

Female CCO Beliefs on Leadership Traits of CCOs

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Abstract

This study uses an in-depth interview methodology and leadership theory, specifically transactional and transformational leadership, to explore the traits female CCOs believe are updated, typical leadership traits of CCOs. This study found these women believe CCOs should adopt traits of both transactional (managerial) and transformational (relationship-building) leadership. These women further describe the specific leadership traits that are best suitable for CCOs to assist in their interactions more effectively with employees, participation at the c-suite table, and adaptability to changes in the profession.

Keywords: leadership theory, transactional leadership, transformational leadership, Chief Communication Officers (CCOs), women in leadership, public relations

Introduction

Leadership is conceptualized as “a characteristic ability of extraordinary individuals” (McCleskey, 2014). Leaders, especially those among the c-suite, can influence others in terms of their performance, values, and motivation (Uma & Wood, 2006), which further influence the work engagement, trust, and job satisfaction of organizational members (Meng & Berger, 2019). Therefore, it takes an individual who is aware of their abilities as a leader as well as the professional needs of others around them to effectively influence organizational performance.

There are times or situations when organizations struggle with the need for effective leadership but lack it, resulting in a leadership vacuum. A leadership vacuum occurs when a leader is not aware or does not recognize the leadership needs of employees (Chopra, 2010). This scenario leads to unnecessary stress, a lack of motivation, and little to no trust in leadership. To avoid this vacuum, a leader must be aware of employee and organizational needs to properly address them and effectively lead.

In public relations (PR), there is a specific set of leadership attributes that differentiate communication leaders from other corporate leaders, such as providing a compelling vision, actively being involved in strategic decision-making processes, and possessing strategic communication knowledge to enhance trust (Berger & Meng, 2010; Meng et al., 2019). This set of leadership attributes can help a PR leader be more aware of employee needs and enact effective leadership practices to avoid a vacuum. For example, PR leaders, more specifically Chief Communication Officers (CCOs), must be able to balance ethical and effective leadership, stay updated with trends in the field, and exercise critical thinking, self-motivation, empathy, and relationship building skills to practice effective leadership (Aldoory & Toth, 2004; Jacques, 2015). This practice, additionally, helps to improve work engagement, as stated in the *Leadership Report Card* by the Plank Center for Leadership in Public Relations (Meng, Berger, Heyman, & Reber, 2019).

More specifically, the most common leadership styles to incorporate into PR leadership (or CCO leadership) is transactional and transformational leadership. Transactional leadership resembles a more autocratic, task-oriented approach (Bass, 1991); whereas, transformational leadership resembles a more democratic, relationship-building approach (Bass, 1991). Furthermore, female leaders in PR have been known to combine traits of transactional (decision-making) and transformational (empathy) leadership to be more effective in the profession (Aldoory et al., 2004; Aldoory 1998; Eagly, et al. 2003; Grunig, 1992). It is worth noting that few updates have been added to this literature; therefore, this study seeks to fill this gap.

Research in leadership styles of CCOs has been limited, especially regarding the women serving in the position, since they are seen as the minority at the executive table (Place & Vardeman-Winter, 2018). Through exploring the leadership and challenges of CCOs, beneficial insight into the roles of these leaders can be provided. However, research into this area of leadership must first explore the typical traits of CCOs to determine how CCOs are matching up to these expectations. This study explores this idea from the perspective of the women in CCO positions to further learn more about this leadership from their point of view. Also, to further narrow the focus of this study, the term “leader” refers to the c-suite level.

Literature Review

Leadership

Leadership greatly influences the performance of organizations. For instance, Hackman and Johnson (2013) as well as Katz and Kahn (1966) suggest the positive or negative performance of leaders impacts an organization's reputation and engagement of employees. As for the engagement of employees, when leaders lack the ability to recognize the leadership needs of their employees, it can result in the occurrence of a leadership vacuum. To avoid this vacuum, scholars (House, Hanges, Javidan, Dorfman, & Gupta, 2004; Michener, DeLamater, & Schwartz, 1990; Uma et al., 2006) suggest leaders must promote positivity and express shared visions with their employees. To do this, leaders must be aware of their behaviors and foster a positive work environment.

For this reason, an effective leader must adapt to work culture. For example, Campbell (2015) suggests leaders must be able to adapt their behaviors to environments before interacting with others to properly think like a leader and address employee needs. In some cases, the work culture is the problem. With this situation, an effective leader must work towards creating a moral culture to improve organizational performance. For instance, Place (2019) suggests a more engaging moral culture can be fostered by a leader who applies moral values to a workplace. Additionally, Quinn, Hildebrandt, Rogers, and Thompson (1991) suggests a more engaging culture can be developed by a leader who is aware of traditional organizational values. These values include consolidating internal organizational processes, maximizing organizational output, adapting the organization to change, and building organizational commitment and trust. All these values help a leader become more integrated in the work culture and distinguish an effective leader from a non-effective leader.

