lead. Female respondents, in particular, stressed how the preparatory steps described above helped them see the organizational landscape and navigate to the C-Suite.

**Finding Three: Building Strategic Relationships**

In a 2015 KPMG survey of 2,410 professional working women, eighty-two percent of those women said relationships with female leaders, including networking, helped advance their careers, and two-thirds said the most important leadership lessons they had learned were from other women (KPMG, 2015).

The literature for this research typically describes networks as a result of having mentors and sponsors (Allen et al., 2004; Single & David, 2013), but the executives described networks as systems that they developed for themselves, often out of less formal relationships, which in some cases led to mentor or sponsor relationships. The literature also noted that mentoring has long been a focus of professional and personal development in corporations and the potential benefits of mentoring for women in the workplace, as both mentors and as protégés, has been widely recognized for decades (Kram, 1985).

Fifteen of the 17 executives stressed the importance of building informal relationships, and 12 highlighted networking in particular. This is in addition to more structured relationships such as mentoring, coaching, and sponsoring (discussed below), although they are related. Respondent M said the focus on
networking is greater today than in the past, when women depended more on individual assertiveness (February 20, 2015).

“Every step of the way, it is having great people around you in terms of mentors, supporters, cheerleaders, whatever you want to call them, which I absolutely had,” Respondent B said (February 25, 2015). “It's really important to have a network that extends much beyond your organization.” Describing a woman who reached the C-Suite, Respondent B said:

Number one, she's a good listener which I think is just key. So she takes input, you know, from a lot of people. And she set out and put a plan in place for herself and then started executing on it – talked and got a lot of support, definitely created, you know, her overall network, as well as built a sponsor. (February 25, 2015)

Respondent Q agreed with the perspectives of Respondents M and B:

I also think it's important to recognize that you don't get to the C-suite on your own, right? It's the network that you built, it's the collaboration with peers over time, where you garner their support and it is about building that network of mentors that should turn into sponsors over time. I wish I had really understood the importance of networking and sponsorship, and not just one or the other. I've always understood the importance of networking and building networks, but never really understood the importance of sponsorship until I started to recognize its impact and value. I, like a lot of people, started my career just thinking, head down, work hard, and my accomplishments will speak for themselves. And quite honestly, my accomplishments did speak for themselves. But that's not quite a loud enough voice to ensure that you keep having forward movement in your career. It's only one voice. (Respondent Q, March 17, 2015)

Or, as Respondent I expressed: “Your ability to advance after a certain point, isn't about any one person. If you think that what your peers think about you doesn't matter in this process, you are fooling yourself” (February 18, 2015).

I built relationships along the way with people in the organization who I felt could help my career, who could speak on my behalf, who could coach
me, who could give me advice that I wouldn’t have gotten from, you know, my own manager. And I've always been a big relationship builder; that's just my personality... you know, that kind of Type A personality. (Respondent I, February 18, 2015).

In the literature, Beeson & Valerio (2012) suggest it is critically important to have a comprehensive understanding of the individual and organizational factors that can play a role in the advancement of women. As is also noted in Respondent I’s comment above, Beeson & Valerio write that women are likely to receive less effective feedback than men on these issues (2012).

From the point-of-view of the respondents, the value of relationship-building is immeasurable, as it serves as the foundation for a long, successful career, particularly for one on the C-Suite track. The relationships are an important part of building a team. “Of the softer skills, I think the number one is relationship building,” Respondent N said (March 12, 2015).

I believe if you have that kind of emotional intelligence that you have to apply that into building strong relationships, so that people would be attracted by you and you can build a strong team. And you can position yourself very quickly to have a significant influence and negotiation for all kinds of opportunities, and that's involving communication, collaboration, so on and so forth. (Respondent N, March 12, 2015.)

The respondents connected their mentoring relationships with their growth in confidence, which they saw as helping them be more successful on the job.

Mentoring

The literature offers several definitions of mentoring. Haggard et al. (2011) note that since 1980, some 40 different definitions of “mentoring” have been identified. These researchers describe mentoring as a complex interpersonal
relationship that is evolving and does not have a single definition (2011). Eby et al. (2007) describe mentoring as a “learning partnership.”

Fifteen of the 17 executives discussed mentoring as a way to make progress in a company. In some cases, they described ways that a mentoring relationship could develop into a sponsoring relationship. For instance, Respondent Q said, “It was about having good mentors along the way, asking questions, like ‘How do I advance?’ ‘When do I put myself forward?’ ‘Where does it make sense?’ [It] was really a great value, both personally and professionally” (March 17, 2015). He continued:

I also think it’s important to recognize that you don’t get to the C-Suite on your own. It’s the network that you built, it’s the collaboration with peers over time, where you garner their support, and it is about building that network of mentors that should turn into sponsors over time. (Respondent Q, March 17, 2015)

The literature notes that women should take the responsibility to establish such relationships in order to advance their careers (Sandberg, 2013). It also points out that some corporations have instituted mentoring programs based on the presumed benefits of mentoring for objective career success (Allen et al., 2006). Respondent Q, who works in the financial industry, related that his firm has a successful mentoring program designed for women:

We have women's development and high potential opportunities in place. I think one of the greatest examples… is our director-to-MD, or managing director, mentorship program. It's managing directors mentoring, sponsoring high potential directors through the promotion process and then into successful MD careers, and that happens through a talent management lens. (Respondent Q, March 17, 2015)

Mentors can help women gain the confidence they need to advance, whether
there are established formal programs, like Respondent Q described, or occur more informally in relationships within the company like Respondent M experienced.

In my first role, or series of roles, the first person I'd say that was my mentor was our vice president of sales when I joined the firm. And he basically gave me the confidence to believe that I could do some of the things that I was a little nervous about, you know. I thought, ‘Can I really be good at this?’ and he was very encouraging. (Respondent M, February 20, 2015)

The concept of mentoring is central to the goals of this research. Mentoring has been a focus of professional and personal development in corporations for more than 30 years and the potential benefits of mentoring for women in the workplace, as both mentors and as protégés, has been widely recognized for decades (Kram, 1985). While the literature notes that mentoring can be an effective way to develop women for executive roles (Taneja, 2007), it also points out the limitations of some forms of mentoring, particularly formal mentoring (Allen et al., 2006).

**Coaching**

The literature distinguishes coaching from training in that coaching focuses on preparing for future advancement rather than mastering skills for present tasks (Noe, 2001). Coaching involves learning, development, behavioral change, performance, leadership, and organizational commitment (Joo et al, 2012). Coaching has many of the benefits of mentoring, but it is more formal,
involves counseling, and generally includes a cost for the service (Coutu & Kauffman, 2009; Joo et al., 2012)

Thirteen of the 17 executives mentioned coaching as a way to advance one’s career. For instance, Respondent K reflected on how coaching has made a difference in her life:

I would say, when I look back on my career, where I've had the most progress and the most growth and the most support was when I had a boss who believed in professional and career development, and who understood my job enough to be able to coach me. (February 25, 2015)

Respondent B says that she actually “coaches and counsels” her own nieces and nephews. Specifically, she reveals that she advises them to pursue a technical base, as it will help them with analysis and critical thinking. “It doesn't matter what you want to do, in some way technology is going to play a major role in how you get it done. So be at the forefront of all that” (February 25, 2015).

Respondent C maintains that her executive coach was “a huge differentiator” in her career. She tells of a time during her career when she was employed in a situation with “all these men and no voice” (February 25, 2015). She was so unhappy that she left to run a small publishing company. It was during this time that she utilized the services of an executive coach.

And I told her this very simple story, I said, I see these CEOs all the time here, and they're nothing special -- some of them are a little better than others, but some of them that have big reputations that really suck. And I said I met 600 CEOs a year for 6, 7 years, so I met thousands of CEOs at big companies. And I was like, these guys are don't have anything over all these women that I know that work so hard. And so I said I really would like to become an entrepreneur CEO, and she helped me, I mean she helped me to identify that yearning, first of all. I couldn't understand what I was yearning for all the time. And then she helped me to understand that I could do this. [She helped me] to put into perspective everything that I had
seen and witnessed at the magazine... [S]he started coaching me on possibility and how to connect to my own best future, and how to get myself out of the way of myself. Yeah, so she helped me a lot. (Respondent C, February 25, 2015)

Not many executives, though, have the luxury of executive coaches because of their hefty fees, not to mention the time away from work required to participate.

