First Bosses’ Primary Early Career Mentor Influence on Women Leaders in the Retail Industry

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This thesis titled
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in the Retail Industry

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Abstract

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First Bosses’ Primary Early Career Mentor Influence on Women Leaders in the Retail Industry

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Women hold the majority of positions in the retail industry; however, they hold proportionally fewer top leadership positions than men. Therefore, it is important to understand the opportunities in leadership development available to women in the retail industry so that appropriate professional development for future female leaders can be offered. The influences of first bosses of women in retail leadership positions and their roles as mentors in the women’s career paths were investigated. Understanding the role that primary early career mentors play in the development of leaders, particularly female leaders, can be valuable to positioning future leaders in career growth and professional development opportunities.

The purpose of this study was to explore the overarching research question: What is the role that primary early career mentors play in the development of female leaders in the retail industry? More specifically, exploratory interviews among a small convenience sample of women who have achieved successful mid-level leadership positions in the retail industry were conducted. The four emergent themes generated from the study were: (a) generally first bosses are seen as mentors, though the role of mentor is not fully defined and not necessarily associated with transactional or transformational leadership,
(b) the first boss, regardless of the leadership trait style, was considered to be an important influence, (c) transformational first bosses, but not transactional first bosses, were emulated, and (d) with respect to emulating first bosses, women most often noted task-oriented qualities.

Additionally, support for the understanding of transactional and transformational leadership styles was evidenced in the interviews; women reported more relationship-oriented influences when describing transformational bosses, and more task-oriented items when describing transactional bosses. No evident differences emerged with respect to execution of the big five personality traits, commonly referred to as OCEAN (openness, conscientiousness, extraversion, agreeableness, and neuroticism), for transformational first bosses as compared to transactional first bosses.

Future areas of research, suggested as a result of these interviews are: (a) further investigation of first boss relationships with new employees based on first boss characteristics, (b) mentor influences throughout career paths, (c) success of mentor programs in the retail industry, and (d) gender and mentoring.
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Chapter 1: Introduction

In 2010 women held 50.1% of jobs in the retail industry (National Retail Federation, 2012), but in 2011 only two Chief Executive Officers (CEOs) out of the top 100 retail companies listed in Stores.org were women. Carol Meyrowitz, CEO of The TJX Companies, Inc., was listed at 24th and Laura Sen, CEO of BJ’s Wholesale Club, was listed as the 31st.

Women hold the majority of retail industry positions, yet proportionally, there are fewer women in the top leadership positions. Therefore, it is important to understand the opportunities (or lack of) in leadership development available to women in the retail industry. Exploring the experiences of successful women in mid-level management positions may lend insight into professional development aimed at women. Mentors and first bosses of women in leadership positions within the retail industry and the influences of those first bosses on women’s career paths were investigated. Understanding the role that primary early career mentors play in the development of leaders can be invaluable to positioning future leaders in career growth and professional development opportunities.

The trait theory of leadership was applied to explore how leadership characteristics and mentoring were experienced throughout women’s careers, particularly with first bosses. Whether women possess the abilities to lead people and companies toward growth and success and how such traits are exhibited and can be recognized are useful to know so that prospective leaders can be appropriately identified during the hiring process. Knowledge about key characteristics that make good leaders will provide insight to retail employees and future leaders that may lead to ways to improve leadership
in companies, thus benefiting society. Any advantage in leadership development that can be clearly identified and applied within the retail industry will be beneficial and have widespread effects.

The purpose of this study was to explore the overarching research question: what is the role that primary early career mentors play in the development of female leaders in the retail industry? More specifically, a qualitative exploratory study among a small convenience sample of women who have achieved successful mid-level leadership positions in the retail industry was conducted. The data generated in this study lends insight into this question and enables identification of key areas for future study, which could result in further analysis with more general implications.

**Definition of Terms**

*Leadership* can be described in many different ways. Northouse (2007, p. 3), stated “Leadership is defined as a process whereby an individual influences a group of individuals to achieve a common goal.”

*Mentor* is defined, by Kram (1983), as someone who “provides a variety of functions that support, guide, and counsel the young adult as this important work is accomplished” (p. 608).

*First Boss* is defined, for the purposes of this study, as the person who employs or supervises another employee in his or her first career position.

*Retail Industry* is a segment of the economy that is encompassed of people and companies engaged in the selling of finished products to consumers. Companies and worksites may include, but are not limited to, product development, wholesalers, buyers,
store managers, and development of other selling formats such as direct sales and Internet.

*Early Career.* For the purpose of this study early career is the first or second position held during the start of a career in a specific discipline.

*Formal Mentor.* For the purpose of this study a formal mentor is defined as a person with whom an assigned mentee is matched for the purpose of helping the mentee in all aspects of the retail industry. Conversations specifically about mentoring and career development are expected and required.

*Informal Mentor.* For the purpose of this study informal mentoring is a by-product of another relationship such as managing, coaching or teaching. While both the mentee and the mentor have agreed to the mentoring, there is no structured or prescribed process or plan to the dialogue.

*Mentee.* For the purpose of this study is defined as someone who is being mentored or guided by a mentor.

*Protégé.* For the purpose of this study, a protégé is someone who is being guided by a mentor. Protégé can be used interchangeably with mentee.
Chapter 2: Review of Literature

The literature review presents four topics; leadership, women and leadership, mentoring, and mentor theories. These are the areas related to exploration of first boss and mentor roles in the early careers. The literature reviewed is applied specifically to the retail industry; the lack of existing literature focused on women in leadership within the retail industry lends support and rationale for the value of this study.

Leadership

Leadership means different things depending on personal experiences, contexts, and perspectives. According to The Transformational Leadership Report (2007), leadership is continuously evolving. Over the past one hundred years, the study of leadership has evolved since the great man theory was presented in the 1800’s to the present day where holistic, organizational theories are frequently cited. Six theories, in order of their chronological development, are presented here.