As for PR leaders, scholars (Berger & Meng, 2014; Meng et al., 2019) suggest traits and dimensions of excellent PR leaders help distinguish them from other leaders. Berger et al. (2014) and Meng et al. (2019) indicate these traits include self-dynamics, team collaboration, ethical orientation, relationship-building skills, strategic decision-making capability, communication knowledge and expertise, a compelling vision, and awareness of organizational culture. The incorporation of these traits in leadership help to foster a trusting relationship between these leaders and other organizational members. One way to work towards developing these traits is to practice appropriate leadership styles.

Leadership Styles

Bass (1991) and O'Shea, Foti, Hauenstein, and Bycio (2009) suggest there are two most common leadership styles that can yield to beneficial outcomes and leadership effectiveness: transactional and transformational. These two leadership styles also remain two of the most popular among executive leaders in PR, which is why they were chosen for this study (Keisenbauer & Zerfass, 2015; Place et al., 2018). Transactional leadership is representative of a managerial style, and transformational leadership is more focused on relationship-building. Both styles can be practiced individually. Ideally, the combination of these two styles represents effective leadership; however, it is extremely difficult to accomplish and requires much practice by the leader.

Transactional Leadership

The first of these two common leadership styles is transactional leadership. Pieterse, Van Knippenberg, Schippers, and Stam (2010) suggest a leader who adopts transactional leadership is defined as one who clearly indicates what is expected of employees. These transactional leaders do this by being more focused on task completion and adopting other behaviors such as responsiveness, working within the organizational culture, appealing to self-interest of followers, using rewards and punishments (Hussain-Haider & Riaz, 2010; Lai, 2011), and leading through management-by-exception (active or passive) (Avolio & Bass, 2004; Odumeru & Ogbonna, 2013). Leaders who practice management-by-exception only get involved when employees report specific issues directly to them, which ties to the autonomy needs of employees by allowing the employees to work independently. All these behaviors sum up the transactional style.

Also, transactional leaders focus on the autonomy needs of employees. Scholars (Campbell, White, & Johnson, 2003; Goffman, 1967) have suggested providing autonomy to employees shows that a leader trusts and acknowledges the employees' right to individual freedom in making and implementing their own decisions. Restricting this autonomy may lead employees to act in rebellious ways. For example, when a leader does not give the employee sufficient support to responsibly complete a task on time, the employee may act out by refusing to complete the task. This action can damage the trusting relationship between a leader and employees, which is vital to organizational performance. It has been observed male and female transactional leaders exhibit these behaviors.

Gender. In terms of gender, transactional leadership has been associated with more male leaders. For this reason, Bruckmuller, Ryan, Rink, and Haslam (2014) and Eagly and Johannesen-Schmidt (2001) suggest the assertiveness and autocratic nature of male leaders has led to the development of a "think management-think male" phenomenon, which is attributed to Schein's (1973, 2001) observation of sex-role stereotypes and psychological barriers that exist among top executive levels. More recently, however, Martin (2015) found no differences between male and female leaders who use transactional leadership and suggests that the more years leaders serve in administration that the more likely they are to use transactional leadership. Additionally, this style typically includes transformational behaviors, suggesting it is not a standalone type of leadership (Bono, Hooper, & Yoon, 2012). This idea has led to the understanding of transformational leadership.

Transformational Leadership

The other more common leadership style is transformational leadership. Burns (1978) defines transformational leadership as a process where leaders and followers assist each other in moving towards an increase in morale and motivation. For instance, scholars (Antonakis, Avolio, & Sivasubramaniam, 2003; Odumeru et al., 2013) suggest transformational leaders do this by adopting a more proactive leadership style, such as setting goals, anticipating next steps, and fostering trusting relationships. To build trust, Martin (2015) suggests these leaders put the interests of their employees first. Alimo-Metcalfe (2010) and Place (2012) also indicate that transformational leaders, like transactional leaders, provide autonomy to their employees to further build trust, reflecting an overlap between these two leadership styles. For this reason, this study interpreted autonomy needs as a combined transactional-transformational leadership behavior. Other beneficial attributes of transformational leadership that help to foster trust include working to change organizational culture by implementing new ideas, achieving

objectives through ideals and morals, and motivating followers (Antonakis et al., 2003; Odumeru et al., 2013). All these qualities sum up the essence of transformational leadership.