Even Respondent C makes it clear that she was only able to partake in this invaluable process because she had the power to green-light executive coaching for her own professional development:

That was the only time, was the only time anyone was willing to pay for me to do that. [T]he payment is in the fees of course, but mostly in the time that they're allowing you to take off. So that was it for me for career advancement, work, everything else was much more catch as catch can, but the one thing as an entrepreneur that I was able to do was to have my executive coach... And so, when I told her [my C-Suite dreams], she said she could help me as an executive coach. And so I started working with her. And you know, that was when I was back at [an early] magazine. So I authorized my company chief executive to pay for her for the first two years because I had that authorization. I brought her in to work with my team and me, and then I brought her with me as an executive coach to [another magazine], and I had her work not just with me, but with my team. And she's still working with me. (Respondent C, February 25, 2015)

Respondent E also speaks very highly of coaching, both formal and informal.

Indeed, she indicates that the need for coaching can be instrumental in landing that first job right out of college:

You know, getting my first job, having someone who pulled me to the side and said, look, here's what I think for you and here's what I think you're capable of and don't take no for an answer. So it starts with when you graduate from college, getting the right job – not a job, but the right job. And I had people coach me on what the right job was, and what I needed to demand. And I didn't know how to do that. And I wouldn't have been able to do it on my own, I just would have been grateful for a job. But they taught me to be grateful for the right job, and to be thankful for the things that come along the way that aren’t not quite right, so to remember, to honor all the things that come your way, but be selective. So it's about
choice, and I think this idea of balance in our life is about choice. So I learned that really early on, and so I became a leader at the age of 25. I already had people reporting to me by the time I was 25. So I've been in leadership now for over 25 years. I'm going into 30 years of leading people. So for me it started young and I had to take that as a blessing and nurture it. (March 6, 2015)

This early coaching contributed to what Respondent E refers to as her “collaborative communication style,” which places listening at the forefront (March 6, 2015). She elaborates:

I have to listen, and I'm trying to coach other people toward that. They know what the answer is, so they think they should lead with the answer. And I say always lead with listening. Ask people what they want first, because you already know what you're thinking, but you have no idea what they're thinking. So why don't you add something to your knowledge? So always my communication style is: I want to leave a conversation smarter and more knowledgeable. I work very hard to make sure that happens. For me, it really is about leading with listening. (Respondent E, March 6, 2015)

Respondent E's coach, who was also her sponsor, was pivotal in her advance to the C-Suite.

I knew she was endorsing me, and that was really important, and it was a turning point for me because I had never had a woman leader. And a lot of times, people who are aspiring to the C-Suite don't encounter another woman along the way, and I just want to make sure that I can do that. Because she did it authentically, she cared about me, she spent a lot of time coaching. She sponsored me. (March 6, 2015)

Sponsoring

The literature describes sponsorship as advocating for the person within the organization (Hewlett et al., 2010; Hewlett, 2013; Single & Donald, 2013; Cao & Yang, 2013). Sponsors have positions of power in the company, so they can advocate and provide opportunities for the advancement of women (Joy et al.,
However, the literature also points out that sponsorship mostly has to do with what others do for the woman, not with the individual’s growth in their own competencies (Hewlett et al., 2013; Single & Donald, 2013; Cao & Yang, 2013).

Twelve of the 17 executives mentioned sponsoring as a way to advance one’s career. As Respondent Q explains:

I wish I had really understood the importance of networking and sponsorship, and not just one or the other. I’ve always understood the importance of networking and building networks, but never really understood the importance of sponsorship until I started to recognize its impact and value. I, like a lot of people, started my career just thinking, head down, work hard and my accomplishments will speak for themselves. And quite honestly, my accomplishments did speak for themselves. But that’s not quite a loud enough voice to keep you having forward movement in your career. It’s only one voice. (March 17, 2015)

The literature states that sponsorship is an especially powerful tool for elevating awareness in women, providing them with the exposure they need, and increasing their confidence to act boldly within the company (Cooney, 2015).

And if I think about, you know, what is the most important thing that I would say was key to my advancement in every one of those roles? I would say that it was having sponsors. And the difference between a mentor and a sponsor is a mentor will tell you what to do. A sponsor will walk you down the hall and help you do it. (Respondent K, February 25, 2015)

Respondent H described a sponsor who helped him advance:

[He] always put me in positions of leadership. He had great confidence in my ability to see the marketplace and leadership. And when he became a leader in companies and organizations, he always made sure that I was there as well. So he was really, really important, but he wasn't my first. In fact, my first was the director of an Upward Bound program when I was a college student, who set similar examples of sponsorship, mentorship and investment in me. So I had those people at particular career signposts for me who were so important in helping me move to the next stage. (February 17, 2015)
Respondent N described a woman whose successes, including advancement, resulted from a CEO’s sponsorship: “That definitely made her very, very different, really…. Building strong relationships with executives makes the difference, and you then have their sponsorship” (March 12, 2015).

The chief officers also focused on the woman's initiative, both before and after the sponsor relationship develops. “I was being rewarded for my contributions, I was getting exposure, I was being sponsored,” Respondent E said (March 6, 2015). Respondent Q added, “I was being paid for my contributions. Sponsorship isn't just enough – you then have to perform” (March 17, 2015). He continued:

So for me it was, it was that. It was preparation, being clear on my goals, what was it I wanted to achieve even when folks had said, 'You know, why would you leave a rising career in sales and marketing and do diversity?' I was clear of mind of the work I wanted to do, the impact I wanted to make. And I think it's through that, and through achievement, that the mentorship that I talked about earlier, did turn into sponsorship. And of course, as we all know, without the sponsorship, without someone taking a risk, opening a door championing on your behalf, you don't get the opportunity to show those skills and competencies (March 17, 2015).

“The difference between a mentor and a sponsor is a mentor will tell you what to do,” Respondent K said. “A sponsor will walk you down the hall and help you do it” (February 25, 2015).

**Training Programs**

Training programs were mentioned by 13 of the 17 executives. Often they were describing general leadership development programs, although some of them suggested that training programs aimed at women in particular are
beginning to become more common. In the past, women were encouraged to attend training programs that covered more general topics such as leadership, teambuilding, or communication skills with no distinction between men and women, and did not target their advancement specifically.

Early on, they had leadership development programs for high potential employees. There were no women- or gender-specific programs that existed when I started my career. It wasn't until more recently that I started designing leadership development programs that were specific to women, and that was just in the past, I'd say, four or five years, but they weren't popular years back. Some would have thought that that was polarizing – ‘Why does there have to be a specific program for women?’ [they would have probably asked]. (Respondent O, March 11, 2015)

The literature notes that traditional leadership development programs, both in general and for women in particular, can be beneficial, but they are not sufficient (Sandberg, 2013). Women in particular need more training in developing the executive traits to increase their confidence, assertiveness, and other so-called soft skills that can accelerate their advancement to the C-Suite (Nelson & Levesque, 2007).

The respondents’ interviews generally agreed with the literature on the value and importance of mentoring, sponsoring, coaching, and training programs. The difference was that the respondent’s considered these relationships to be just one part of a larger set of factors needed to gain access to the C-Suite. For example, some of the literature suggests an either-or choice between mentoring and sponsoring (Hewlett, 2013; Travis et al., 2013). The respondents saw these relationships as interdependent in that each supplemented the other by
expanding one’s network. They found an all-of-the-above approach to be more successful.

Finding Four: Engaging Organizational Culture

The literature describes organizational culture as a corporation’s values, beliefs, attitudes, behaviors, and other intangible elements of business that have developed over time through the interaction of its members (Tyson, 2003; Tsai, 2011). This culture, which often operates independent of social culture, can be a major barrier to women’s advancement, especially when that culture includes gender bias (Tsai, 2011).

The findings from the respondents’ interviews generally agreed with the literature about institutional and cultural biases that affect women’s advancement (Devillard et al., 2014), both positive and negative. The biases include the tacit understandings within an organization that do not appear on job descriptions or performance reviews; biases that hinder the progress of women and minorities (Nohria & Khurana, 2010; Beeson & Valerio, 2012).