Great Man Theory

According to The Transformational Leadership Report (2007) the “great man” theory posed the question: is leadership a characteristic that only some people are born with and, if so, who is born to lead? During the 1800’s, leadership studies corresponded with the elites. The styles and accomplishments of most well known leaders, for example Abraham Lincoln, Mahatma Gandhi and Alexander the Great, contributed to the notion that great leaders are not made; they are born (Cherry, 2012). Leadership was studied among political, financial, military, aristocratic, or cultural elites to explore the idea of a great man.
Thomas Carlyle made the great man theory prevalent in the 1840’s when he stated that, “the history of the world is but the biography of great men” (Carlyle, 1841, p. 28), thus implying that great men (or heroes) shape society and history. Their lives are the framework for what we call history. Carlyle (1888) later stated that effective leaders are gifted; they have divine inspiration and are born with the “right” characteristics.

Herbert Spencer challenged this idea in 1861 when he declared that society and social conditions are what shape great men who are leaders. Spencer (1961) stated, “the genesis of the great man depends on the long series of complex influences which has produced the race in which he appears and the social state into which that race has slowly grown” (p. 35).

Borgatta, Bales and Couch (1954) stated that, “Tests of the great man theory which involve the performance of groups rather than the consistency of the leader’s behavior are relatively absent in literature” (p. 756). In response, 126 male Air Force personnel participants were surveyed to study how great men emerge in small groups. These participants were split into groups of three and then evaluated. This was repeated for four sessions in which two new co-participants were introduced each time. They found that among the top 11 participants defined from session one, seven had the highest rankings throughout all sessions. They determined that great men positively influence groups when major factors of group performance, member satisfaction and efficiency are simultaneously improved. This research yielded knowledge about leadership tendencies and lent credence to the concept that people with leadership qualities consistently emerge as leaders in groups this finding supports the notion of the great man theory.
Group Theories

The manner in which leadership develops in small groups, or group theory studies, began in the 1930’s (Boehm, 2001; Earle, 1997; Kaplan, Hooper & Gurven, 2009). Group theories support the notion that democratic leadership is more effective than autocratic leadership. Group theories support development of an open view of leadership, away from the elitist and sexist great man theory (The Transformational Leadership Report, 2007). Group theories also seek to understand “why some human groups exhibit relatively egalitarian distributions between dominant and subordinate, leader and follower, chief and commoner, king and subject, or ruler and ruled” (Hooper, Kaplan & Boone, 2010, p. 634).

Hooper et al. (2010) investigated benefits associated with working in large groups. They observed that, as group size increases, there is greater incentive for members to avoid responsibilities to the group, which can diminish these gains. They developed an evolutionary game theoretical model that was based on the public goods game presented by McElreath and Boyd (2007) to better understand how leaders can navigate social and economic conditions of groups to effect member cooperation. They investigated “the conditions under which collective action is sustainable without reinforcement, sustainable under mutual monitoring by group members, sustainable under reinforcement by a leader, or ultimately unsustainable” (p. 634). They concluded that some individuals prefer to cooperate in groups under management of leaders rather than to work in leaderless groups (Hooper et al., 2010).
Trait Theory

Trait theorists consider characteristics of an individual to identify propensity for leadership (Kassin, 2003). Kassin (2003) noted that the way people think, act, and develop habits contributes to the personal characteristics that are known as traits. According to Pervin (1994), traits are static and fluctuate among individuals. For example, some people are gregarious and others are inhibited. These traits influence behaviors. Similar to great man theory, trait theory reflects that leaders are born with capabilities aimed at creating leadership traits rather than taught to develop and acquire them. Kassin (2003) described trait theorists as being interested in measuring traits.

To investigate the way human traits are understood and communicated, Allport and Odbert (1936) searched the English dictionary and identified over 4,000 words that described personality traits and then divided them into three different categories: cardinal traits, central traits, and secondary traits. Cardinal traits are those that develop over time and typically control an individual’s whole life. Central traits are descriptive of a person although they are not as dominant as cardinal traits. Secondary traits often only emerge in certain situations and can be described as relative to a person’s attitude (Allport & Odbert, 1936).

Lord, de Vader and Alliger (1986) studied how personality traits and leadership are related to leaders’ performances. They predicted that three specific traits (intelligence, extroversion – introversion, and masculinity – femininity) were related to leadership perceptions. They reviewed fifteen journal articles, performing a meta-analysis on the topic of personality traits and leadership. Of these, nine studies concluded that
“intelligence, masculinity – femininity, and dominance were significantly related to leadership perceptions whereas the traits interpersonal sensitivity, dominance, conservatism, and adjustment did not predict leadership” (p 402).

**Behavioral Theory**

According to Kirkpatrick and Locke (1991) behavior theory posits that people can be developed into leaders, rather than leadership being limited to people with certain birthrights or inherent traits. Behavior theory creates a foundation for further leadership development studies.

Schafer (2010) surveyed a convenience sample of 1,000 police supervisors to investigate effective and ineffective leadership traits. They found that effective and ineffective leaders express opposite sets of traits and habits. Integrity, work ethic, communication and care for others were strongly linked with efficacy. Ineffective leaders failed to possess these positive leadership traits. The respondents data supports the suggestion that “prospective leaders [should] be given a foundation of classroom training and education, [should] be given the chance to practice their leadership skills, and [should] be given feedback to enhance application of knowledge and skills” (Schafer, 2010, pp. 655-656).

**Situational Leadership**

Paul Hersey and Kenneth Blanchard (1969) developed the situational leadership theory when they wrote *Management of Organizational Behavior: Utilizing Human Resources*. Research conducted during the 1960’s and 1970’s was inconclusive with
respect to determining behaviors that result in strong leadership. Therefore, scholars have continued to study the relationship behavior patterns and leadership.

Green and Nebeker (1977) found that relationship-motivated and task-motivated leaders respond differently from one another to favorable and unfavorable situations in leadership. Fifty-two research participants were placed in situations where they chaired committee meetings with different degrees of situational favorableness. In unfavorable situations the relationship-motivated leaders exhibited interpersonal behaviors that were less task-oriented. In favorable situations the task-motivated leaders behaved in a more interpersonal manner and less with task-oriented behaviors than the relationship-motivated leaders.