Transformational leaders also incorporate four main practices. Antonakis et al. (2003) and Odumeru et al. (2013) suggest these four main practices include the following: inspirational motivation (leader represents shared vision of organization), idealized influence (leader is socially charismatic and demonstrates a sense of mission), individualized consideration (leader expresses support for every individual), and intellectual stimulation (leader encourages employees to be creative and innovative ideas to solve problems). The combination of these four practices summarize how transformational leaders work to build a positive future by creating emotional ties with their employees, acting on shared values, and considering individual strengths for better problem solving. The combination of these practices are also an example of a leader's ability to properly wield power. Berger et al. (2014) suggests this ability to wield an appropriate amount of power and adapt to situational variables are seen as desirable traits of transformational leaders. This ability has also been found in female transformational leaders.

Gender. In terms of gender, transformational leadership has been associated with more female leaders due to their democratic and participative nature (Appelbaum, Audet, & Miller, 2003; Eagly et al., 1990; Martin, 2015). Female leaders are found to have more transformational traits such as good listening skills, empathy, negotiation, and conflict resolution (Appelbaum et al., 2003; Martin, 2015). Aldoory and Toth (2004), suggest there is a stronger preference for transformational leadership in PR, which has been noted to be because of the existence of more women in the field (Aldoory & Toth, 2021). From this idea, it is beneficial to further explore the challenges and responsibilities of women in senior leadership roles.

Chief Communication Officers (CCOs)

As mentioned above, effective leaders have a set of qualities which set them apart from other leaders, and the same is said for CCOs. Berger et al. (2010; 2014) and Meng, Gower, and Heyman (2012) suggest CCOs are set apart from other corporate leaders based on their responsibilities and traits. These unique qualities include holding a compelling vision for communication, possessing comprehensive understanding of media systems, and developing and implementing strategic communication plans (Meng et al., 2012). In addition to these qualities, CCOs must also have a specific mindset.

In a survey conducted on Fortune 500 companies in the United States, 67% of CCOs “recognize they must have a strategic and forward-thinking mindset to effectively perform the duties required of the position” (Marshall, Fowler, & Olson, 2015). Marshall et al. (2015) suggests this mindset helps CCOs to better recognize the globalization of stakeholders, social media development, and technological advances in the industry. Additionally, Jacques (2015) and Kiesenbauer and Zerfass (2015) suggests this mindset helps CCOs analyze situations from different angles, stay current on trends, and craft effective messages.

In addition to a specific mindset, the Arthur W. Page Society emphasizes CCOs are embracing three key roles: foundational, integrator, and builder of digital engagement systems. In other words, CCOs serve as strategic business counselors, help other leaders activate corporate character to engage stakeholders, and leverage data to understand stakeholders as individuals (Arthur W. Page Society, 2016). More recently, in 2019, the Arthur W. Page Society released a report that provides evidence that CCOs are also acting as pacesetters in addition to the other key roles. As a pacesetter, CCOs help Chief Executive Officers (CEOs) transform their companies by continuing to build reputation and trust.

Furthermore, there has been a noticeable increase of women in CCO positions. For example, in a 2019 Zippia report, 40.63% of CCO positions in the U.S. were held by women, which is up from 36.25% in 2018. From this knowledge, it may prove beneficial to focus on gaining information about female CCOs to see what they believe are expected leadership traits of CCOs and if it reflects the literature, since the literature suggests expected leadership traits of CCOs are typically associated with women (Aldoory & Toth, 2004; Jacques, 2015) but are gaining popularity with male leaders (Place et al., 2018). Therefore, explorations should be conducted to learn more about the leadership qualities these women believe CCOs should exhibit to better explore the qualities of female CCOs and if they are meeting expectations. Based on this literature, the following research question is proposed:

RQ: What leadership qualities do female CCOs believe are typical of CCOs?

Methodology

The review of literature revealed the limited research that has been conducted on CCOs; furthermore, few studies focus solely on the women in this position. Therefore, the purpose of this study is to fill this gap in the literature by conducting an exploration into the leadership qualities that female CCOs believe are typical of CCOs. Since the research question lends itself to a more qualitative method, interviews with 15 female CCOs were conducted to allow for a deeper examination. This method allows for the discovery of nuances that may be undetectable via other methods (Curry, Nembhard, & Bradley, 2009) as well as uncover beliefs, values, and motivations (Crabtree & Miller, 1999).

Participants

There were a total of 15 women interviewed for this study. These women are currently holding a CCO position or had previously held this position within the past five years. For this study, a CCO was defined as an individual who acts as the head of communications and oversees PR and public affairs of an organization, as described by the Arthur W. Page Society. Each participant has been a part of their affiliated organization's c-suite and oversaw at least 30 staff members in the organization.