Tacit Understandings

In the literature, Beeson and Valerio (2012) argued that one of the greatest obstacles to advancing women to executive levels is a set of “unstated criteria” for promotion, the unwritten requirements and tacit understandings within an organization that are associated with advancement. While these competencies don’t typically appear in a job description or a performance review,
they have a strong influence on a person’s ability to advance. Although the unstated criteria’s specific content varies from organization to organization, Beeson and Valerio (2012) developed three general categories to describe them. The first are non-negotiables, including a strong track record, ethics and integrity, and a drive to lead. The second are de-selection factors, including weak interpersonal skills, abrasive or insensitive treatment of others, putting one’s self-interest above the company’s good, and holding a narrow perspective in the business. The third are core selection factors, including strategic skills, building a strong team, managing implementation, initiating innovation and change, lateral management, and executive presence. Women are likely to get less effective feedback than men on these issues. Additionally, built-in biases can lead others to perceive an exaggerated level of de-selection factors in women, while lack of responsible opportunities, such as “stretch assignments,” can keep women from demonstrating the core selection factors (Beeson & Valerio, 2012).

**Gender Bias and Unconscious Bias**

The literature describes bias as thought patterns, assumptions, and interpretations based on beliefs usually learned at an early age, or from others who are looked up to (Chu, 2014). These assumptions, whether positive or negative, are often ingrained and inflexible (Andrade, 2014). Going a step further, in his book *Everyday Bias: Identifying and Navigating Unconscious Judgments in Our Daily Lives*, Ross (2014) identifies “unconscious bias” as “a tendency or inclination that results in judgment without question.” When bias occurs
unconsciously, it occurs without awareness, intention, or knowledge (Ross, 2014).

Eleven of the 17 executives mentioned biases as a factor in women's advancement to the C-Suite. Some pointed out that overt biases are less common than they were in the past, but “unconscious bias” is often a deterrent to progress. Women who succeed sometimes must significantly outperform men to reach the same level. “If it's something equal that both can have, a man can have it at a five, a woman has to have it at a nine or a ten,” in Respondent A's estimation (January 7, 2015).

The first women to reach high levels in a corporation create a new and sometimes uncomfortable environment for men.

You know, I can't say there is prevalence [in bias], but I can say that it happens. It's even more challenging in some cases if you're from another culture and you are entering into these conversations in a leadership role where you have to help them understand, and they decide that they're going to go off and have a beer, and you're the one who has to pick up the kids. You've got to figure out whether you should go with them to have a beer because of those subjective conversations or whether you go pick up the kids, or whether you can find somebody. Oftentimes, they don't take that responsibility, although, studies show that men are picking up more on the responsibility of spending time with their children and sharing some of the workload – and I'm not saying this as a fault or anything negative about men. Traditionally, the men don't have to make arrangements, so these spontaneous things we sometimes can't get included in. (Respondent K, February 25, 2015)

Women need to understand these biases exist when they reach the C-suite, as Respondents A and K said, but when they arrive at that level, they can use their executive traits to change the environment. The findings gained from the interviews suggest that gender matters much less than expected or
traditionally perceived for advancement to the C-Suite and that personal executive traits, such as confidence and assertiveness, are more important than one’s gender.

While the female respondents did experience gender biases, they were so focused on accomplishing their goals, that they did not allow these biases to deter them. Even though in some cases this meant leaving one job for another, these women didn’t let gender or racial bias stop them from reaching their goals. Using their skills, such as the executive traits noted earlier, helped them move ahead.

On the topic of gender bias, Respondent M noted that women who succeed have many of the traits of men who succeed because “we’re still in a man’s world.” As the literature notes, Respondent M also points out that women often have different leadership styles than men.

The world doesn't appreciate that you can be successful with different styles, so because men are mostly the ones doing the coding, they're still looking for women that have the same skills and attributes as men. I don't think they realize the important attributes that women bring, which are not necessarily the hard skills. Women are better collaborators, they're better integrators. From an emotional intelligence point of view, they are more aware of themselves so there [are] a lot of things that women bring to the table. However, when it comes to advancement, I think still it's the tougher women with tougher exteriors who are able to articulate well, who are able to make those quick decisions, who are able to say what's on their mind with confidence, and who are able to build those networks and relationships. (Respondent M, February 24, 2015)

The 2007 study “Social Role Theory and the Expectation States Theory” features structural/cultural models that describe differences between the genders and explains why women are still blocked from the upper levels of
business because of bias, female stereotypes, and gender differences (Weyer, 2007). The author argues that without changes in those broader differences and elimination of stereotypes, women will not progress to high positions (Weyer 2007).

“So we've got a pipeline problem, but then beyond the pipeline problem, we've got the unconscious bias problem,” Respondent B said (February 5, 2015). Based on Respondent B’s experience and research, this bias is not limited to gender, but it also extends to race and culture, which could be a subject for further research.

Studies have shown where you use the exact same resume, you put a male name on it and a female name on it, the male name will be called much more often than the female. So the exact same resume for the job. Now, you take that same resume and you put an African-American sounding name on that resume, and the number of calls drops even further. So unconscious bias plays a role every step of the way in getting a job. (Respondent B, February 25, 2015)

Respondent G said she experienced this personally. When she changed her ethnically identifiable name to a less-distinct nickname, she began receiving calls from the same companies that previously had ignored her: “I didn't experience my first bout with racism until I was 22 years old, and that was me going to look for a job when I had to change my [ethnic] name on my resume [in order to get an interview]” (February 20, 2015).

Most of the executives said that some corporations, at least sometimes partly because of unconscious bias, do not appreciate the benefit of hiring more women at high levels. “When it comes to thinking of leadership roles and places at the board, it is still dominated by White men,” Respondent K said (February
They’re still looking for women that have the same skills and attributes as men. And I don’t think they realize the important attributes that women bring,” pointed out Respondent M (February 20, 2015).

The literature for this research notes that by excluding women from executive positions, American businesses are failing to take full advantage of the skills and abilities of a large portion of the workforce (Padavic & Reskin, 2002), which is an economic problem as well as cultural (Carter & Wagner, 2011). The general business benefits of including women in a company structure are widely documented (e.g. Meyerson & Fletcher, 2000; Kanter, 2010; Carter & Wagner, 2011).

Most of the respondents in this research strongly emphasized that women should engage organizational culture, which generally agrees with the literature on unconscious bias and the unwritten expectations within organizations that impact women’s advancement.

Much of the literature points out the negatives women face in the corporate world such as gender and cultural bias. However, the findings from the respondents in this research show that women who have made it to the C-Suite chose not to see those negatives as barriers but as fact-of-life challenges to work through. Because they cultivated executive traits such as confidence, courage, and assertiveness and exhibited leadership skills, they were able to reach their goals.
Summary

Participants in this research described a wide variety of factors/qualities that they perceived as important for advancement to the C-Suite, especially for women. As shown in Figure 3 below, the most frequently cited factors included intangible personal qualities, such as confidence and emotional intelligence, and individual initiatives, such as networking and building relationships, alongside more structured factors, like mentoring, coaching, sponsoring, and training programs, and more measurable factors, such as education and performance.

![FREQUENTLY CITED FACTORS & QUALITIES THAT HELP WOMEN ADVANCE TO C-SUITE](chart)

*Figure 3. Frequently cited factors and qualities to help women advance to the C-Suite*

In many cases, those factors are connected in important ways, such as
sponsorships that develop from mentorships, mentorships that develop from more general relationships, and confidence that can be built in training programs and mentor relationships.

The executives’ stories suggested that those connections are as important as the factors themselves and that consideration of individual factors in isolation can lead to flawed conclusions about the path to the C-Suite. Some of the attributes mentioned by the executives, such as leadership and confidence, clearly refer to a number of related factors, both tangible and intangible, that can build and express those qualities effectively. Their stories stand in contrast to the notion that some single factor can be discovered or implemented – such as education or sponsorship – that will shatter the glass ceiling for significantly more women. Instead, the participants insisted that each person’s unique context, including their industry and life choices, must be taken into consideration along with the combination of factors for success.

For example, a widely held belief suggests that earning an MBA is a significant boost for a woman to reach the C-Suite. Yet women have been earning more than one-third of the MBAs awarded in the United States for well over a decade without a significant change in the percentage of women who reach the C-Suite (Nohria & Khurana, 2010, p. 378). Several executives in this study provided nuanced perspectives on the role of education, including the different expectations in different industries. In one example, a woman in the financial industry earned an MBA in order to overcome the biases that might have allowed her higher ups to use her lack of the degree as evidence that she
was not worthy of elevation to the ranks of chief officer. She went on to reach the C-Suite. Yet in a counter-example, a woman in media turned down an opportunity for a fully funded Ivy League Executive MBA because of her life choices concerning her children, and she compensated through hard work and experience so that she, too, reached the C-Suite. No research into the value of an MBA alone is likely to predict either of those outcomes, but this fuller narrative of the executives' perspectives explains the integration of many factors.

