



Upskilling Women Leaders For Leadership Roles Through Coaching And Mentoring Using Positive Psychology Principles

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Abstract:

This study focused on the impact of coaching and mentoring on women's advancement in leadership roles, an increasingly important topic in both organizational and societal discussions. Coaching and mentoring provide personalized support to enhance women's leadership skills by tackling specific challenges and nurturing their strengths. The goal was to promote sustainable growth, resilience, and adaptability in women's evolving roles. Leadership development required a shift from short-term wins to a more comprehensive, strategic perspective, which can significantly influence both personal and organizational success. By utilizing approaches like VIA strengths, addressing Imposter Syndrome and Unconscious Bias, and employing techniques such as job crafting, negotiation, and creative visualization, the study aimed to facilitate a mindset shift. It explored how coaching and mentoring contributed to leadership growth among women. Additionally, the study sought to cultivate a growth mindset and a more strategic perspective in the 15 women who participated. By measuring outcomes through pre- and post-assessments, role plays, and focused group discussions, the study demonstrated the program's effectiveness, ultimately creating a model for industries to develop women leaders within their organizations.

Keywords: *Women leadership, coaching, mentoring, VIA strengths, imposter syndrome, unconscious bias, job crafting, negotiation skills, creative visualization.*

INTRODUCTION

I executed six months research from February-August 2024, for an Indian software company as a mentor and coach with the aim to boost women leadership. Coaching and mentoring were means to assist women for instance overcome imposter syndrome, address hidden biases and improve on their negotiation skills. Research brought out that it is relevant to use the strengths of women, encourage them to adopt innovative work methods thus developing future leaders will require long-term perspectives with some creativity for purposes of visualization.

There have been many instances where women are seen excelling in managerial positions across different sectors such as corporate world, politics or even education but there are still some stumbling blocks encountered due to cultural issues mainly structural arrangements.

Up to today, organizational changes continue happening because of women who become their leaders and fight for them not only outside but inward as well bearing such values as inclusiveness and justice. Despite this progress realized so far, there remains a challenge regarding joining top management positions particularly when considering deep-rooted historical facts and modern society trends. This study examines current status of female leadership, noting milestones even as hurdles are discussed.

Women occupying these top offices include India's standout figures such as Nirmala Sitharaman who is India's first full-time female Finance Minister and Kiran Mazumdar-Shaw founder of Biocon. These champions set policies, spur progress and serve as role models for the coming generations.

In terms of business transformation at high levels in the corporate world Jane Fraser hit another landmark by being appointed the first-ever female CEO of Citigroup in 2021. Consequently, a well-known global steadiness exponent is Anshula KantCFO World Bank India has got a number of leading women spurring innovation, sustainability and resilience. In tough crises like Covid-19 Jacinda Ardern of New Zealand and Angela Merkel of Germany, resorted to scientific facts that led to good results. Globally known Indian women entrepreneurs like Indra Nooyi (PepsiCo) Gita Gopinath (IMF) and Arundhati Bhattacharya (Salesforce India) still wield considerable influence. Priyanka Chopra has been a prominent personality in showbiz and charity work. In spite of this achievement there is still underrepresentation of females at top leadership positions however they are known to enhance organizational performance through promoting diversity thus fostering better decisions.

Barriers to Women's Leadership

In spite of the progress women are presently making, the glass ceiling or the invisible barrier, prevents women to reach the top positions despite the required qualifications. Gender stereotypes, imposter syndrome, unconscious biases, and limited access to professional networks further stall women's advancement. Women's leadership is often characterized by emotional intelligence, inclusivity, and commitment, and yet organizational biases prevent them from receiving due recognition. Women also face traditional systems which prioritize family and care giver's role over career growth, leading to underrepresentation of women.

The women in position of power are said to be bright but their achievement lies in the persistence of determination level from the part of governments, organisations, and normal citizens. Among other things, mentorship as well as sponsorship programmes are crucial in providing women with relevant leadership abilities; such as confidence, negotiation skills, or strategic planning skills. It is important to have more women occupying position and power-sensitive roles so as to stimulate success among next generation female leaders.