Waller, Smith and Warnock (1989) studied the situational leadership theory regarding the stages of planning for and implementing organizational change. They observed support for designation of two basic leadership styles that had been identified in early studies: task-oriented style (or transactional leadership) and relationship-oriented style (or transformational leadership). Waller et al. (1989) presented the situational leadership theory as a way to differentiate effective leaders from ineffective ones; reflective of the way a given leader behaves in specific situations.

**Holistic Theories**

From the 1980’s forward, research has focused on the interactions of traits, behaviors, key situations, and group facilitation, which allow people to lead organizations to success (Kirkpatrick & Locke, 1991; The Transformational Leadership Report, 2007; Wadia & Kolender, 1988). Holistic management is defined as an activity that is aimed
toward goals and fosters positive relationships within work situations and social situations (Wadia & Kolender, 1988). Wadia and Kolender (1988) observed that the holistic approach recognizes that in order to achieve satisfaction, individuals must feel like members of winning teams, as well as major contributors to the success of their team. The link between leadership and ethics, with the idea that merely doing the right thing in business decisions is leadership, emerged during this time. Lists of traits, behavior patterns, group facilitation strategies, and culture-shaping practices for future leaders were developed (The Transformational Leadership Report, 2007).

Kirkpatrick and Locke (1991) studied whether traits really matter in leadership. They found that leaders clearly are not like other people. They stated that leaders do not have to be geniuses or all-knowing to succeed, but they do need to possess certain traits – referred to as the “right stuff” – and these traits are not evenly presented in all people. Kirkpatrick and Locke (1991) observed that leadership positions are difficult, with great pressures and serious responsibilities. Thus, they concluded that a special type of person is needed to master the challenges and responsibilities of leadership.

**Transactional and Transformational Leadership**

Bass and Stogdill (1990) defined leadership as many combinations of the following definitions; “as the focus of group processes as a matter of personality, as the exercise of influence, as particular behaviors, as a matter of inducing compliance, as a form of persuasion, as a power relation, as an effect of interaction, as a differentiated role, as an instrument to achieve goals, and as initiation of structure” (p. 38). According to Bass (1997) “the transactional – transformational paradigm views leadership as either a
matter of contingent reinforcement of followers by a transactional leader or the moving of followers beyond their self-interests for the good of the group, organization, or society by a transformational leader” (p. 130). Transformational leadership was defined by Steven Covey (1989) as:

The ability to ‘transform’ people and organizations in a literal sense – to change them in mind and heart; enlarge vision, insight, and understanding; clarify purposes; make behavior congruent with beliefs, principles and values; and bring about changes that are permanent, self perpetuating, and momentum building. (p. 287).

Transformational leadership can be displayed two ways: autocratic and directive or democratic and participative (Bass, 1997). The Transformational Leadership Report (2007) lists four components of transformational leadership: (a) charisma or idealized influence, (b) inspirational motivation, (c) intellectual stimulation and (d) individualized consideration or individualized attention (p. 11). Charisma refers to the admirable ways in which leaders behave and influence followers to identify with them. Charismatic leaders display principles and respond to people’s emotional needs. Inspirational motivation reflects the extent to which leaders trigger people to follow their visions. Intellectual stimulation involves risk taking as leaders to seek new solutions. Finally, individualized consideration is the ability of leaders to attend to each follower’s concerns and needs, respecting and celebrating each person’s individual contribution to the team (The Transformational Leadership Report, 2007).
**Women (Gender) and Leadership**

Stanford, Oates and Flores (1990) along with Helgesen (1990) suggested that certain feminine characteristics give women leadership advantages. These characteristics are typically linked to good communication skills, such as being good listeners or being empathetic.

Stanford, et al. (1990) explored the question, “Do women have different leadership styles from those of men?” (p. 9). After interviewing 12 women, they developed a heuristic model of female leadership that reflects female leaders as visionary leaders who facilitate communication, involve employees in team building, prefer referent (or reward) power, inspire and motivate, and foster mutual trust and respect. Participation of employee involvement emerged as a basis for team-based management among female leaders. While not definitive because of the small sample size and qualitative nature of their study, Stanford et al. (1990) observed that the data from their 12 female participants formed a common theme and provided a strong rationale for continued research to determine whether gender differences in leadership styles exist. They noted that using their heuristic model of leadership could determine whether leadership differences exist, based on gender, and their relative meanings regarding effects on organizations.

Kelley (1997), noting that communication is an important element in leadership that is often difficult for people to master, identified four factors that affect and complicate communication: situation, time, cultures and customs, and gender styles. Specifically, she examined gender differences in communication using Myers-Briggs...
Type Indicator testing and leadership surveys. Her research supports the notion that the best way to improve communication is to understand the differences between genders. Although the participants were from military and civilian sources and were predominantly male, Kelley (1997) concluded that characteristics exhibited by women, including some at which they excel, are essential for leaders of today and in the future.

According to Al-Jenaibi (2010), whether in the work force or everyday life, there is likely a difference between men and women. According to the Oxford University Press (1989) the definition of gender is the behavioral, cultural or psychological trait typically associated with one’s sex. Historically, sex has been a differentiating factor in role assignment and behaviors between men and women. Each is claimed to have different thinking, attitudes, reactions, behaviors, physical and biological characteristics that result in women versus men being perceived in unique ways. Because there are so many gender differences, the workplace has emerged as an arena for gender conflict and debate. Al-Jenaibi (2010) conducted ten face-to-face interviews exploring attitudes, facial expressions and body language within the public relations department of an organization. She observed a clear discrimination against women, who were not treated equally with men and whose abilities were often doubted.

In 1979 and 1991 Dozier and Broom (1995) conducted a study comparing public relations managers. Using 440 participants in 1979 and 203 in 1991, they concluded that gender and professional experience are positively related. They also found predominant manager role enactment was positively related to gender and professional experience. Management decision-making as well as salary and job satisfaction were positively
related. There was a significant salary difference between men and women in 1979. After controlling for professional experience, manager role enactment, and decision-making participation the remaining differences in salaries indicated there was an arguable gender salary discrimination (Dozier & Broom, 1991). Their research confirmed that work positions and salaries contribute to the differences in pay between genders.