The respondents in this research provided complex, multifaceted, nuanced perspectives on the personal and professional factors that are involved in reaching the C-Suite. Their narratives included real examples of women who actually reached the C-Suite – both the respondents themselves and women they knew – as well as general perspectives and insights that could be applied to other women’s strategies and preparation in their careers. Chapter Five discusses the significance of these findings and compares them to the conclusions of earlier researchers in the literature review.
CHAPTER FIVE: CONCLUSION

The purpose of this research was to examine the advancement of women into the C-Suite. Despite decades with women in the workforce in roughly the same proportion as men when presumed barriers to their advancement such as lack of education have been overcome and when companies have promoted mentoring, training, and other programs to assist them, the proportion of women in the C-Suite remains extremely low. Thus, this research sought to answer the following questions:

1. What do current corporate officers believe will enable anyone to advance to the C-Suite of their organization?
2. What do current corporate officers believe will enable women to advance to the C-Suite of their organization?

In this chapter, the 17 chief officer respondents’ perspectives are compared to the evidence in the literature review on the role of various factors (mentoring, education, sponsoring, emotional intelligence, etc.) in women’s advancement. Based on their responses, four major themes became apparent: (1) executive traits; (2) preparation; (3) forming strategic relationships; and (4) engaging organizational culture. For the sake of organization, these categories will form the basis of this concluding chapter’s comparative analysis of the findings and the existing body of literature on the advancement of women in corporate America.

The participants in this research described a wide variety of
factors/qualities they perceived as important for women to advance as shown in Figure 4 below.

**Figure 4.** Major themes.

It is important to note that the respondents did not isolate individual factors, as most of the studies in the literature review tended to do. Instead, the respondents described the interrelationship of those factors in comprehensive stories of individual women's advancement and in descriptions of the combinations of factors that propelled them into the C-Suite. Moreover, their perspectives in response to the research questions significantly focused on what is required for anyone to reach the C-Suite, with a secondary focus on issues particular to women, such as dealing appropriately with unconscious bias in an organizational culture. This was true regardless of the respondent’s age, gender, race, nationality, sexual orientation, or personal background. This outcome was surprising in that, despite the commonly held belief that women and minorities
will always experience prejudice, only Respondent G, an African-American female, mentioned having *directly* experienced racial bias. As Respondent G describes her situation:

> I grew up in a really small town with the melting pot of race and ethnicities around me. I literally had the mecca of diversity as a young child, so I didn't know any different. That has made it so much easier for me to have the courage and the fortitude to walk into any situation and not let me being diverse limit me. I've never had the feeling that because I'm an African American female I'm going to be limited. I didn't experience my first bout with racism until I was 22 years old, and that was me going to look for a job when I had to change my [ethnic] name on my resume [in order to get an interview]. (February 20, 2015)

While other respondents noted that racial and gender bias do exist, in their personal stories, they concentrated less on the bias they experienced and more on how they remained focused on their goals for success, and that's what made the difference for them.

### Study Findings and Conclusions

**Finding One: Executive Traits**

The respondents made frequent reference to a wide variety of personal qualities that are often observable, but not easily quantifiable. Overall, they seemed to consider these factors at least as important as more measurable factors such as education, mentorship, sponsorship, and coaching. Much of the literature focuses on these four factors (e.g. Eby et al., 2007; Joo et al, 2012; Hewlett, 2013; Soares et al., 2013), yet also notes that these approaches have
failed to significantly increase the number of women in the C-Suite in almost every line of work (Hewlett, 2013; Travis et al., 2013).

While all of the respondents noted several traits as important to reaching the C-Suite, this discussion focuses on confidence, assertiveness, courage, passion, visibility, leadership, and emotional intelligence, as these traits seem important to women in particular. The literature focused much less, if at all, on many of these traits.

Confidence.

All but three of the respondents discussed confidence as a vital element of such success, especially for leadership that inspires others to follow. A 2015 KPMG study notes that while men will often place too much value in their strengths, women will often undervalue their strengths. This difference in valuation standards is described as a “confidence gap” (KPMG, 2015).

Some of the respondents noted the confidence gap between men and women and said it could deter some women from seeking advancement for which they are qualified. Some explained how their own confidence grew as a result of working with mentors and sponsors, and some pointed out the importance of confidence for effective communication and for the courage required of leaders.

Results from the KPMG Women’s Leadership Study (2015), conducted by the independent research company Ipsos, are consistent with findings of this research -- that confidence is of great importance for a woman advancing to the C-Suite. In this study, 3,014 U.S. women (2,410 professional working women and
604 college women) between the ages of 18 and 64 were surveyed.

One of the findings was the importance of building confidence in the workplace. Two in three respondents (67%) believed they needed more support building their confidence to feel like they could be a leader. One respondent stated, “If I learned about leadership and how to be a leader as a child, I think it would have taught me to be more confident in myself and express my opinions without caring about what other people think” (p. 9).

**Assertiveness.**

While all but two of the respondents listed assertiveness as an important quality for women who seek to attain the C-Suite, none of them perceived it as a negative quality. Some of the literature on this subject (Tannen, 2001; “The double-bind”, 2007), as well as some of the public conversation, has focused on the perception that women who are assertive are considered “bossy,” while men who behave in the same way are considered strong leaders. The literature notes a “double-bind” for women in that, if a woman speaks assertively, she may be seen by others as excessively aggressive, but if she speaks collaboratively, she may be interpreted as lacking confidence or adequate leadership qualities (Tannen, 2001, “The double-bind”, 2007). However, none of the executives interviewed, men or women, supported that view, although some did mention the importance of combining a collaborative approach with an assertive one.

**Courage.**

While only two of the respondents noted the importance of courage as an executive trait for one hoping to reach the C-Suite, they made a compelling case
for the attribute. This is a notable departure from the literature, which found no such linkage. The two respondents described courage as what it took to be successful, most notably, being willing to take risks.

It's okay to take risks, and more than okay; it's required. Get out of your comfort zone, take a risk, don't wait until you feel you have absolutely every single aspect of capability, knowledge, background to be able to go after a job. It's okay to go after the job when you're only 70% there. But take a risk if there are opportunities that require you to move or opportunities that may just take you out of your comfort zone. That's when you get stretched, and that's when you do the most learning; when you're comfortable, you're less aware of what's going on around you; when you're in an environment that's uncomfortable, you're much more aware. (Respondent B, February 25, 2015)

Even though most of the respondents did not mention courage, many of them exhibited and expressed this trait in their responses, indicating that courage is one of the traits necessary to be successful in reaching the C-Suite.

**Passion.**

The importance of passion for one's work was mentioned by 12 of the 17 respondents, particularly how this passion helped them reach their corporate goals.

The other thing that played a big role was that I had such a passion for what I was doing because I loved the work. I almost thought that I was taking a vow of poverty by doing diversity work, because at the time there wasn't any diversity industry. But it was something I knew I was passionate about. I was committed to making a difference in the world, and those were more the things that motivated me than then anything about the work aspect of it. Because I was really fascinated with the work and it wasn't just a job, I was more likely to do that. It's having a passion for the work and having a purpose driven focus, and then learning to not do it all on my own. (Respondent L, February 26, 2015)

Respondent J found that having passion for her work was what led to her successes.
Once I found my passion and it was something that I was really good at, it was something that I was really invested in personally, and I saw where I really had a real calling and a purpose to do that. That was a real hook for me, so I started doing something I loved and I played to my strengths. (February 25, 2015)

These perspectives align with the literature that upholds a “third party leadership” model uniting qualities often identified as particularly masculine or feminine (Regine & Lewin, 2003). Passion is a gender-neutral quality expected of both men and women, breaking down the old logic/emotion distinction (Hatcher, 2003).

Visibility.

All but four of the executives mentioned visibility as important for making progress to the C-Suite, often in connection with relationships. The literature emphasized the importance of mentors (Allen et al., 2004) and sponsors (Paddison, 2013), but the executives focused more on a woman’s own initiative and included a wider range of strategies for achieving visibility, including education, taking initiative within the organization, communication, and assertiveness.