Participants were collected through snowball sampling, starting with the researcher's academic network. This was done to assist in rapport between the researcher and participant. Some participants also provided names of any contacts that may be willing to participate. If those women were willing to participate, they were also included in the sample. To offset potential skewing of the results, responses were not shared with other participants, and the researcher did not reveal which participants accepted to participate in the interviews. The size of this sample did allow for a cross-sectional analysis, since the women represented corporations, agencies, nonprofits, and universities. The participants also ranged in years as an acting CCO from one to 15 years, with years of experience in PR ranging from 10 to 40 years. All participants were given pseudonyms for the purpose of this study.

Research Design

The overall design of this study stems from phenomenological research, which focuses on participant experience (Creswell, 2013; Englander, 2012; Lester, 1999). For this reason, in-depth interviews were conducted. The goal of these interviews was to gain a deeper understanding of this study's topic from the participant's point of view (Patton, 1990) and to allow for effective conversations (Lofland & Lofland, 1971). Interview questions stemmed from

the review of literature in leadership, corporate culture, and expectations for CCOs. To better reflect trends in the field, some of the leadership-focused questions included prompts for transactional and transformational leadership, since these styles remain two of the most popular among CCOs, as suggested by scholars (Keisenbauer et al., 2015; Place et al., 2018).

The interviews lasted between 60 to 90 minutes in length and were semi-structured in nature to allow for guided discussion and clarifications. An interview guide was used to help make certain all topics were covered. All interview questions were open-ended to allow for participants to share as much information as they desired and for the researcher to ask any follow-up questions when needed, as suggested by McCracken (1988) and Turner III (2010) for better preparation of long interviews. Gall, Gall, and Borg (2003) also suggests this design helps reduce the potential for researcher bias.

The interview questions were carefully worded to allow participants to answer on their own terms and were written as neutral as possible to avoid bias. The questions also received approval by the Institutional Review Board (IRB). After IRB approval, participants were contacted via email and asked to complete a consent form, which informed the participants of their individual rights and purpose of this study as well as reminded them that participation is voluntary. Upon receiving consent of the participants, interviews were scheduled.

Interviews were conducted via Skype and recorded using a digital audio recorder. Participants were sent a list of the interview questions ahead of time to allow them an opportunity to contemplate their answers and inform the researcher about any concerns. At the beginning of each interview, participants were reminded of their rights, confidentiality, and voluntary participation. During the interviews, participants were asked relevant questions to this study. Field notes were also taken during the interview for transcription and data analysis.

Data Analysis

The interviews were transcribed verbatim by hand. After transcription, systematic procedures were followed. Horizontalization was conducted, where any significant statements were clustered together into specific themes (Creswell, 2007; Moustakas, 1994; Turner III, 2010). Each theme was assigned a particular code to assist with data interpretation. Once themes were identified, information was further analyzed into broader, or meaning, units to develop detailed textual and structural descriptions, which summarized participant experiences within their work environments.

Findings

The purpose of this study was to explore the leadership qualities that female CCOs believe are typical of CCOs. These women indicate the typical leadership traits of CCOs should be general aspects of good leadership, regardless of work environment or industry. Furthermore, these women indicate traits they believe are unique to CCOs based on the demands of the profession. These traits consisted of both transactional and transformational leadership as well as traits that do not solely fit into these two styles. The female CCOs believe all these traits are important to help CCOs adjust to changes in their role and the profession. These findings are represented in *Table 1*.

Table 1

Typical leadership qualities of CCOs

Leadership Qualities Female CCOs Believe are Typical of CCOs			
Themes	Leadership style	Subthemes	Descriptions
Typical traits of good leadership	Combination of transactional and transformational		Leads with head and heart.
	Transformational	Empowerment	Motivates and inspires through a clear vision. Provides guidance.
		Empathy	Puts employees first. Treats others with a velvet glove.
Changes to the CCO role			Executorial to strategic. Conscience of the company. More all-encompassing.
Typical traits of CCOs	Transactional	Good business acumen	Helps with c-suite involvement.
		Reactive	Must be able to quickly respond during crises.
		Intellectual agility	Understand information quickly. Put up a mirror.
	Transformational	Collaboration	Connects everything together.
		Relationship building	Builds trust with stakeholders, employees, and c-suite members.
		Good listening skills	Helps with understanding and solving problems.
		Proactive	Have an action plan.
Combination of transactional and transformational	Task-oriented and empathetic	<i>Task-oriented</i> : manages projects and output. <i>Empathetic</i> : has emotional intelligence and can understand perspectives.	