Mentoring

Kram (1983) defined a mentor as someone who “provides a variety of functions that support, guide, and counsel the young adult as this important work is accomplished” (p. 608). An effective mentor acts in a dependable, engaged, and authentic manner, with the needs of the mentee as the focal point. The purpose of a mentor is to assist the protégé in learning organizational culture and workplace expectations. The mentor also assists new employees with learning the tasks and dispositions needed to succeed in their jobs and roles. Mentors may be assigned when people join organizations, creating a formal mentoring relationship. The mentor could be a peer, a coworker who is more knowledgeable and experienced, or a supervisor or team leader. Mentors can also arise with time. A mentor can be pursued when a novice employee wants to enhance his or her experience or career growth potential.

Types of Mentoring

Primary mentoring is also called classical mentoring. According to Clawson (1980), primary mentoring means that the close relationship between mentor and protégé is developmental in nature and endures over a long time period. Secondary mentoring is
defined by Philips-Jones (1982) as shorter, less intense, less focused, and developmental than primary mentoring.

Parise and Forret (2007) investigated the benefits for formal mentoring programs. Specifically they considered the relative cost of the program in terms of the amount of time mentors spent with their protégés. The key factors they examined were “the extent to which mentor participation is voluntary, the amount of input mentors have into the matching process with their protégé, the perceived effectiveness of the training mentors receive, and the perceived level of management support for the program” (p. 226). Parise and Forret (2007) found from surveying 97 formal mentors in a Midwestern financial institution that “mentors whose participation in the program was more of a voluntary nature were more likely to perceive it to be a rewarding experience” (p. 236).

Furthermore, they found that the level of support from management for mentor programs was positively related to successful mentor experiences.

**Types of Mentors**

Mentros and Yang (2006) identified five types of mentors: career mentors, research mentors, project mentors, co-mentors, and lead mentors. The career mentor provides support for mentees in work relationships; s/he is typically more experienced than the mentee and can offer guidance and advice about career development. The research mentor oversees the mentee’s research agenda through participation in development of projects and by sharing resources such as space, staff, databases, and funding sources. A project mentor usually has a short-term commitment in supporting a mentee during the completion of a project. Co-mentors share the responsibility of
mentoring or are in similar roles in different departments. A lead mentor is a person who assumes a primary leadership role, understanding the “big picture” and assisting a mentee with creating a team of support mentors (Mentros and Yang, 2006).

Whitely, Daugherty and Dreher (1991) stated, “coaches and teachers help develop interpersonal and intellectual skills in their mentees, which would be similar to the workforce relationship” (p. 333). They found that people with certain profiles are more likely to be in mentor relationships. Specifically, people engaged in continuous work in managerial who have high expected future incomes and are members of the upper or upper-middle class are more likely to seek mentors (Daugherty & Dreher, 1991).

According to Kram and Isabella (1985) experienced mentors gain benefits of technically knowledge and psychological support. Technical mentors also gain satisfaction as their role of teacher to a younger colleague.

Kane, Healy and Henson (1992) suggest that students who have mentors will further gain skills and solidify their work ethics as well as achieve greater confidence in their job performances. The reported skills gained by students are time management, communication, self-discipline, and self-motivation. Mentoring can begin in an internship or an entry-level job. Their study consisted of a random sample of 505 students who were interview by phone. They found that students who worked 30 or more hours per week were less involved with campus activities than others; however, the students who were not working 30 or more hours a week reported establishing important relationships with their faculty members. Kane et al. (1992) concluded that the success of the relationships with faculty members aided in helping students remain at college.
Big Five Personality Traits

Trait theory of leadership led to the development of the “big five” personality traits and can be applied to mentoring (Costa & McCrae, 1992; Tuples & Christal, 1967). The big five model is a comprehensive, experimental, data-driven research tool that can be traced to Allport and Odbert’s (1936) lexical hypothesis. According to Allport and Odbert (1936), people are born with certain traits, which is the idea of trait theory of leadership. Because skillful leadership is linked to specific traits, trait theory pronounces that people are either born to lead or not people are either born to lead or not; if one can accurately identify others’ traits, leaders and potential leaders can be identified (Cattell, 1946; Fiske, Shrout & Fiske, 1995).

Fiske, Shrout and Fiske (1995) reported that the lexical hypothesis was first presented by Sir Francis Galton. Reflective of the root word lexicon, which means vocabulary, the thought behind the lexical hypothesis is that personality traits will eventually become part of common language. The concept of a lexical approach means that vocabulary words are considered as a way to categorize and understand traits. In 1936, Allport and Odbert (1936) identified 17,953 personality-describing words from two comprehensive English language dictionaries. From that list, they reduced the number of words to 4,504 adjectives, which were deemed to be observable and relatively permanent traits. Cattell (1946) researched the Allport-Odbert adjectives then decreased the list to 171 words by disregarding synonyms.

Cattell (1946) developed the 16 Personality Factor Model (16PF) through this research. The 16PF measures personality based upon measures of people’s warmth,
reasoning, emotional stability, dominance, liveliness, rule-consciousness, social boldness, sensitivity, vigilance, abstractedness, privateness, apprehension, openness to change, self-reliance, perfectionism, and tension (Eysenck, 1967).

Eysenck (1967) demonstrated how to derive a thorough classification of human personality traits by sampling language. To do this he developed a three-factor model containing the traits of extroversion/introversion, neuroticism, and psychoticism. Tupes and Christal (1967) used eight large samples and investigated data describing personality. Using Cattell's (1946) trait measures, Tupes and Christal (1967) discovered five recurrent aspects. The five aspects were named surgency, agreeableness, dependability, emotional stability, and culture. These were described as the big five and made popular by other scholars in recent years (Costa & McCrae, 1992; Eagly & Carli, 2007).