These intangible qualities -- confidence, assertiveness, courage, leadership, emotional intelligence, passion, and visibility -- played important roles in the narratives that executives reported about their own and others’ advancement to the C-Suite. It is noteworthy that the executives highlighted personal characteristics more than was expected from the evidence in the literature review. They identified these characteristics as vital, not only in themselves, but also in relation to other factors, such as visibility and gaining a
Leadership.

All of the respondents identified leadership as an important attribute for women advancing to the C-Suite and described their ideas of what leadership meant to them. Respondent C pointed out, “The first thing about being a CEO or a C-Suite person is you have to be willing to shoulder a tremendous amount of responsibility. If you don't want to shoulder the responsibility, don't take that job and don't aim for it” (February 24, 2015). Respondent P noted, “I also think the leader needs to know how to motivate, facilitate, and integrate all components to meet long-term goals” (March 9, 2015). Respondent B felt that true leaders must be true to themselves as well as others.

When it comes to kind of the key attribute of a leader I think it comes down to they have to be authentic; people have to believe you, so you can't be pretending you're somebody else or something else. You have to be comfortable with yourself and in your own skin. (Respondent B, February 25, 2015)

However, only a few of the respondents referred to the perceived difference in the leadership behavior of men and women that was an important feature in the literature review (e.g. Rosener, 1990; Claes, 1999; Mandell & Pherwani, 2003.). One respondent observed that some past stereotypes, such as negative perceptions of a woman’s assertiveness, are no longer prominent. Others said that the top-down, command-and-control style of leadership does not work for anyone, and leaders must inspire, motivate, facilitate, and integrate. Instead, the executives talked about components of leadership that are common to men and women, such as courage, emotional intelligence, fairness, vision,
integrity, team-building, and flexibility.

According to Powell (2011), field studies of actual managers indicate fewer gender-linked style differences than studies in laboratory settings, or studies that ask non-leaders how they would act if they were leaders. In a study of gender and executive leadership style based on journalistic interviews with 80 executives, Eisner (2013) concluded that the responses indicated far less gender-based differences than other studies had predicted. Her conclusions align with the results of this study. The actual experience and practice of executives is more complex, nuanced, and gender-neutral than many studies indicate, either because of those studies’ methods or because of a more recent shift of emphasis in the C-Suite – possibly both.

**Emotional Intelligence.**

Although only 10 of the 17 executives mentioned emotional intelligence, Respondent L remarked that this field had become more important now than it was in the past as “...there’s a deeper appreciation now for emotional intelligence” (February 25, 2015).

This aligns with the literature review that suggests a relationship between emotional intelligence and transformational leadership (Mandell & Pherwani, 2003). This emphasis on emotional intelligence, specifically qualities such as self-awareness, self-regulation, internal motivation, empathy, and social skills, aligns with the literature that recognizes the importance of those characteristics in vital functions such as communication, teamwork, and building consensus (Goleman, 2003).
However, the executives’ view of the importance of emotional intelligence, especially self-awareness, for both men and women was greater than expected. They also connected these qualities to the ability to build a team, to build relationships that can lead to mentoring and sponsoring, and to leadership that can overcome challenges. They pointed out that emotional intelligence is a key part of an organization’s culture, and its importance becomes greater at higher levels in the organization.

**Evaluation.**

There is an extensive gap between the attention to executive traits in the research literature and their importance to the wide diversity of executives who participated in this research. In general, the respondents considered these traits more important than qualities such as education, partly because they are the driving force in gaining other qualifications, such as experience and continuing education. Upon reflection, it becomes clear that qualities such as confidence, assertiveness, courage, and passion are necessary to propel women and men to C-Suite positions.

This finding aligns with Sheryl Sandburg’s description of “leaning in” (2013), meaning that women should empower themselves in the workplace. It also suggests that these qualities that are necessary for success are not, in general, specific to men or women. According to information gathered from the interviews, men and women who aspire to leadership roles need to be inspiring, motivating, visionary people who put a high value on diverse human capital. Everyone needs the kind of emotional intelligence that includes confidence-
supporting self-knowledge, as well as the ability to relate well to others and
defuse disruptive situations. The executives noted that women can apply these
qualities in specific ways, such as confronting and moving past biases, or
exercising assertiveness in a way that cannot be confused with “bossiness,” as
they are qualities that are important to anyone’s success.

**Finding Two: Preparation**

While many of the executives described comprehensive strategic plans
and preparations that led to their success, the literature primarily focused on
individual strategies such as education, mentoring, coaching, sponsorship, or
overcoming biases (e.g. Eby et al., 2007; Joo et al, 2012; Hewlett, 2013; Soares
et al., 2013; Devillard et al., 2014).

For the respondents, such plans and preparations were assigned a role in
a much larger narrative of success – and the roles for different factors could be
very different for different people. For example, education might be important for
one, while gaining experience filled that role for another. It all boiled down to
individual life choices and what worked best for that individual in reaching his or
her goals.

**Life Choices**

Much of the literature on advancing women in the corporate setting deals
with the question of children and work-life balance from the perspective of
needed changes in organizational culture, including hours, recruitment, and early
opportunities for highly visible experience (Eagly & Carli, 2007). Even potential sponsors might hesitate when they consider working with a married woman with children whose commitment to the organization may be divided (Hewlett et al., 2010).

The executives in this study acknowledged the work-life challenges and the impact of organizational culture, but successful women described ways they had overcome those challenges – either by changing companies, by speaking up, or sometimes by making agreements with a spouse. These responses were highly individualized – to reach the same goal, some made sacrifices to gain an advanced degree, others gave up earning an advanced degree in order to protect family life, and one accepted an overseas assignment while her children were still young.

**Education**

Every member of the sample mentioned higher education as an important factor in women’s advancement into the C-Suite, but they had unexpectedly nuanced perspectives. In addition to the particular skills gained in education, such as business acumen, they discussed its importance for gaining visibility in a company and for overcoming biases – to “shut up those men from seeing you as ignorant,” Respondent N said (March 13, 2015). Some considered their advanced degree foundational to their success, although they knew of successful women without such a degree.

Given the high cost of higher education, many of the executives recommended a careful evaluation of potential return on investment, including
the requirements of one's specific industry. They also mentioned globalization, rapid transition, and the emergence of new skills as factors that might change the value of education in the modern workplace.

“I think the MBA is important for advancement as a business person,” Respondent M said. “Do I think it is going to completely alleviate the disparity? No” (February 24, 2015). Respondent M elaborated that advanced degree is very important in that it can get someone into a company or into position for an opportunity, but it alone will not get that person into the a C-Suite role. In some cases, a person’s performance or experience could outweigh having a degree. While participants did not devalue the importance of an MBA, they felt that having a high-level degree will not necessarily make a difference in helping women achieve the C-Suite.

**Broad Business Learning**

All of the executives discussed the importance of continuing one's business learning, in addition to formal education and training programs, for their own or others’ advancement to the C-Suite. The literature on advancing women in the corporate focused more on initiatives by the organization, such as management commitment, development programs, and collective enablers (Desvaux et al., 2010). The respondents, in contrast, focused on the initiative of the women and tied the approach to their visibility within the organization. Some suggested that a small company would be an excellent place to gain such diverse experience.
Background and Skills

All 17 of the executives discussed the importance of early-career success for advancing one’s career to the C-Suite, often comparing it to education. Like education, women’s progress in reaching management, professional, and related positions has not translated into comparable progress to the C-Suite (U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics, 2015). The respondents emphasized the importance of women’s initiative in gaining this experience by volunteering for high-visibility tasks and achieving high-level goals.

Respondent A, founder and CEO of company worth over $470 million worldwide, started out planning for a law career, but early success in retail changed her path in life.

I graduated with a degree in Communications and Advertising, and I wanted to go to law school to be a civil rights attorney. So I went to Washington D.C. where they had lots of law schools and figured I could work and go to school at the same time. I got a great job at a department store chain there, and I got into their executive training program and never looked back. (January 7, 2015)

Evaluation

Many of the respondents confirmed the importance that the literature suggested for formal and continuing education, skills acquisition, and advancement through the corporate pipeline. However, their perspectives were much more focused on how a woman would address these issues in her personal, unique set of circumstances. For example, a woman who does not get an MBA can find another route to the C-Suite. In the modern environment, the MBA is no longer a determining factor in reaching a C-Suite office, and the
absence of the MBA is not necessarily a deterrent, depending on the industry and the person’s other skills, experience, and education. The importance of continuing one’s education within the corporation, including business acumen, seems more important in real life than it has been portrayed or emphasized in the literature.