Despite steps taken so far, it is commonly observed that women are still not well represented in various professions. However, there is still a long way to go for women because they have to deal with variously cultural as well as institutional and often intersectional barriers so as to increase their visibility in organizations. Thus, attainment of gender parity in governance requires sustainable moves embracing policy amendments, advocacy, and change in structures. The rise of women in leadership positions will transform society through economic and social changes which will make it more multicultural and diverse. For the future challenges, leadership development program must build a growth mindset among people hence broadening their way of thinking.

Coaching and Mentoring as a Process

Although they are sometimes employed interchangeably, coaching and mentoring have unique approaches but a shared purpose: leading folks towards achievement. Training is both structured and time-bound as it focuses on certain abilities while being able to quantify results. The coaches, some with no knowledge of their customers' industries, employ active listening, questioning, and feedback to assist in learning and solving problems. It is outcome oriented since it deals with immediate concerns during a specific period of time.

Conversely, mentoring is an informal, long-term process. Normally mentors are professionals with lots of experience who provide direction, advice, or share information that might help their mentees develop personally or in their careers. They often discuss issues about ones leadership style, career pathways, or opportunities for networking and so on through ongoing conversations and time spent reflecting. They position themselves on trust levels, mutual respect and partnership provide a suitable place for goal setting, feedback as well as accountability. Basically, women's leadership coaching focuses on assisting women to overcome their workplace difficulties thus increasing their confidence and effectiveness in leadership. The program tries to address specific barriers like gender bias by supporting women with high performance skills in thinking strategically about leading. The process helps build self-awareness which eventually translates into self-confidence thus assisting women fight against imposter syndrome which includes lack of confidence in oneself due to fear of being recognized as inadequate because they do not know everything about themselves; this happens by acknowledging strengths and achievements made in life time . Furthermore, it also avails mechanisms for balancing work and family responsibilities as well as enhancing communication skills, negotiation skills that make them come off as understanding yet firm in their interactions with others.

Moreover, women leadership coaching covers general issues such as discrimination at work and invisible barriers between different positions within companies implying that it is meant to make sure that women bring about inclusivity while effectively manoeuvring through the organization without having to face challenges related to glass ceiling syndrome. In the fight against imposter syndrome, personal awareness, confidence, and resilience are important coaching elements. Coaches guide women through personal sessions where they learn that feelings of inadequacy might result from perfectionism tendencies or being influenced by societal qualities; hence turning shortcomings into chances for betterment instead of dwelling on them too much. Additionally, there are those who serve as non-judgmental spaces enabling ladies confront their phantoms for better lives (Friedman & Charnes, 2020).

VIA Strengths Coaching and Leadership impact:

VIA strengths coaching, based on positive psychology which focuses on helping women leaders to identify and utilize their core strengths for authentic leadership and resilience. In the face of systemic challenges like imposter syndrome and gender bias, this approach builds confidence by leveraging individual strengths for professional success. The VIA strengths model, developed by Peterson and Seligman, (2004), identifies 24-character strengths, such as creativity, bravery, and social intelligence. Research shows that those aware of their strengths and who intentionally use them, report greater well-being, job satisfaction, and leader effectiveness. For women in leadership, using strengths helps overcome external barriers and fosters authentic, values-driven leadership.

Strength's coaching emphasizes self-discovery and the natural talents of individuals. For women, this approach helps break free from organizational leadership expectations, promoting self-efficacy and resilience in male-dominated environments. Strengths like social intelligence aid in relationship-building and conflict resolution—key leadership skills. VIA strengths coaching also encourages positive thinking and resilience, improving well-being and optimism. This mindset helps women leaders face challenges with confidence, leading to both personal and organizational success along with many key advantages. First, it fosters greater self-awareness, a crucial quality for successful leadership (Sweeney et al., 2020). Secondly, it enables women to lead authentically, inspiring others with genuine influence. Third, by focusing on strengths, women build confidence in their abilities to confront challenges and meet goals. It also promotes long-term leadership development by cultivating sustainable skills, not just situational responses. Women leaders develop resilience, mentor others, advocate for gender equality, and create inclusive leadership environments. VIA coaching emphasizes using strengths rather than focusing on weaknesses, helping women overcome barriers and excel in leadership roles.