Several sets of researchers have contributed toward defining the five factors (Cattell, 1946; Costa & McCrae, 1992; Digman, 1990; Eysenck, 1946; John & Srivastava, 1999; Tupes & Christal, 1967). Eagly and Carli, (2007) presented the big five with the terms openness, conscientiousness, extraversion, agreeableness, and neurotism (commonly referred to as OCEAN).

**Research Questions**

The scholarly work presented here provides insight into identifying an appropriate approach to explore the overarching research question: what is the role that primary early career mentors play in the development of female leaders in the retail industry? Through a thorough review of women and leadership literature and mentoring literature, the following specific research questions were identified for this study:
1. Was there a mentor relationship with the first boss?

2. What style of leadership did the first boss practice?

3. Did the first boss make an impact on the woman’s career?

4. Did the first boss exhibit qualities of the big five personality traits?

5. Does the leader believe that mentoring is important for leadership success in the retail industry? If so why?

6. Were the leader’s first boss and early career experiences influential in her current mentoring activities, and is she currently mentoring others?
Chapter 3: Methodology

Seven interviews were conducted to explore the research questions. The process of participant selection, interview protocol, and data analysis are described in this chapter.

Participants and Recruitment

Seven participants were interviewed for the study. The interviews were conducted individually to ensure a positive atmosphere between the investigator and each participant. Women who were at least 18 years of age and who had worked in a leadership position in the retail industry for six or more years where they supervised at least one person were eligible to participate. This depth of experience was identified because it was determined that after six years of leadership they have had the opportunity to have had mentors and to have served as mentors for others.

In compliance with an approved Institutional Review Board (IRB) protocol, initial participants were recruited using a convenience sampling method. Emails were sent to potential participants through a university-sponsored listserv for retail merchandising students and graduates. Additionally, personal emails were sent to prospective participants who were suggested by faculty, personal acquaintances, and industry professionals known to the researcher. Word-of-mouth, personal networking processes, and the snowball effect were all employed. As a result seven eligible women were identified who agreed to participate.
Interview Protocol

Each participant was interviewed individually using a qualitative protocol (Berg, 2009). They were audio recorded; then interviews in their entirety were transcribed for analysis. Each participant was informed that the contents of the interview, both written and recorded, would be secure and viewed solely by the primary researcher. Written consent was secured from each participant. Although the researcher knew the identity of the participants, the reported research uses pseudonyms to ensure their anonymity.

The following questions (and explanatory dialog listed in quotes) served as the framework for each interview:

- Tell me about your current position.
- How many people do you currently supervise?
- Can you describe your supervisory role?

“I’d like to explore your early career experiences.”

- What was your first career position?
  - When was that and can you elaborate?
- Describe your work history.
- Tell me about the boss at your first career position.

“There are three recognized management styles; transactional, transformational, and laizzez-faire. Transactional leaders establish a give-and-take relationship, clarify responsibilities and reward or correct them for the outcome. Transformational leaders are ones who establish themselves as a role model; they mentor and empower followers.
encouraging them to develop to their full potential. Laizzez-faire leaders fail to take responsibility for managing and have a lack of involvement.”

- Which category would you say your first boss would fit into?
  - Explain and give examples

- Would you say that your first boss was a mentor to you?
  - Explain

- Was your boss male or female?

[The researcher probed as appropriate, to explore formal versus informal mentor relationships.]

“I am going to ask you to rank and explain your first boss in the 5 personality traits that are used to describe human personality; openness, conscientiousness, extraversion, agreeableness, and neuroticism¹. Please rate them on the scale 1 being poor and 10 being excellent and give examples that demonstrate.”

- How would you rate your first boss in openness, which is described as exhibiting creativity, nonconformity, autonomy, and unconventional qualities? (Eagly & Carli, 2007, p. 40)

- How would you rate your first boss on conscientiousness, described as exhibiting achievement orientation and dependability? (Eagly & Carli, 2007, p. 40)

• How would you rate your first boss on extroversion, exhibiting sociability, assertiveness, activity, and positive emotions? (Eagly & Carli, 2007, p. 40)

• How would you rate your first boss on agreeableness, exhibiting caring, trusting, compliant, and gentle qualities? (Eagly & Carli, 2007, p. 40)

• How would you rate your first boss on neuroticism, exhibiting poor emotional adjustment and negative emotions? (Eagly & Carli, 2007, p. 40)

• Have other bosses been similar or different?
  ▪ Explain

• Have you seen yourself emulating your first boss throughout your career?

• What degree of impact has your first boss made on your career?
  ▪ Explain

• Have you had an/another influential mentor in your career?
  ▪ Why were they influential?

• In your career, do you see the process of mentorship translating into leadership success within the retail industry?

• What is the importance of mentoring?

• Do you consider yourself a mentor?
  ▪ Can you provide examples?

**Data Analysis**

The data collection and analysis was undertaken not to create broad generalizations about women in mid-level management positions in the retail industry but to present overarching themes and observe similarities and differences between each
individual based on her personal experiences. A conversational interview based approach was selected to create a comfortable environment with the interviewees, allowing for in-depth conversation. Each woman had a different experience and perspective that cannot be properly collected nor understood in a structured survey.

The qualitative data was transcribed and analyzed to build a case of studies. Content analysis was employed to identify overarching themes related to women in mid-level management positions.
Chapter 4: Results

Summary of Case Profiles

The pool of seven participants held the following positions: retired from a direct marketing position, vice president of planning, project manager, merchant, director for private brands, merchandise manager, and recruiting coordinator. They supervised between one to 100 employees and had professional careers of at least six years. For ease of reporting purposes and to protect identity, each participant was assigned a pseudonym: Amanda, Brittany, Cassie, Danielle, Emily, Faith, and Gabrielle. Table 1 presents an overview of each of the participant’s current position and first career position.

General Findings

Several observations were made in response to the overarching research question, “what is the role that primary early career mentors play in the development of female leaders in the retail industry?” Primary early career mentors of the women in this study

- Taught professional development aspects of the industry, such as relationship building;
- Guided the women through learning technical and task-oriented industry practices; and
- Demonstrated (exhibited MODELED) both positive and negative leadership traits.