	Other	Constant learner	Improves intellectual agility and comfort with management.
		Authenticity	Promotes honesty and has integrity.
		Storyteller	Provide the story around the facts.
		Curiosity	Ask questions. Improves mental agility and strategic ability.

All themes and subthemes are equally weighted and represent the majority. Additionally, these traits represent those the participants believe are typical of leaders and CCOs regardless of work environment or professional sector.

Typical Traits of Good Leadership

The female CCOs believe it was beneficial to discuss the traits of good leaders before discussing leadership traits of CCOs, since it is important to practice traits of good leadership before a person can be a good CCO. These women have learned about good leadership from former mentors and fellow leaders they respect. The women describe good leadership is a combination of transactional (managerial) and transformational (relationship-focused) leadership traits.

Combination of Transactional and Transformational Leadership

The consensus of these female CCOs is that a good leader is one who can be both strategic and personable. One participant, Susan (three years as CCO), described this approach as “leading with the head and the heart.” The phrase “leading with the head” resembles transactional leadership, or strategic and tactical skills such as good listening, self-awareness, and decisiveness. The phrase “leading with the heart” resembles transformational leadership, or emotional intelligence, to better manage the emotions of others, stay open to ideas, seek professional feedback, and be collaborative.

Transformational Leadership

Many of the women further stressed the value of transformational leadership to be a good leader. For example, the women believe empowerment and empathy are two transformational traits that are crucial for good leadership.

The women believe being an empowering leader to followers helps with team motivation. For instance, one participant, Ashley (three years as CCO), explained “People who are really great leaders set the direction so everyone knows where the North Star is and knows where they are headed . . . then they can empower others enough to get the work done and get it done well.”

As for embracing an empathetic approach, the women believe this trait assists in relationship-building with followers. For example, participant Jessica (15 years as CCO) indicates that being empathetic is to “truly care about . . . employees need[s] and consider them [your] first audience.” But, an individual must be able to first balance an appropriate amount of empathy to be considered a good leader.

Changes to the CCO Role

The female CCOs believe staying current on changes to the CCO role helps them adapt their leadership. These women indicate the role of a CCO has drastically changed within the past few years because of the increasing complexity and faster pace of the profession. These women explain CCOs have moved from being an executional role to a more strategic one. CCOs are no longer considered “firefighters” who resolve crises (Elizabeth, two years as CCO). Now, a CCO is “more important, more critical, and more all-encompassing” (Jessica, 15 years as CCO). This role is a “two-way street with the goal being an active dialogue among all audiences . . . and the need to communicate and the potential for an issue to occur can happen at any time” (Olivia, six years as CCO).

As a result of the demands of the role, the women explain CCOs continue to be thought of as the “conscience of the company” (Ashley, three years as CCO), reaffirming the notion that PR officers are the corporate conscience (Ryan & Martinson, 1983). Therefore, these leaders must be “forward-thinkers . . . to consider reputation implications . . . and the social implications and emotions that come along with decisions” (Ashley, three years as CCO). Another participant, Anne (two years as CCO), further indicates as CCO “you are often the lone voice in the wilderness because you are the person who interprets the outside world for the inside of the organization.” So, a CCO must be able to strategically interpret various perspectives to make decisions and be able to clearly communicate a vision to others.

Typical Traits of CCOs

The female CCOs also describe the typical traits they believe CCOs should exhibit because of how they are influenced by the changes to the CCO role and what they believe are typical traits of good leaders. Additionally, these women suggest, that while all the traits mentioned below in this section are foundational of CCOs, the traits of a CCO can change over time and be redefined based on the industry sector this leader works in. For example, the women explained that a CCO of a nonprofit will become more mission-driven, whereas a CCO of a technology company may become more data-driven. This is a result of how the CCO must adapt to the environment needs of their associated organization. Overall, the women believe CCOs should exhibit traits associated with transactional and transformational leadership. The women also indicated other leadership traits not necessarily associated with either two styles as desirable traits of CCOs.

Transactional Leadership Traits

The women believe CCOs should exhibit transactional traits such as a good business acumen, reactivity, and intellectual agility.

Good business acumen. A good business acumen helps a CCO “think beyond communication and also be a businessperson . . . since CCOs are now more connected across the business than any other member of the c-suite team” (Elaine, eight years as CCO). Having a good business acumen also helps a CCO understand the tactics with marketing, business, and finance to better “match the intellect, business acumen, emotional intelligence, and business ability [of other c-suite members]” (Susan, three years as CCO).