In addition to VIA, tools like PERMA (Positive emotion, Engagement, Relationships, Meaning, and Accomplishment) and optimization scales are valuable in assessing strengths. PERMA focuses on how individual strengths contribute to well-being, while optimization scales measure effective strength utilization. Together, these tools provide a comprehensive approach to strengths-based development, helping women realize their full potential in both their personal life and work.

Imposter Syndrome

Imposter syndrome is where individuals doubt their achievements and fear being seen as frauds, this affects women in leadership role the most. This psychological barrier often prevents women from pursuing challenges, promotions, and raises. First conceptualized by Clance and Imes (1978), imposter syndrome affects women the most, especially in male-dominated industries, with research indicating that 70% of individuals experience it (Bravata et al., 2020). Cultural and societal pressures further add burden to the issue for women.

Unconscious Bias:

Unconscious bias leads automatic judgments based on stereotypes, and becomes a significant barrier to women's leadership (Greenwald & Banaji, 1995). These biases can affect how women are perceived in leadership positions, often being seen less capable or assertive, particularly in male-dominated industries (Heilman, 2012). Women may internalize these biases, leading to self-doubt and reluctance to pursue leadership roles (Rudman & Glick, 2001).

Gender Bias:

Gender bias is rooted in stereotypes which hampers women's leadership capabilities by creating assumptions about their abilities and limiting growth opportunities (Heilman, 2012). Women face more stringent evaluations and may struggle to balance assertiveness with societal expectations (Rudman & Glick, 2001).

Balancing and Job Crafting:

Women leaders face unique challenges, including balancing work and personal life. Studies show women in leadership experience more stress than men in similar positions (Lyness & Judiesch, 2014). Effective time management and organizational support, such as flexible work policies, can help female leaders maintain this balance (Kossek, Su, & Wu, 2017). Job crafting allows individuals to align work roles with personal strengths and values, increasing job satisfaction and leadership capacity (Wrzesniewski & Dutton, 2001). For women, this strategy fosters empowerment, enhancing their ability to lead by reshaping tasks and relationships, resulting in better leadership performance (Berg, Dutton, & Wrzesniewski, 2001).

Negotiation:

Negotiation is vital for leadership development, enabling women to secure resources and navigate organizational dynamics. Women often negotiate less due to societal expectations and fear of backlash (Bowles & Babcock, 2013). Developing negotiation skills can boost women's confidence and influence, helping them secure better opportunities and create inclusive work environments (Babcock & Laschever, 2009). Promoting gender equity through negotiation, women leaders can advocate for fair pay and equal opportunities, fostering change within organizations (Sandberg, 2013).

Creative Visualization:

Creative visualization empowers women leaders by enabling them to envision success, set clear objectives, and navigate leadership challenges with confidence (Taylor et al., 1998). By focusing on positive thinking and imagery, female leaders can overcome self-doubt and enhance their performance. Grounded in psychological theories of mental rehearsal and goal-setting, creative visualization allows individuals to simulate experiences and prepare for obstacles (Taylor & Pham, 1999). Visualization improves key leadership skills like confidence, decision-making, and communication (Komaki & Minnich). Women using this tool regularly perform better, especially in male-dominated environments. Combining visualization with goal-setting boosts motivation and success (Oettingen & Mayer, 2002).

Till the mid-1990s, emphasis was placed on the negative aspects of psychology, dealing with mainly the psychiatric patients. According to Myers, 1999, for every one article in positive side of psychology, there are 21 articles on negative aspects of psychology. Hence, in their paper 'Footsteps on the road to a positive psychology' (Gillham & Seligman, 1999), thought of finding ways for humans to focus on the positive side of the psyche. Thus, they forged a new study known as positive psychology. Martin Seligman and Mihail Csikszentmihalyi (2000), used the scientific method using its foundations and objectives of knowledge and scientific research.

Since its introduction, positive psychology, lays strong emphasis on practical application (Gumbau & Soria, 2016). According to Khan et al., 2020, transformational leadership, influences employees' work performance, work burnout and social loafing at workplace. They also state that the trigger for this transformational change is intrinsic motivation, which was proved by a survey they conducted for their research. Thus, it can further be concluded based on their research that transformational leadership impacts, overall employee self-confidence, as well as their decision-making power to improve the cohorts. Leaders' positivity impacts and influences the positivity and performance and vice-versa (Avey et al., 2011). They have also conducted research on how positivity leadership are new leaders in the making who produce and affect outcomes.