Brittany’s first boss taught her about the aspects of the retail industry by, “being a good teacher and explaining why business processes work the way they do.” This guidance aspect was also evident in Faith’s first boss who “acclimated me to the retail
industry.” The first bosses all varied on the rankings of each of the big five personality traits, showing positive and negative leadership traits.

Table 1

**Participant Career Experiences**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Pseudonym</th>
<th>Current Position</th>
<th>Scope of Employee Supervision</th>
<th>First Career Position</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Amanda</td>
<td>Retired from Direct Marketing Position</td>
<td>50 (In last position)</td>
<td>Fashion Board Committee</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Brittany</td>
<td>Vice President of Planning</td>
<td>7 Directly 14 Total in Team</td>
<td>Merchandise Training Program</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Cassie</td>
<td>Project Manager</td>
<td>1 Directly 20-30 Depending on project</td>
<td>Executive Training Program</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Danielle</td>
<td>Merchant</td>
<td>1 Currently Has Supervised More</td>
<td>Assistant Buyer</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Emily</td>
<td>Director for Private Brand</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>Cosmetic Division</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Faith</td>
<td>Merchandise Manager</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>Internship in Corporate Merchandising Office: Led to Merchant Training Program</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Gabrielle</td>
<td>Recruiting Coordinator</td>
<td>1 Directly 100 Indirectly</td>
<td>Sales Associate</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Analysis of Research Questions

This study’s five specific research questions were investigated by using content analysis applied to the qualitative data generated from the seven interviews. The first research question was to determine whether the formal relationship between a boss and an employee developed into a mentor relationship. The second explored leadership styles of each of the first bosses. The third question explored whether the first boss relationship, being positive or negative, had an effect on each of the women’s careers. In question four, data were analyzed to determine the extent to which the first bosses exhibited the big five personality traits. The last question was meant to explore whether and why a mentor relationship is important to a career in the retail industry.

*Was there a mentor relationship with the first boss?*

All of the women except for Danielle described their first bosses as mentors. Interestingly, Danielle had categorized her first boss as a transformational leader. Thus three transformational leaders and three transactional leaders were all labeled as mentors. Although six of the seven women identified bosses as mentors, the types of mentorship that they described varied. Several noted that their first bosses were short-term mentors or project mentors, offering support for the mentee within the discreet timeframe, of the first job, and/or for a specific task. Some of the women noted that their first boss relationship emerged into a career mentor relationship – mentors who guided the majority of the mentee’s career.

When Faith was asked whether she considered her first boss to be a mentor she responded with, “at the time I thought she was a mentor to me.” Faith considered her first
boss a mentor at the time but upon reflection about what a mentor should be, would not consider her a mentor now, meaning her first boss was not a career mentor. Six of the women also said that their first bosses were formal mentors. Brittany stated that her first boss was a mentor “in short term, at the beginning stages,” but Brittany quickly outgrew the relationship. Amanda noted that her first boss was a mentor, and they are still very good friends.

Amanda was the only interviewee who described her first boss’ mentor relationship as an informal relationship. This is because her first boss worked with her in tandem and there was not a firmly established, traditional formal boss/employee relationship. Gabrielle emphasized the influence of her first boss as mentor through the statement, “I totally switched career paths more because of whom I would get a chance to work with and that person’s beliefs, more than even what the job was.”

*What style of leadership did the first boss practice?*

Shown in Table 2, three participants, (Amanda, Brittany, and Faith) categorized their first bosses as transactional leaders. The other four (Cassie, Danielle, Emily and Gabrielle) categorized their first bosses as transformational leaders. These seven women’s designations of leadership styles were substantiated through their explanations of first boss behaviors.

Amanda noted that her first boss was “all business, always.” Brittany stated that her boss offered “rewards for results.” She further elaborated, “responsibility was given as it was proven.” Faith disclosed that her first boss was “learning to be a merchant at the same time I was learning to be an assistant.” Faith reflected that this learning status
limited her boss’ ability to be fully transformational, though this status enhances the boss’ ability to be empathetic in learning a new position.

Emily’s transformational boss explained the mistakes and successes she had made with her employees to show them how to handle a given specific issue in anticipation of their future opportunities with similar situations. Cassie and Gabrielle categorized their first bosses as transformational because they were empowered and had the trust of their bosses to make decisions. Danielle observed that her first boss set very high expectations and was often difficult to please; however, she also provided opportunities and advocated for Danielle’s career success.

When the women were asked whether they saw themselves emulating their first bosses, women with transformational bosses all said yes and women with transactional bosses reported either limited emulation or said no. Interestingly though, of the four women with transformational first bosses, only one (Gabrielle) cited relationship-oriented transformational qualities, such as mentoring characteristics and positivity, that she seeks to emulate. Cassie described that she seeks to emulate her first boss’ management style but does not emulate certain personality characteristics of her first boss such as providing criticism and being confrontational (which are typically not considered transformational qualities). Danielle referenced her first boss’ assertiveness and high expectations as qualities she seeks to emulate. Emily observed that the fact that the first boss set a tone for her with respect to work culture has resulted in emulation of her management style. Emily reflected that because it was her first boss, the influence on her work style was particularly powerful.
Among the women who reported having transactional first bosses, only Amanda acknowledged a degree of emulation. She reflected that her own educational preparation, which was limited in analytical foundation, supported her need to seek to emulate her first boss’ strong analytical skills. Brittany replied with an emphatic “no” when asked whether she emulates her first boss. She elaborated that she recognized early on that she did not “want to be a boss like that person” and she noted, “I have modeled behavior to pretty much 100% opposite.” Faith, who had earlier noted that she and her boss were both learning their new positions, also replied “no” to the question about emulating her first boss.

Did the first boss make an impact on the woman’s career?

Whether or not the women said they see themselves emulating their first bosses, all of the women described their first bosses as having a degree of impact on their careers. The nature of the first bosses’ influence on the seven women’s careers varied from positive to negative depending on the individual situations.