Reactive. Since many of the women believe reputation management is still one of the larger parts of the CCO role, they emphasize a typical CCO should know how to react well in crisis. Organizations are under constant scrutiny in the media, especially social media, so CCOs must know how to act quickly and strategically during difficult situations since employees and other leaders look to them to know how to react.

Intellectual agility. As for intellectual agility, the women believe it is important for a CCO to understand huge amounts of information, “put up a mirror” to determine consequences (Elaine, eight years as CCO), and be a broader thinker. One participant, Elaine (eight years as CCO), emphasized “you have to be quick on your toes, take it all in, synthesize it, assess what is important, and ask how you move forward . . . [so] having intellectual agility is taking in all kinds of information and understanding what is important for your organization.” These actions and decisions influence an organization’s reputation.

Transformational Leadership Traits

In addition to transactional traits, these women believe CCOs should also resemble transformational traits such as collaboration, relationship building, good listening skills, and proactiveness.

Collaboration. For collaboration, one participant, Jillian (seven years as CCO), emphasized CCO should stand for “Chief Collaboration Officer” since a CCO is “the glue that holds everyone together . . . and the one role that sees it all.” The ability to be a good collaborator will continue to be important for a CCO due to the profession’s “complexity of telling stories” and CCOs are the storytellers of an organization (Jillian, seven years as CCO).

Relationship builder. It is vital for a CCO to be a good relationship builder. For instance, a CCO must constantly maintain relationships to continue to build trust with stakeholders, c-suite members, and employees. These women emphasize CCOs must act as the voice of stakeholders when they are not in the room to give those individuals a seat at the table. As for interactions with employees, the women emphasized the importance of team bonding. For example, one participant, Elaine (eight years as CCO), explained that, at the beginning of every year, each team member, including herself, must pick a song that best describes themselves to add a personal touch to their self-introductions as well as provide greater interaction for discussion. A portion of the song is played for everyone at their first boardroom meeting of the fiscal year to provide a more personal introduction of each person.

Good listening skills. Additionally, having good listening skills assists in the ability to collaborate and maintain relationships. One participant, Mary (two years as CCO), indicated “listening should be for the purpose of understanding . . . because you have to know what is going on with your staff, how they are feeling, and what they need, because, if you don’t listen to them, then it really affects their work.”

Proactive. Many of the participants also believe being proactive is essential of a CCO. CCOs should think ahead and have a strategy prepared to better handle difficult criticisms. For example, a participant, Mary (two years as CCO), argued, “You must be a forward thinker, reflect upon the impact of organizational decisions, and put a mirror up. You have to be comfortable with anticipating the impact of decisions and . . . go ahead and have plans set in place to handle different situations.” This practice helps a CCO to act more strategically and urgently in time sensitive scenarios.

Combination of Transactional and Transformational Traits

The women believe a CCO should be both task-oriented and empathetic, combining transactional and transformational leadership. A CCO must be able to be “task-oriented enough to manage a project and move [their] way through a logical fashion and then combine it with an ability to apply more soft skills and emotional intelligence to that work” (Susan, three years as CCO).

These two traits should be well-balanced. For example, one participant, Anne (two years as CCO), explained “task-oriented means you just have to get stuff done . . . and output is essential . . . whereas empathy is putting yourself in somebody else’s shoes . . . and how you approach [the situation].” Empathy is viewed as the “piece of the puzzle . . . to help bring the perspectives of the people that are not in the room” (Melanie, four years as CCO).

However, a CCO cannot be too empathetic because it could be “paralyzing” to the organization (Anne, two years as CCO). For example, one participant, Anne (two years as CCO), described a scenario where a CCO has a person on a team who is not performing. She indicated there could possibly be something else going on in their life, so she is empathetic to it; however, it does not cause her to not have a conversation about it with the individual. She will ask the person how she can help them to be open and better understand how the team can get work done.

Other Leadership Traits

While most of the traits these women believe are typical of CCOs are categorized as transactional or transformational, they also describe valuable traits that do not necessarily fit into these two styles, such as being a constant learner, having authenticity, being a good storyteller, and having curiosity.

Constant learner. The women believe a CCO should always be learning because of the ever-changing field of communication. One participant, Anne (two years as CCO), explained, “If you are not a learner, you’re dead. You have to search out what is that latest and greatest tool, and, if you don’t, then you could be left behind.” New techniques or skills can be acquired through reading, observation, or on-the-job experience. The ability to learn also helps with intellectual agility, decision-making, and “security in . . . professionalism” (Anne, two years as CCO). For example, sometimes a CCO is “the big dog . . . [while other days] a CCO is the middle dog . . . so you have to be comfortable with the gray areas” (Anne, two years as CCO).