To take the matters further, Coaching came up to be a very effective solution in personal, health and executive setup. Coaching helped to come up very novel and tailor-made solutions to problems. In fact, it was observed that coaching enhanced the psychological well-being in addition to goal attainment for the individual (Grant, 2011). It was only in the latter 1990s that psychologists and behavioural scientists explicitly articulated an agenda for a sub-discipline of psychology that focused attention on sources of psychological health, well-being, and the scientific study of the factors that enable individuals, organizations, and communities to flourish and thrive (Seligman & Csikszentmihalyi, 2000).

During coaching people can actualize and regulate their cognitive and emotional responses and values (Rosenbaum, 1990). These values we talk about have their history laid down by (Maslow, 1954, 1971). It helps the individual to become the best version of himself or herself by increasing concentration and absorption by remaining fully human. There are many intrapersonal as well as interpersonal dimensions which are worked upon.

There is very little literature about how exactly to go about the process of coaching. The coach needs to bring Positive techniques for the process. Also, the literature also does not suggest what practical tools the coach should apply to support the growth of the client (Herd & Russell, 2010).

The entire process involves asking powerful questions which appeal to the psyche and generate insights during the process. There are different constructive ways where the dominant positive values can be used in innovative ways for the enhancement of leadership skills and qualities.

NEED AND SIGNIFICANCE:

Empowering women to overcome gender imbalances and overcoming their leading capacity is where coaching takes a significant part. One-on-one assistance offered by coaches helps potential women leaders to deal with such obstacles as gender prejudices and stereotypes hence fostering resilience that is synonymous with growth in any individual with ambitions of reaching the topmost position within an organization. Such an individualized approach helps in improving vital qualities of leadership such as effective communication as well as strategic and critical thinking so much that they are able to make decisions easily. Thus, it helps them prepare adequately for taking up top managerial positions in the organization. Another benefit of coaching is that; it helps in bridging the gap of confidence usually experienced by women leaders through creation of strong self-belief, assertion and self-efficacy for one to be able to step into a leadership position with authority. Coaching enables women executive managers to promote diversity in their teams and thus it results in increased teamwork and business output. Not only does investment in female coaching promote personal growth but also contributes so much towards success of an organization. Companies that promote women's leadership development have workplace environments with more equality hence they make better decisions and release female productivity into continued prosperity of any organization.

Research Gaps

- **Lack of empirical studies:** Long-term effectiveness and sustainability of such interventions in diverse organizational settings.
- **Transferability of coaching outcomes:** From controlled settings to real-world organizational environments, where complexities and challenges may vary.
- **Existing literature:** Often focuses on short-term outcomes, often overlooking the need for longitudinal studies to evaluate the lasting impact of positive psychology coaching on leadership development.

Statement of Research Problem

It is the extensive approach to measuring development in dependent variables. It involves utilizing the VIA Strengths Instrument, 360-degree feedback and pre-and post-assessments to quantify changes over time. This multifaceted approach ensures a thorough evaluation of individual strengths and progress towards desired outcomes, here it is enhanced leadership skills, thus enhancing the validity of the results.

Research Objectives

The following are the research Objectives which would be accomplished during the period of coaching and mentoring the participants:

1. **To build confidence and assertiveness** in women leaders, to help them create a niche for themselves in the traditional hierarchical organizational structure.
2. **To develop leadership presence and influence**, which will help them to command respect, inspire confidence, and exert influence within and outside the organization.

RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

Variables under Study:

Independent variables: These are variables which control the outcomes of the entire process. Outcomes of this change are expected to be built confidence, assertiveness, leadership skills and presence. Below are 2 factors considered for this exercise

1. **Coaching and Mentoring techniques:** Specific coaching and mentoring techniques to be used like self-assessment exercises, cognitive-behavior role-plays, and Goal-setting activities, using World Café Model and VIA strengths assessments, PERMA and optimism assessments.
2. **Self-awareness activities:** Deep insights into the self, using the values clarification exercise, reflection prompts, creative visualization exercises. This will help the women leader to gain insight into their respective strengths, weaknesses, values and aspirations. These would ensure that a new identity and developmental needs are created for each women leader.