Amanda and Brittany elaborated that their first bosses, who were transactional, taught them to look at things more analytically and instilled in them an understanding of business processes – practices that they have adopted throughout their careers. Faith’s first boss, who was also transactional, acclimated her to the retail industry. Notably, these three transactional bosses had an impact or an influence on these women that was task-oriented and based upon industry knowledge. The task-oriented learning outcomes reflect transactional leadership and communication where performance is rewarded based on proper execution of the job.
Among the women who reported having transformational first bosses, the influences on their careers went beyond task-oriented items to include more holistic career shaping outcomes, reflective of transformational leadership. Cassie revealed that her boss emphasized and modeled the importance of forming relationships with her assistants and associates and having an open door policy and also gave her confidence. Danielle said, “My first boss had a great impact on my career because I think she set the bar so high that I could never reach it; as she did that, she kind of pulled me along with her and I think her expectations always set me up to have high expectations. So I think even as I progress even more, the sky is always the limit.” Gabrielle described her first boss’s strong influence as the reason she switched careers by making her part time job a full time career. Emily stated that her first boss is still the person she “runs things by” and she continues to be an influence in her life. Cassie, Danielle, Emily, and Gabrielle all described their first bosses’ as having a transformational leadership approach. Their descriptions show that these bosses had a mentoring impact or influence which supports transformational leadership.
Table 2

Leadership Style of the First Boss

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Pseudonym</th>
<th>Leadership Style</th>
<th>Reported Leadership Style Substantiated Through Interview Statements</th>
<th>Do they Emulate their First Boss</th>
<th>Was the First Boss Influential</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Amanda</td>
<td>Transactional</td>
<td>Yes</td>
<td>Limited</td>
<td>Yes</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Brittany</td>
<td>Transactional</td>
<td>Yes</td>
<td>No</td>
<td>Yes</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Cassie</td>
<td>Transformational</td>
<td>Yes</td>
<td>Yes</td>
<td>Yes</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Danielle</td>
<td>Transformational</td>
<td>Yes</td>
<td>Yes</td>
<td>Yes</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Emily</td>
<td>Transformational</td>
<td>Yes</td>
<td>Yes</td>
<td>Yes</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Faith</td>
<td>Transactional</td>
<td>Yes</td>
<td>No</td>
<td>Yes</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Gabrielle</td>
<td>Transformational</td>
<td>Yes</td>
<td>Yes</td>
<td>Yes</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

*Did the first boss exhibit qualities of the big five personality traits?*

Each of the seven women ranked her first boss on the five personality traits, openness, conscientiousness, extraversion, agreeableness, and neuroticism (shown in Table 3). The ranking options were presented on a 10-point Likert scale during the interviews; one being “poor execution” and ten being “excellent execution” (shown in

\*2 Only Danielle did not describe her first boss as a mentor.*
Figure 1). Each of the five personality traits in reference to the individual woman’s first boss are presented and discussed in this section.

Table 3

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Personality Traits</th>
<th>Transactional Leadership</th>
<th>Transformational Leadership</th>
<th>Mean</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Amanda</td>
<td>9</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>8</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Brittany</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>7</td>
<td>8</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Faith</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>7</td>
<td>8</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Cassie</td>
<td>7</td>
<td>8</td>
<td>8</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Danielle</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>10</td>
<td>8</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Emily</td>
<td>9</td>
<td>9</td>
<td>9</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Gabrielle</td>
<td>8</td>
<td>10</td>
<td>8</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Note 1 = Poor execution; 10 = excellent execution

$^3$ Upon analysis and reflection it was apparent that participants rated neuroticism differently; some participants associated a low number with positive (lack of) neurotic traits while others associated a high number with positive (lack of) neurotic traits.
No distinct differences were observed between the transformational and transactional first bosses with respect to openness. Overall the first bosses were rated positively in openness with rankings between four (Brittany) to nine (Amanda) (see Figure 2). Both of these first bosses happened to be designated as transactional. Amanda described her first boss (ranking = 9) as wanting insight from others. Brittany (ranking = 4) defined her first boss as being very direct and not open to new changes. Faith, the third woman with a transactional boss (ranking = 7) indicated that her first boss was open to new ideas. Figure 1 presents rankings of openness from the seven women.

Cassie (ranking = 5) said her first boss was not open to new ideas but her “management style was kind of open.” She was able to take on more responsibility with
limited deviation. Danielle (ranking = 7) said, “that she was not afraid to think outside of the box when it came to finding a way to drive her business.” Emily’s first boss (ranking = 8) shared things she did not need to, to help her learn. Gabrielle’s first boss (ranking = 8) was very open-minded. Gabrielle reported that “she encouraged new ideas from her employees and if they were not successful, she wanted to know what you learned from it.” Interestingly the four transformational bosses were described as being open-minded or having an open management style.

*Denotes Transformational Leadership Style of First Boss

Figure 2. First Boss Rankings in Regards to Openness.

Conscientiousness, described as exhibiting achievement orientation and dependability is the second personality trait on which the women were asked to rank their first bosses (Eagly & Carli, 2007). The rankings ranged from five (Danielle & Faith) to
ten (Amanda & Emily), showing overall positive levels of conscientiousness among the first bosses. Each of the ranking extremes were represented by both transactional and transformational leaders (see Figure 3).

Amanda’s first boss (ranking = 10) was reported to be very friendly and worked well with others. Brittany explained that she rated her first boss nine because she had very consistent goals and dependable qualities. Faith gave her first boss a five because she was indecisive and did not have a “firm point of view.”

Cassie’s first boss (ranking = 9) was very involved and always knew what was going on in the office. Danielle said that her first boss (ranking = 5) was inconsistent. Emily’s first boss (ranking = 10) and Gabrielle’s first boss (ranking = 8) were known for being dependable and reliable.
The third personality trait, extraversion, is the practice of exhibiting sociability, assertiveness, activity, and positive emotions. This trait had the overall highest ranking among the five personality traits. Rankings ranged from five (Faith) to ten (Amanda & Gabrielle). Amanda’s first boss (ranking = 10) stated that she “let us do our own thing.” However, Faith described her first boss (ranking = 5) as defensive when it came to criticisms and they were not taken positively (see Figure 4). It is noted that in one of the interviews (Brittany) this question was inadvertently omitted.