Authenticity. Female CCOs believe a good CCO is also authentic as a leader, in speech and writing. Authenticity helps build trust and honest relationships, such as with the “relationship between a CCO and a CEO” (Elaine, eight years as CCO). A participant, Elaine (eight years as CCO), further explained, “If we [CCOs] are counseling CEOs, we are not always going to tell them what they want to hear . . . but we tell them what they need to hear.” It is important to be transparent. For instance, a CCO must be able to share “the good, the bad, and the ugly . . . to have honesty and trust” in relationships (Mary, two years as CCO). This behavior helps to build trust and authenticity in storytelling.

Storyteller. Many of the participants believe a CCO should be a good storyteller. Participant Elaine (eight years as CCO) explained, “there is more pressure to be able to tell stories and do it well.” Therefore, there is a greater emphasis on storytelling as “the secret sauce” (Emily, one year as CCO). For this reason, a CCO must be able to understand “the story around the facts that people will care about and get inspired about it” since communication is the profession of messaging (Emily, one year as CCO).

Curiosity. Lastly, many of the women indicate a good CCO is one who is always curious. Curiosity helps improve mental agility and strategic ability, which further assists in a CCO being able to move faster in a strategic way to keep up with the quick pace of the profession. As explained by one participant, Elaine (eight years as CCO), “Curiosity is the ability to always be asking the questions no one else is asking . . . and the best leaders have the passion for what they do, what the organizations do, and the people. It takes a whole lot of energy, and it is an around the clock job.”

Discussion

The purpose of this study is to provide a contemporary exploration of the traits female CCOs believe are typical of CCOs. In previous years, leadership research has observed follower perceptions of leaders. Now, there is a shift in leadership research to observe aspects of leadership that are of interest to the individual leader (Bass, 2008). Therefore, this study sought to continue this trend by exploring the aspects of CCO leadership that are of interest to the CCO leaders themselves, specifically female CCOs since they are still considered the minority at the executive table, as indicated by more recent observations (Place et al., 2018).

In this study, it was found female CCOs believe typical leadership traits of CCOs should represent traits of good leadership, which is a combination of transactional and transformational styles. This type of leadership approach was also viewed as ideal leadership, supporting findings from past literature (O'Shea et al., 2009). Ideal leadership, in this study, is defined as leading with the head and the heart. In other words, an ideal, or good, leader practices a combination of transactional (the head or tactical skills) and transformational (the heart or empathetic nature) leadership. Both descriptions of transactional and transformational leadership support previous literature which suggests transactional leadership is tactical ability and transformational leadership is empathetic or motivational ability (Avolio et al., 2004; Bass et al., 2008; Odumeru et al., 2013; Pieterse et al., 2010).

Good leaders are also those who continue to learn from experience. From this study, the female CCOs did not bring up gender differences when discussing characteristics of good leadership. The qualities of good leadership noted in this study have also been found in other literature as aspects that help improve work engagement, which has been found to be one of the most important leadership aspects in public relations as mentioned in the *Leadership Report Card* by the Plank Center for Leadership in Public Relations (Meng, Berger, Heyman, & Reber, 2019).

Unique to this study were the other traits, which do not necessarily represent transactional or transformational leadership, that the women believe are typical of CCOs, such as being a constant learner, having authenticity, being a good storyteller, and having curiosity. The combination of these traits assist in improving intellectual agility, presenting honesty, and framing stories. The women further insist these other traits are crucial of CCOs due to the evolution of the role, since they believe a CCO is now more strategic, all-encompassing, and acts as the conscience of the company, which mirrors recent findings by the Arthur W. Page Society.

CCOs are not only communicative individuals but must also be smart, savvy businesspersons to fully participate in executive board meetings and act as consultants to other c-suite members. As a response to these changes, the women emphasize having a good business acumen and intellectual agility is vital for c-suite participation, resembling findings from past research (Jacques, 2015; Kiesenbauer et al., 2015). Additionally, regardless of participating at the executive table or with employees, transformational traits such as collaboration and forward-thinking are seen as crucial for CCOs, resembling previous findings (Kiesenbauer et al., 2015; Marshall et al., 2015).

The women believe these traits mentioned in this study differentiate CCOs from other executive leaders. The women insist all CCOs typically start with the same leadership foundation, but the industry sector where the CCO works will redefine their tactical leadership skills over time. For example, a CCO who works in technology will have different tactical skills

from a CCO who works in a nonprofit organization, but a CCO's soft skills remain valuable and get even more refined with practice. From this finding, the tactical leadership abilities of a CCO can be influenced by work environment or the mission statements of an organization, and soft skills continue to be sharpened. More exploration into this area could help give more critical insight into the influence that organization missions have on the leadership of CCOs, since these leaders are the ones who must oversee all sides of an organization. Additionally, research into observing how CCOs interact with other leaders and employees could provide more beneficial insight into how these interactions shape leadership.