Moreover, the question of work-life balance as described by the respondents is more personal and situational than the literature suggests. The individuals’ stories included life choices, usually family or career, often made early on, that positioned them for success in their career while maintaining meaningful relationships in a full, holistic approach to life. Some also described women they knew who had failed to make such plans and wound up sacrificing a great deal in their personal lives. This link between preparation and work-life success is vital, and it does not seem to be adequately communicated in the literature. As the interviews noted, all of these are important, both in themselves and as ways to increase women’s confidence, visibility, and other intangible qualities.

**Finding Three: Building Strategic Relationships**

Fifteen of the 17 executives talked about the importance of building informal relationships, and 12 talked about networking in particular. The literature typically describes networks as a result of having mentors and sponsors (Allen et al., 2004; Single & David, 2013), but the executives described networks as
systems that women develop for themselves, often out of less formal relationships, sometimes leading to mentor or sponsor relationships. Some mentioned that networking is more important today than individual assertiveness, which was more important in the past. They did not make sharp categorical distinctions among the relationships – “mentors, supporters, cheerleaders, whatever you want to call them,” said Respondent B, who also pointed out that networks should be both inside one’s organization and beyond (February 25, 2015). The respondents also described the formation of personal networks based on personal qualities – “good listener,” “collaboration with peers,” and “relationship builder.”

In addition to the informal relationships that a person must develop to advance to the C-Suite, the executives discussed more structured, intentional relationships: mentoring, coaching, and sponsoring, along with training programs. They shared the literature’s positive view of the impact of such programs, but again, they assigned more emphasis to the women’s initiative than the organization’s, compared to much of the literature.

**Mentoring**

Fifteen of the 17 executives discussed mentoring as a way to make progress in a company. In some cases, they described ways that a mentoring relationship could develop into a sponsoring relationship. This is in contrast to some of the literature that suggested an either/or choice between mentors and sponsors (Hewlett, 2013). Respondents also did not draw a sharp distinction between mentors, sponsors, networks, and other relationships. The executives
generally described mentoring relationships that developed from broader relationships. This aligns with the literature that suggested self-selected, voluntary mentoring relationships are more effective than more formal, company-initiated relationships (Eby et al., 2007; Ragins & Cotton, 1999), although one respondent said his firm has a successful mentoring program for women, part of a larger development initiative. The respondents also connected the mentoring relationship with their growth in confidence, which they saw as helping them be more successful on the job.

**Coaching**

Thirteen of the 17 executives mentioned coaching as a way to advance one’s career, although their understanding of the relationship appears broader than the formal structure typically described in the literature. Respondent K described “a boss who believed in professional and career development, and who understood my job enough to be able to coach me” (February 25, 2015). This is not the problem-focused, short-term executive coaching usually intended by the term in research (Joo et al., 2012). The respondents often used such relational terms interchangeably in their narratives.

**Sponsoring**

Twelve of the 17 executives mentioned sponsoring as a way to advance one’s career. They generally reflected the understanding in the literature that sponsorship means advocating for the person within the organization (Hewlett et al., 2010; Hewlett, 2013; Single & Donald, 2013; Cao & Yang, 2013). “And the difference between a mentor and a sponsor is a mentor will tell you what to do,”
Respondent K said. “A sponsor will walk you down the hall and help you do it” (February 25, 2015).

However, they did not view any of the relationships as necessarily more important than others, and even described how mentorships could evolve into sponsorships. “I wish I had really understood the importance of networking and sponsorship, and not just one or the other,” Respondent Q said, (March 17, 2015).

They also focused on the woman’s initiative, both before and after the sponsor relationship develops. “I was being rewarded for my contributions, I was getting exposure, I was being sponsored,” Respondent E said. “I was being paid for my contributions” (March 6, 2015). Respondent Q listed sponsorship with preparation, clear goals, and mentorship in his path to success. “Sponsorship isn't just enough – you then have to perform,” he said (March 17, 2015).

### Training Programs

Training programs were mentioned by 13 of the 17 executives. Some of them suggested that training programs aimed at women in particular are beginning to become more common in recent years. In the past, women were encouraged to attend training programs that were more general and did not target their advancement specifically. The literature supported that corporations have instituted more training programs as they become more aware of the benefits of inclusion (Carter & Wagner, 2011; Meyerson & Fletcher, 2000), and general leadership training programs can be beneficial, in tandem with gender-specific ones (Nelson & Levesque, 2007).
Evaluation

The findings from the respondent's interviews generally agreed with the literature about the value and importance of mentoring, sponsoring, coaching, and training programs. However, the respondents included these relationships in a broader category of networking, and as components of a much larger set of factors needed to reach the C-Suite. Unlike some of the literature that suggests an either-or choice between mentoring and sponsoring (Hewlett, 2013; Travis et al., 2013), the respondents suggested an all-of-the-above approach. They also pointed out the benefits of such relationships for increasing visibility and other intangible factors, which relate to each other in mutually supportive ways. In their experience, executive training programs have generally not been gender-specific, although they also noted that more training aimed particularly at women seems to be emerging.

Finding Four: Engaging Organizational Culture

The findings from the respondent’s interviews generally agreed with the literature about institutional and cultural biases that affect women's advancement (Devillard et al., 2014), both positive and negative. In their broader narrative, however, these elements played a smaller role than in many of the studies that focused on the factors individually. The factors are the tacit understandings within an organization that do not appear on job descriptions or performance reviews; biases that hinder the progress of women and minorities (Nohria &
Khurana, 2010; Beeson & Valerio, 2012). Rather than focusing on how organizations might need to change in order to accommodate the progress of women, the respondents emphasized what they and others they saw as successful have done to engage and respond to those factors, such as moving to another organization when the existing institutional factors proved too much of a hindrance to personal advancement.

**Gender Diversity and Unconscious Bias**

Bias, including unconscious bias, is defined in the literature as positive or negative assumptions that can occur without awareness, intention, or knowledge (e.g., Chu, 2014; Andrade, 2014; Ross, 2015).

Eleven of the 17 executives mentioned biases as a factor in women’s advancement to the C-Suite, including some who said “unconscious bias” is still a problem, even when the overt bias of the past is no longer a factor. One respondent reported a significant change in the number of calls generated by her resume when she changed her name on the resume to a less ethnically identifiable version. This aligns with the literature on unconscious bias as an obstacle to women’s progress (Ely et al., 2011; Sturm, 2001; Nelson & Levesque, 2007; Tyson, 2003). The executives agreed with the high-level managers interviewed by Poirier (2009) that hard work, relationship building, and risk taking help overcome gender biases and stereotypes. Some of the executives pointed out the importance of effective communication to overcoming gender biases, aligning with the “small wins” strategy that calls for dialogue (Meyerson & Fletcher, 2000). As Respondent B noted, “It was very important to me to build
what I'll refer to as a strong presence and a strong ability to communicate and communicate effectively” (February 25, 2015).

**Evaluation**

Most of the respondents strongly emphasized that women should engage organizational culture in an effective way, which generally agrees with the literature on unconscious bias and the unwritten expectations within organizations that impact women’s advancement. More importantly, many of the respondents, in addition to describing how they had combated hindrances in organizational culture, emphasized the importance of making choices about whether to remain in an organization. The perspective suggests a shift in approach from “I need this company” to “this company needs me,” along with a willingness to find another company when values and goals do not align. This powerful position of the woman to make such choices was not highlighted in the literature, at least not at the level that the executives described. This concept involves intangible qualities such as confidence, courage, and assertiveness.

While much of the literature points out the negatives women face in the corporate world, the respondents’ interviews showed that women who have made it to the C-Suite chose not to see those negatives as barriers, but as fact-of-life challenges to work through. They spoke of the positive gains they experienced by exercising executive traits such as confidence, courage, and assertiveness, and moving through or around negative barriers.
Interpretations

None of the respondents highlighted any single factor as definitive for a person’s advancement to the C-Suite. Instead, they narrated complex particular paths that involved an individual’s initiatives and responses to their circumstances on a host of issues, from education to childcare, from mentoring to assertive communication. Each factor was an element in the participant’s story, impacting the other factors and being impacted by them in dynamic ways that evolved during the course of her career. For the women in particular, the cause of the advancement was the woman herself – the way that she combined, controlled, and in some cases created the factors that propelled her to the C-Suite. The analysis of the executives’ responses organizes that large collection of factors into four broad categories, as cataloged and illustrated in Figure 5.