Dependent Variable: These are outcomes or changes which would influence or reflect the impact of the independent variables.

1. **Leadership Presence:** This variable can be measured in the long run using the 360degree feedback which is a common appraisal tool used by Human Resource. It will inform the women leaders about their perceived confidence and influence in their roles. The coaching and mentoring process will help them improve their executive presence and their ability to command attention and respect.

TOOLS EMPLOYED FOR DATA COLLECTION

SAMPLE CRITERIA

Included Sample: The Women Leaders who are participating in the study are part of a software company, belonging to mid-management level. They have been nominated by the company's Human Resource Department as part of succession planning program in the organization.

Excluded Sample: The women who have just joined in the organization, or at a junior level have not been made as part of the study.

The discretion of selection and choice of the participants rests with the organization, and they have complete ownership of it.

Secondary Data sample obtained from the 360-degree feedback or DISC assessment, which is a component of the performance management process whereby evaluations of employee performance are collected from supervisors, subordinates, peers, and customers. This feedback can be used for employee performance appraisal and development.

Sampling Techniques

Purposeful Sampling: Also known as judgment or selective sampling, this method involves selecting participants who possess specific characteristics relevant to the coaching objectives. For women's leadership coaching, participants may be chosen based on their leadership potential, level of experience, or specific developmental needs.

Intervention Strategies

- Self-awareness through VIA strengths assessment tool.
- PERMA and Optimism assessment tools
- Skill-development, mentorship workshop
- Creating awareness about Leadership & executive presence and Gender bias
- SMART Goal setting and creating tailor-made action plan, using world café model

Data Analysis

Looking at the robustness of the project to bring about behavioral changes, the possible approaches towards data analysis would be **Qualitative Analysis** using Kirkpatrick's model to measure effectiveness at 3 levels, them being Reaction, Learning and Behaviour. This would be further addressed in details with the following:

Thematic Analysis: This will help to identify the themes, patterns and their underlying interpretations with respect to their meanings.

Grounded Theory Approach: This will use inductive approach for explanations towards the data itself, which will lead to generation of new insights in the coaching process itself.

Behavioural Indicators:

This is the report which is collected by managers of the 15-participant each at 30-90-180 days on the 10 Behaviour Indicators that are elaborately discussed below. Seven of these were tied to Skillset development whereas the rest were based on Mindset Development. The managers keep on reviewing their employees against these BIs, during initiation, 30 days, 90 days and 180 days period.

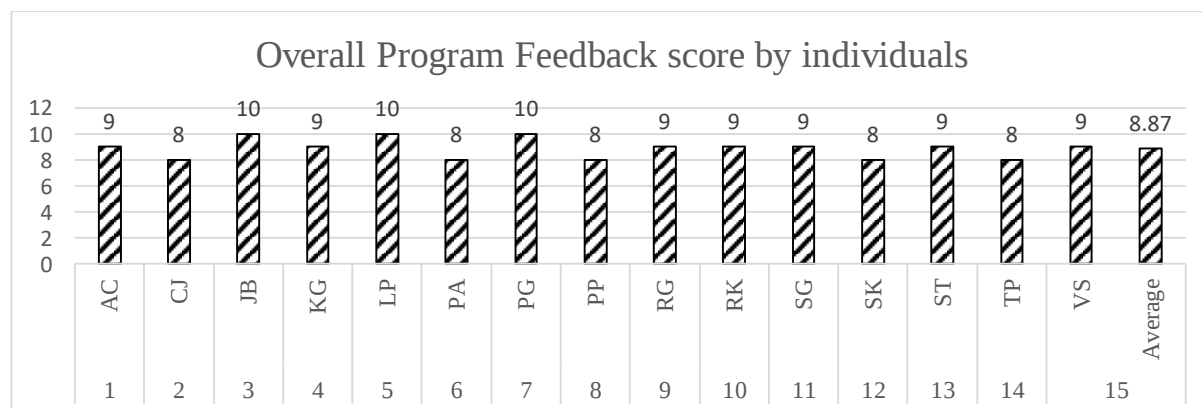
Here are the behavioural indicators (BIs) for each of the mentioned competencies, using action verbs from Bloom's Taxonomy used for the evaluation of Behaviour assessment of the participants:

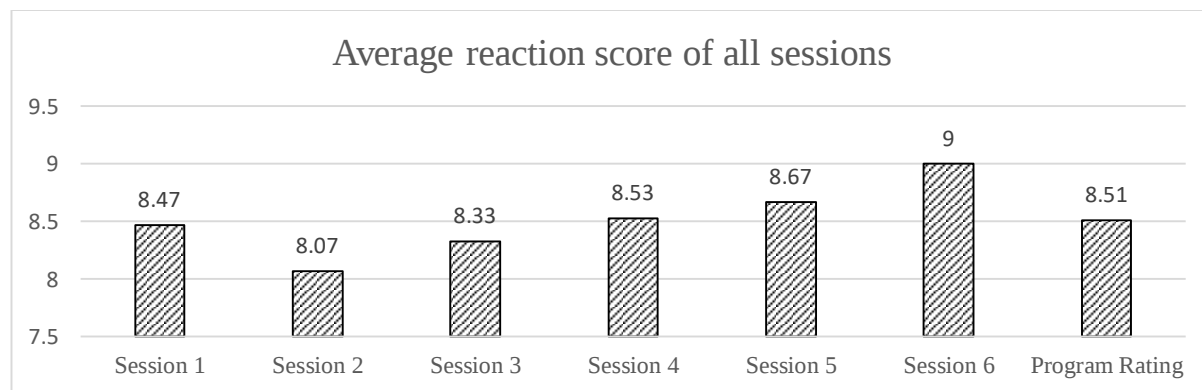
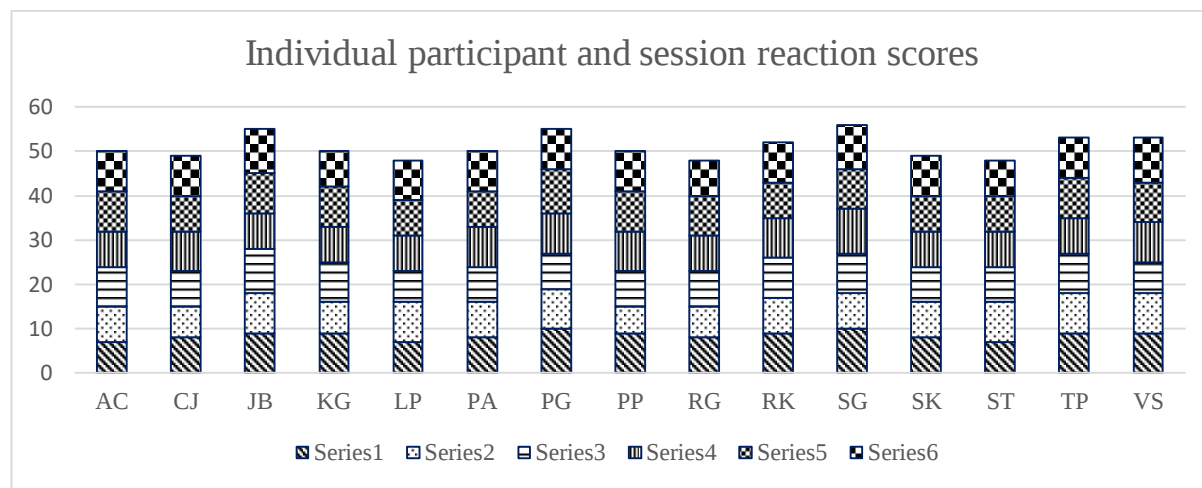
These BIs have been categorised into Skillsets (S) and Mindset (M)