Theoretical Implications

Regarding leadership theory, the findings from this study support past and recent observations into leadership traits, especially with transactional and transformational leadership. For instance, female CCOs believe typical CCOs should be both task-oriented (transactional) and focused on relationship-building (transformational) (Bass, 1991).

From this study, it is also suggested PR leaders are working towards resembling ideal leadership, which is a more combined leadership approach (transactional-transformational leadership). This leadership practice is a direct response to the evolving changes to the CCO role and allows the leader to embrace a more well-rounded leadership style to match the all-encompassing responsibility of the position.

This study also provides insights into other traits female CCOs believe are important for PR leadership, such as being a good storyteller and constant learner. While these traits do not necessarily fit into a transactional or transformational leadership category, further research into these traits could explore whether these traits are necessary to help improve transactional or transformational leadership ability or if they are representative of a third leadership style.

Practical Implications

Leadership is crucial to the human condition (Hackman et al., 2013), specifically in PR. Leaders can motivate others through effective performance, relationships, and shared visions (Gentry et al., 2014; Uma et al., 2006). Therefore, female CCOs believe typical CCOs should represent characteristics of good leaders to help avoid a leadership vacuum. From this study, good leadership is viewed as a combination of transactional (managerial) and transformational (relationship-building) leadership traits, and good leaders can adapt their leadership style based on the situation.

For instance, transactional traits help CCOs to meet c-suite expectations. A good business acumen and tactical skill set assists CCOs in better understanding information, managing projects, and responding more quickly and strategically to challenging situations. Other transactional traits such as intellectual agility and task completion further assist in c-suite participation. These findings support descriptions of the strategic advisory role of CCOs as indicated by the Arthur W. Page Society (2016). These findings also highlight how female CCOs are observing the transactional nature of the executive table and believe in embodying it.

As for interactions with employees and fellow co-workers, transformational leadership assists in building trusting relationships with stakeholders, employees, and other executive leaders, which reflects the integrator role of CCOs as described by the Arthur W. Page Society (2016). Transformational traits greatly help CCOs to put their employees first, leading to more effective motivation and better organizational performance.

In any scenario, CCOs are now viewed as consultants to other c-suite members in addition to strategic advisors, integrators, and builders of digital engagement systems (Arthur W.

Page Society, 2016, 2019). This means CCOs need to embrace a leadership tool kit that will help them to adapt to these evolutionary changes more effectively in their role, and female CCOs recognize this need, which is their reasoning for believing a combination of leadership traits from various leadership styles is the new normal for CCO leadership.

Limitations and Future Research

This study provides insight into what female CCOs believe are typical leadership traits of CCOs and fills the gap into explorations of leadership from the leader's point of view as well as the point of view of the minority group (women) in the executive room. While these are positive benefits to this study, there are some limitations to this study.

Although there is great value in in-depth interviews, this study was limited to non-randomly selected interviews of 15 participants, so no generalizations can be made. The sample was limited by the availability of participants due to the design of the interview methodology. Future research should consider allowing more time to interview or survey a greater number of participants to be able to make more accurate generalizations as well as better observe distinctions based on work environment. Therefore, sample sizes should seek to represent an equal number of representatives of agencies, nonprofits, corporations, and universities for better cross-sectional analysis. Future studies could also use sample sizes that include individuals who work in smaller organizations, with less than 30 staff members, to explore the leadership needs and challenges of those environments.

Additionally, this study narrowed its exploration to the leadership traits female CCOs believe are typical of CCOs. More research should be done to explore how female CCOs are evaluating their own leadership based on c-suite expectations, needs of employees, and changes to the profession to see if these women are embodying what they believe are typical traits of CCOs. This notion is especially important for female CCOs of racial or ethnic minorities, which is an area of study that needs greater attention. This research can help to continue to fill the gap in representing the challenges, improvements, and performance of female CCOs, so their voices can be heard.

Reflexivity Statement

As with all qualitative research, the researcher must examine how his or her presence affected the study. This study is limited by the researcher. If someone of a different gender, age, or experience level were to conduct this study, the responses to the interview questions may be different. In this case, the researcher believes her gender and rapport with the participants may have influenced the findings. The rapport with each participant did vary resulting in different amounts of information from the interviews. Also, since this study focuses on the views of women, the gender of the researcher may have influenced the rapport with the participants. Therefore, if a different researcher conducted this study, the results may have been different. While this researcher feels her presence did not present any significant limitations to this study, it is still worth noting.

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