Figure 5. Conceptual Framework: Formula for greater numbers of women in the C-Suite.
1) **Executive Traits**: the woman’s internal motivation and optimism. This includes the factors of confidence, courage, passion, emotional intelligence, assertiveness, vision, flexibility, and leadership.

2) **Networking**: the woman’s building of personal and professional connections. This includes the factors of mentoring, coaching, sponsoring, relationships, collaboration, and developing others.

3) **Preparation**: the woman’s strategic initiatives to position herself for advancement. This includes the factors of education, training programs, lower-level success, hard work, continued education, visibility, life choices, corporate culture (including dealing with biases), and strategy.

4) **Engaging Organizational Culture**: this includes an awareness and appropriate response to the elements of an institution, including the tacit understandings that do not appear on job descriptions or performance reviews; biases that hinder women and minorities; and training programs that can help people, especially women, advance.

The factors within each category relate to each other in mutually supportive ways. General relationships can develop into strong networks where one might find mentors, and mentors could become sponsors, as the executives described. Those factors can sometimes be compensatory: hard work and experience can fill the role of education in the narrative of a woman who has made a life choice that prioritizes time with her children over acquiring an MBA.

Likewise, the large categories relate to each other in mutually supportive
ways in a person’s life. Confidence and all its elements can play a large part in a woman’s ability to build personal and professional connections, and those connections will boost her confidence, as many of the respondents reported. Confidence and networking can also support life choices and equip a woman to deal with challenges in the corporate culture. These combinations can trigger an upward cycle of accumulating and accelerating success to advance the woman into the C-Suite.

**Beneficiaries of Research and Recommendations**

The results of this research point away from any effort to identify a single solution or limited set of solutions to the problem of underrepresentation of women in the C-Suite. Instead, the executives’ perspectives encompassed a broad, complex, and highly personalized approach to a career that can successfully achieve that goal. This is true of their own success stories, the success stories they described of others, and the combination of factors that they described for success in general. These results would be instructive for (1) women who are contemplating or pursuing careers aimed at the C-Suite; (2) present executives in the C-Suite who seek to expand the diversity and inclusion of their business; and (3) human resources officials, mentors, and others who seek to assist women in their career progress.

**Women Pursuing C-Suite Roles**

The executives’ perspectives on advancing women to the C-Suite can have a direct and actionable impact on individual women’s understanding of the
challenges and opportunities involved in such a career. The comprehensive narratives they shared address women’s own understanding of their own life choices, education, personal qualities, relationships, and the host of other associated factors.

The variety of examples, even from such a small sample, indicate paths that address maintaining work-life balance, assessing the value of a degree, affirming the value of hard work and broad experience, revealing the value of diverse relationships, and attending to one’s personal growth and emotional intelligence. This path is broader than many women likely expect. For example, as Respondent A noted, women sometimes wrongly assume that they must have expertise in each item on a list of qualifications, whereas men assume they need to excel at only one or two (January 7, 2015). Changing that perspective could boost a woman’s confidence when applying for advancement. Additional research with more executives would both generate more success narratives and identify predictable ways that the different factors interact generally for success.

C-Suite Executives

Executives who have reached the C-Suite, both men and women, can benefit from the perspectives described in this study. They could use those narratives to identify the roles of a wide variety of factors and their interactions that brought about their success. They could seek out the narratives of colleagues and peers to indicate the personalized and various ways that people have reached the C-Suite. They could narrate their own stories in a comprehensive and detailed way and share those with others.
This personal awareness would open new insights into ways to advance women in their own company, both formally and informally. Like the information collected here and in other qualitative studies such as Eisner (2013), their stories could contribute to further research in the field. It is this area where Erikson’s (1963) generativity theory and McAdams’ narration theory (2006) are most evident. Qualitative research of this type allows executives to pave the way for future generations of C-Suiters, as well as enhance their own personal legacies.

**Human Resources Officials and Supporters of Women’s Advancement**

The narratives of these executives provide important insights for improving both formal and informal efforts to help women advance in their corporate careers. For example, awareness of both the organization’s and the woman’s role in her advancement could lead to more engaging, collaborative approaches to training, mentoring, work assignments, educational incentives, and other initiatives in the company.

- People who are mentoring others also can gain a broader perspective on how the relationship fits into a person’s comprehensive approach to his or her career.

- Further research could investigate what programs are most effective at helping women advance and how they could be improved by considering this fuller range of factors.

- Intangible personal qualities such as confidence, courage, assertiveness, emotional intelligence, and passion; relationships such as networking and getting a mentor or sponsor; and preparation, such
as life choices and continued education and engaging the culture, such as dealing with bias and understanding unstated expectations, can all be taught.

- Training programs for women should be developed to address all four categories, helping women to understand and build the necessary factors for advancement.
- Female managers could benefit from learning how to speak up and increase their visibility, without necessarily imitating masculine approaches.

Moreover, the importance of these qualities, especially the personal intangibles, calls for creating awareness about CEO careers for women very early in their childhood. As one Facebook meme by Redefining Refuge recently posited: We must “teach our daughters to worry less about fitting into glass slippers and more about shattering glass ceilings” (August 13, 2015).

As Respondent O pointed out in her interview, the pipeline to the C-Suite needs to start before a college graduate starts considering an MBA – it should reach all the way down to a person’s young years of learning and having role models.

The earlier on these leadership development programs can start for younger talent, high potential talent, the better off they will be in the long run – anything that has to do with leadership or coaching or managing people or courageous conversations. All that should happen in the very beginning. When you start to see any indications of a high potential talent, that person should start going through some of that training. (Respondent O, March 11, 2015)
Researcher Reflections

As a woman of color who is the founder and publisher of a magazine for women, this researcher has a passion for helping women advance to the C-Suite. The aim of this research was to discover how to accelerate that advancement and perhaps discover a neglected or hidden factor that would lead to a breakthrough.

The notion of “unstated criteria” suggested the tantalizing possibility that the answer lay in those intangibles. When early interviewees gave strong attention to confidence as a factor, this intangible was considered to be the answer. But with the end of the research came the realization that there is no single silver bullet to break the glass ceiling.

The results pointed in the opposite direction, to a complex, nuanced, dynamic set of factors in the life of an individual whose own preparation, networking, and confidence – with all those categories included – could propel her to career success in the C-Suite. Despite that surprising outcome, the research holds out the empowering promise that women can not only identify and gain the tools they need to accomplish their goals but also can select and organize these factors in a way that offers success in both life and career.

The outcome of this research led to reflection on the unexpected success of Barack Obama as he became the first African-American U.S. president. The same factors noted by the respondents are present in his story – executive traits, preparation, networking, and engaging organizational culture (in President
Obama’s case, engaging American political culture). Obama came onto the national scene as a little-known freshman Illinois State Senator giving a speech at the Democratic National Convention, a powerful communication that conveyed his confidence and the factors related to confidence, including extraordinary courage. That speech was made possible by the sponsorship of a seasoned and powerful member of the Democratic Party establishment and then presidential candidate, U.S. Senator John Kerry, now Secretary of State, who invited the relatively unknown senator to deliver the prime time address that was beamed into homes across the country and ultimately around the world.

Obama would go on to be elected to the U.S. Senate, ultimately winning the Democratic nomination in an extraordinary primary battle against frontrunner New York Senator (and former First Lady) Hillary Clinton through networking and preparation. He networked with important senators, like Claire McCaskill, D-Mo.; other politicians such as Caroline Kennedy, daughter of slain American President John F. Kennedy; and opinion leaders like media mogul Oprah Winfrey in order to win endorsements that helped him succeed. His preparation, particularly his groundwork in the caucus states where his opponent was not as effective, kept him in contention during the seesaw primary. The same combination, including an unprecedented use of technology as part of his preparation, led him to win the presidency against considerable odds. This suggests that my findings are applicable to success in any field of endeavor.
Suggestions for Further Research

1. The sample size for this research was small, and similar research could be conducted with larger samples to confirm the results, as well as to gather more narratives that describe successful individuals’ paths to the C-Suite.