1. **Listening Skills:** *Interprets* information accurately by paraphrasing the speaker's message to confirm understanding. (S)
2. **Questioning Skills:** *Formulates* probing questions to gather deeper insights and clarify information. (S)
3. **Feedback Skills:** *Evaluates* performance by providing clear, constructive feedback that promotes improvement. (S)
4. **Assertiveness Skills:** *Expresses* opinions or needs confidently while respecting others' viewpoints. (S)
5. **Influencing Skills:** *Persuades* stakeholders by articulating compelling arguments to gain support or cooperation. (S)
6. **Executive Presence:** *Demonstrates* confidence and poise by maintaining composure in high-pressure situations. (S)
7. **Negotiation Skills:** *Synthesizes* different perspectives to propose mutually beneficial solutions. (S)
8. **Guilt Trap:** *Recognizes* attempts at emotional manipulation and *responds* calmly with healthy boundaries. (M)
9. **Imposter Syndrome:** *Identifies* irrational self-doubt and *challenges* it by acknowledging personal achievements. (M)
10. **Unconscious Bias:** *Assesses* personal assumptions and *modifies* behaviour to ensure fair treatment of others. (M)

RESULTS & DISCUSSIONS:

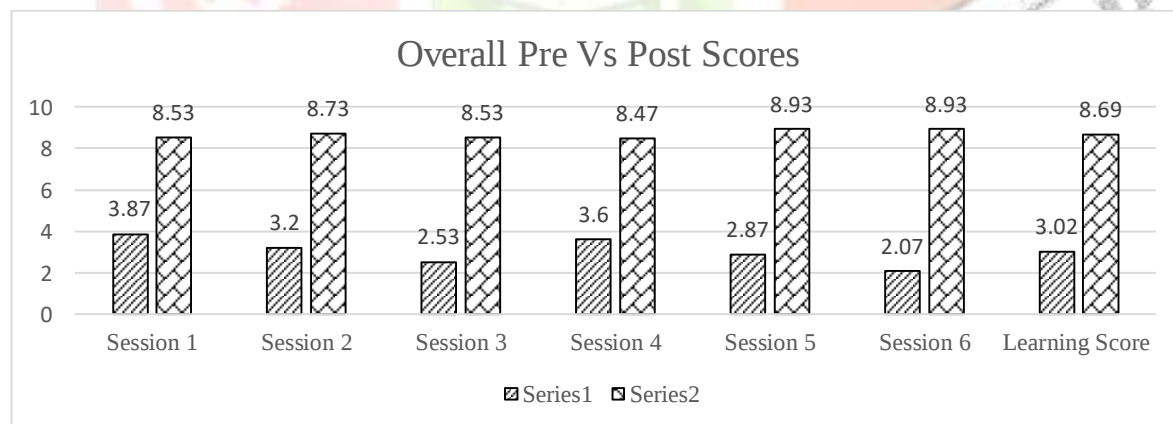
Reaction:





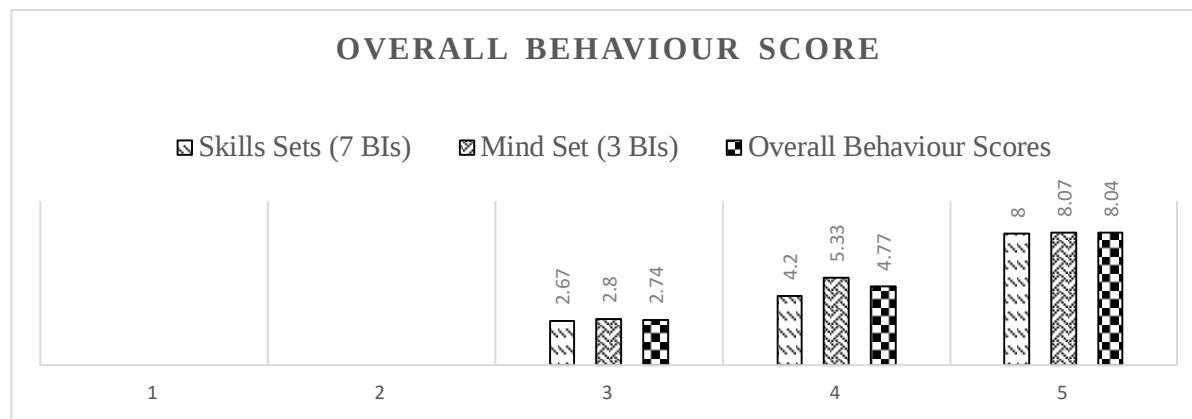
Surveys were used to assess the satisfaction of individuals with the program at the **Reaction stage**. Participant involvement and endorsement of the content, delivery and framework of the program are very high as shown by the average rating of 8.66 out of 10. Therefore, this program was appreciated and met the participant's anticipation as a vital starting point with regard to program success.

Learning:



The **degree of learning** increased after program completion as indicated in the pre vs. post scores post every session, this showed that there were changes in the perceptions, abilities and attitudes of the people taking part in the program. The scores are indicative that respondents now know more about leadership ideas like Strengths, weaknesses, Opportunities and Threats (SWOTs), negotiation skills together with strategies that aim at dealing with phony feeling inferiority complex and hidden preference against either gender. From this statement, it is evident that the participants have gained more insight on better management skills.

Behaviour:



At the **Behavior level**, the program's long-term impact on participants' actual leadership behaviors was tracked over a 90-day period. The results show a progressive improvement in behavior scores, with participants scoring **2.67 at skillset** and **2.80 at mindset** out of 10 at **30 days**, **4.07 at skillset** and **5.33 at mindset** out of 10 at **90 days**, and **8 for skillset** and **8.07 for mindset** out of 10 at **180 days**. This consistent increase implies that respondents used what they gained in class about real world leadership, hence the course helps in influencing practical leadership behaviours eventually. All these were connected to the Behaviour Indicators which were detailed earlier on in this chapter. Seven indicators associated with skillset development whereas three others associated with mindset development were linked with the 10 Indicators. Thus, effectiveness is determined in relation to skillset versus mindset.

Our analysis suggests that the programming was effective in promoting positive reactions, learning gains, and incremental behavioral change, which means that there is a lot of potential for long-term improvement in the leadership of women in our organization.

THEMATIC ANALYSIS:

An assessment of participants JB, PG, and SG reveals consistent high performance throughout their coaching programs, particularly in Reaction, Learning, and Behaviour areas—indicating strong potential for organizational leadership. JB and PG scored a perfect 10 in Reaction, with SG at 9, highlighting high engagement and satisfaction with the program. In Learning, SG led with a 9.5, followed by PG (9.17) and JB (9), reflecting solid knowledge in areas such as VIA strengths, imposter syndrome, and negotiation skills. In Behavior, JB and SG scored 10, with PG close at 9, showing effective application of skills in professional settings. While their general performance marks them as promising leaders, their status as High-Potential (Hi-Po) candidates will depend on their workplace performance under pressure, risk-taking ability, resilience, ambition, and willingness to embrace challenging assignments, which will demonstrate their readiness to lead.

IMPLICATIONS:

The study highlights several key implications for building a robust pipeline of women leaders. Targeted coaching and mentoring programs will strengthen the leadership pipeline, aligning with management's vision for diversity and addressing gender gaps at senior levels. Enhanced leadership competencies are achieved by developing strengths through VIA profiles, negotiation skills, and strategies for overcoming imposter syndrome, fostering confidence and resilience in women leaders. Unconscious bias training empowers participants to identify and address biases, promoting gender parity and advancement opportunities for women. Increased engagement and retention are achieved by offering growth opportunities, making women more likely to stay within organizations. The program's design encourages a positive shift in organizational culture, as empowered female leaders act as role models, promoting inclusivity and harmonious workplace relations. Strategic succession planning integrates women into future leadership roles, creating diverse management teams. Finally, the program's success suggests its applicability across sectors, as organizations seek balanced gender representation at all management levels.

ETHICAL CONSIDERATIONS:

This program focused on guiding women leaders to optimally use positive psychology principles and hence, placed careful attention to ethics, focusing on fairness, privacy, and respect for diversity. Fairness and equity ensured that leadership development is made accessible to women from all backgrounds, with genuine growth rather than just representation. Confidentiality is also vital, as coaching involves sharing sensitive information; therefore, maintaining trust through privacy and informed consent is essential. As a Coach, culturally sensitive, recognizing varied leadership styles without imposing a universal standard were areas of prime focus. Additionally, coaching empowered women to embrace their authentic selves, respecting their personal leadership aspirations rather than pushing them toward predefined norms. Addressing bias ethically involved raising awareness without assigning blame, recognizing systemic barriers while helping women navigate them. Finally, psychological safety was prioritized to prevent harm, respecting participants' vulnerabilities and fostering a supportive environment that encourages growth without risking emotional distress.

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