2. Research could also focus on more homogenous groups of executives, such as older and younger executives, female and male executives, minority executives, white executives, and executives of companies of specific sizes or commitments to diversity and inclusion.

3. Further studies could focus on people who became C-Suite executives more than a decade ago and those who reached C-Suite executive status within the past three to five years.

4. Comparative studies between such groups would be informative.

5. Related studies could be conducted by interviewing women in middle management, or people who mentor such women, in order to collect their perspectives on what it takes to achieve success in the C-Suite.

6. Again, the samples could be diverse or homogeneous—people of different ages, in corporations of different sizes or industries, with similar or different expressed commitments to diversity and inclusion.

7. Comparison and contrast of those results with the results from executives would be informative.

8. The researcher should remain open to surprising results – newer
executives, for example, might have significantly different stories from older executives, and mentors in more traditional companies might have a broader view of how to help a woman succeed than mentors in companies with more inclusive mission statements.

Summary

This research yielded unexpected insights into some of the individual factors that affect women’s advancement to the C-Suite. Moreover, it highlighted the importance of taking into consideration the dynamic interaction of those factors and the particular way they relate in an individual woman’s life and career.

Most of the findings from the respondents were consistent with the literature review on what it takes for women to advance to the C-Suite. One of the most compelling discoveries from this study is how these findings do not and cannot stand alone but instead are interrelated and interdependent of each other. There is no one single factor that makes for a successful journey to the C-Suite, but a combination of all of them is what helps women succeed at the corporate level.

Much of the literature on women and the C-Suite concentrates on the negatives women face in the corporate world such as gender and cultural bias. However, the findings from the respondents in this study show that the women who made it to the C-Suite certainly encountered many of those barriers, but they chose not to see them as negatives but instead as fact-of-life challenges to work
through. Because these women cultivated executive traits such as confidence, courage, and assertiveness, and exhibited leadership skills, they were able to reach their goals. While current literature tends to concentrate on what is wrong with women’s experiences in the corporate setting, this study makes an important contribution to existing research by pointing out the positives happening in the advancement of women to the C-Suite.

Women who may be reluctant to even try advancing to higher corporate levels because of negative perceptions would be inspired by the women in this study who talk about how passionate and confident they were about their careers and family, how they knew what they wanted, and stood firm by their goals. This study provides a clearer picture of the challenges and opportunities involved in helping women reach their higher goals.

This information could potentially empower women to prepare themselves, build their relationships, and increase their own self-confidence, and other personal qualities in ways that significantly increase their potential for advancement.

The results from this study can provide material for training programs, editorial content for online postings, print and e-books, magazine articles, and discussion groups, and other meaningful tools that could help shatter the glass ceiling.
APPENDICES

Appendix A: Interview Protocol

Interview Protocol for Factors That Enable Women to Advance in the C-Suite

Q1. Tell me the story of your own career. Where did you start, and what were the decisive events in your advancement to the C-Suite?

— Were there any specific factors that you think were important in supporting your own advancement to the C-Suite? Can you give some examples of when these factors came into play for you?

— Which communication style best helped you succeed? E.G., being assertive, aggressive, passive, collaborative, etc.

— As you consider your career progression, have your strategies for advancement changed over time? If so, how did your approach change and why?

Q2. Does your organization have any specific programs or actions in place that are designed to support women in advancing to upper management and C-suite roles?

— If no, has there been any discussion within upper management about putting such a program in place? Please describe.

— If yes, tell me about the program – what it is, how it is managed, why/when was it started?

  o How would you describe its effectiveness?

  o How many women have completed the program, and how have they advanced their careers since then?
Q3. From your perspective, how does a leader successfully advance to the C-Suite?

— What are the attributes the leader needs to possess? How are they experienced in the organization?

— What “hard” skills do you consider necessary for advancement to the C-Suite?

— What “soft” skills do you consider necessary? Soft skills include things like: communication, collaboration, emotional intelligence, etc.

— How do you compare their relative importance?

— How are self-awareness, awareness of your own strengths and weaknesses, and awareness of the others around you important to your leadership success?

Q4. Can you share an example of a woman you know who has succeeded in advancing up the corporate ladder into upper management/C-suite? Please describe that person and their career trajectory, without revealing their identity.

— Did men in senior executive positions play a role in supporting this specific woman’s development, promotion, and performance?

— Did women in senior executive positions play a role in supporting this specific woman’s development, promotion, and performance?

— Were there any unique characteristics or behaviors she exhibited that helped her to succeed?

Q5. With the global economy becoming more and more “knowledge-based,” some consider higher educational attainment as one key to women’s advancement. Can you share an example from your own organization where a female manager's education may have played a central role in supporting her advancement?

— What specific degrees or formal education do you believe helped her to succeed? E.G., Bachelor’s, MBA or other Master’s, J.D., Ed.D, Ph.D, computer software skills, etc.

— What’s your own opinion about the value of educational attainment in alleviating the disparities in leadership roles that women now face?

— Has your opinion on this issue changed recently, and if it has, was there a specific experience or event that made you change your thinking?
Q6. Looking back at your career from your present position, what do you know that you wish you had known then?

— What support would have been helpful?

— What were some of the biggest differences between life in the C-Suite as you expected it and the actual experience now that you are here?

— What are the similarities?

— What factors in your career best prepared you to reach this level?
Appendix B: Dissertation Interview Invitation Letter

Dissertation Letter of Invitation
And
Informed Consent to Participate in Research Study

Dear ________________

I am a doctoral student at the University of Pennsylvania and I am writing to request your participation in my research study titled “Leadership Perspectives on Advancing Women to the C-Suite.”

The purpose of this study is to discover factors that contribute to professional women's success in attaining C-Suite roles. I will conduct qualitative research focusing on individuals – both men and women – who have reached the C-Suite and can provide insight and knowledge gained from their experiences and observations, in their process of successfully recruiting for, and being recruited to, corporate officer positions in Fortune 1000 companies.

The principal investigator of this study is my Committee Chair, Dr. Robert Moore, Senior Lecturer in Educational Linguistics, Graduate School of Education, University of Pennsylvania. His contact information is, (215) 898-1920, email: moorerob@gse.upenn.edu

I am the co-investigator and independent researcher of the study and will be conducting the actual research as follow:

   Procedures and Time Requirement: As part of this study, you are asked to participate in a 60-minute individual interview. The interview will be recorded for accuracy and transcribed by an outside service. A short follow up interview or phone call may be necessary for clarification of comments but only if needed. Additionally, you will receive the interview questions prior to the interview.

   Confidentiality: To assure participant confidentiality, the study is conducted in accordance with the regulations of the Institutional Review Board at the University of Pennsylvania. The IRB sees email as inherently
insecure communication so no sensitive information will be exchanged via email and any data collected for the study can only be used for research purposes. The results of the study will be published as a dissertation, but your name or organization will not be associated with any results.

Participation in the research is completely voluntary: In accordance with the Institutional Review Board at the University of Pennsylvania, participants are required to sign an official informed consent form and will be asked to verbally acknowledge their consent to participate at the onset of the interview. The informed consent signature block can be found at the bottom of this document.

Benefits and Risks: This research poses no foreseeable risk to any of the participants in the study. Although there may or may not be a direct benefit to you, the possible benefit of your participation may be of value to organizations advancing more women in leadership roles and helpful to professional women who desire to attain the C-Suite.

I hope I can count on your participation and will be glad to share the final research findings with you and your organization. I am available by phone to discuss this form and answer any questions you may have about this voluntary research study.

To confirm your participation, please sign the informed consent block below and return this document to me as a PDF by email.

Immediately following receipt of your consent, I will contact your office to schedule time on your calendar for the interview.

Thank you for your consideration to participate and I look forward to your response.

Kind Regards,

Sheila A. Robinson M.E., M.Ed,

Doctoral Student
University of Pennsylvania
(336) 451-4289
sheila@diversitywoman.com

By signing this form, I acknowledge that I understand the nature of the study, the potential risks to me as a participant, and the means by which my identity will be kept confidential. My signature on this form also indicates that I am 18 years old.
or older, and that I give my permission to voluntarily serve as a participant in the study described.

Signature of participant

Date

Signature of researcher

Date
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