Cassie said that her first boss (ranking = 8) was sociable in the company and was great at balancing her positive and negative emotions. Danielle and Emily’s first bosses
(ranking = 9) were both positive people. Danielle’s first boss was social and Emily’s first boss always tried to “turn a negative into a positive.” Gabrielle’s first boss (ranking = 10) was described as being a positive influence in her team.

Agreeableness is exhibiting caring, trusting, compliant, and gentle qualities (Eagly & Carli, 2007). There was a wider range of rankings for this personality trait than any of the others, with two (Brittany) as the low score and 10 (Gabrielle) as the high score (see Figure 5). Several of the respondents couched the quality of agreeableness with comments such as “[she was] not a softie” (Cassie) and “[she was] assertive and business
like” (Danielle), demonstrating that the quality agreeableness does not diminish leadership and management focus of the relationship.

Amanda stated that she and her first boss (ranking = 8) worked very well together, Amanda being creative and her first boss being analytical. Brittany stated that her first boss (ranking = 2) was “all about work and was never a friendly person.” Faith’s first boss (ranking = 9) was “very trusting of me and I trusted her” and she was always open to other people’s feedback.

Cassie stated that her first boss (ranking = 6) showed that “there are definitely arguments and confrontation in this environment so I can’t say that she was agreeable always and I don’t think that’s a bad thing.” Danielle’s first boss (ranking = 6) was very “assertive and business like” not having “warm and fuzzy” qualities. Emily’s first boss (ranking = 6) was very friendly and easygoing but “she knew when business was more critical.” Gabrielle described her first boss (ranking = 10) as exhibiting caring and helpful qualities to her employees.
*Denotes Transformational Leadership Style of First Boss

Figure 5. First Boss Rankings in Regards to Agreeableness.

*The personality trait neuroticism, defined as exhibiting poor emotional adjustment and negative emotions, presented challenges for analysis in this study (Eagly & Carli, 2007). Upon reflection of the data it was apparent that some participants interpreted first bosses who possessed neurotic qualities as “poor execution” while other with first bosses who did not possess neurotic qualities ranked those bosses with “poor execution.” Thus no meaningful ranking data was generated for analysis purposes. Nevertheless, the qualitative comments (which were limited because the participants offered little explanation) were reviewed and are summarized here (see Figure 6).
Amanda’s first boss (ranking = 1) stated, “No she didn’t have any of that.”

Whereas Danielle stated, “I would say she was like a 7, she displayed those emotions. I felt like I could tell when a meeting didn’t go well,” about her first boss.

*Denotes Transformational Leadership Style of First Boss

Figure 6. First Boss Rankings in Regards to Neuroticism.

Does the leader believe that mentoring is important for leadership success in the retail industry, if so why?

All of the women had an/other influential mentor(s) in their careers and all agreed that mentorship leads to leadership success in the retail industry.

Faith stated that she thinks it is “extremely key to have a strong mentor to survive and thrive in the retail industry.” Cassie described that it is important to have a mentor
just to ask questions whether you are just out of college or switching into a new company there needs to be someone you can go to for help. Danielle said, “I think the importance of mentoring is guidance outside of your day to day experiences and what your supervisor is expecting of you and I think it should be positive encouragement with the ability to be realistic about the subject at hand.” Gabrielle described the importance of mentoring being that you can help someone find something that maybe they did not even know about, whether it is a career or something about themselves that you can help guide and coach someone in their professional and personal life and have a positive impact on them.

*Were the leader’s first boss and early career experiences influential in her current mentoring activities, and is she currently mentoring others?*

Each of the women stated that she considers herself a mentor to others. Gabrielle described a protégé whom she has encouraged and facilitated the transformation from her part-time job into a full-time career just as her first boss did with her. She attributed the guidance and mentoring of her first boss to her success in helping her own employees. Faith explained that the two women whom she currently mentors are in different companies, which she prefers and believes that the mentor relationship is better when she is not the direct boss. Emily shared that she has mentored formally and informally, and the formal mentorship program that her company had always felt forced. Danielle said, “I think it’s very important to set an example and act as some type of role model for especially people who are younger in their careers and I always try to make myself an open door so that no one would ever be afraid to approach me.” Interestingly Brittany has
been a role model many times in her career and she said that informal mentoring has always turned out to be the best.
Chapter 5: Discussion and Conclusion

Insights were gained regarding the role that primary early career mentors play in the development of female leaders in the retail industry. Evident in this sample of female leaders, (a) the first boss was influential, (b) both transactional and transformational leaders were viewed as mentors, but only transformational leaders were reported as effective role models, (c) all of the women reported that mentorship leads to leadership success in the retail industry and (d) these women see themselves as mentors.

Was there a mentor relationship with the first boss?

All of the first bosses were described as being mentors with the exclusion of Danielle’s transformational first boss. This mentor role shows the importance first career bosses have on new employee career paths. Interestingly, in this population, the positions that these first bosses held were fairly entry level. While their positions as supervisors placed them in leadership roles, their relative lack of leadership and career experiences might have affected their abilities to be highly effective transformational leaders, perhaps due to being inexperienced as bosses. Emily supported this when she reflected about being more impressionable during that time in her career. Faith also stated “at that time in my career yes she was a mentor to me. As I furthered my career I do have mentors in my life, and when I look back, she wasn’t the mentor that I would have needed to take me to the next level.”

What style of leadership did the first boss practice?

These first bosses were reported to be both transactional (n = 3) and transformational (n = 4) leaders. None were reported in the category of laizzes faire.
Danielle’s first boss, who was transformational, was the only first boss who was not considered a mentor; however, she and the other transformational bosses were described as having influences that were relationship-oriented. When the women were asked whether they saw themselves emulating their first bosses, those with transformational first bosses (Cassie, Danielle, Emily, and Gabrielle) all said yes and the three with transactional first bosses (Amanda, Brittany, and Faith) stated that emulation was limited or not practiced. Further investigation revealed that of the four women with transformational first bosses Gabrielle was the only participant to cite transformational qualities through examples about how she emulates her first boss. That is, the remaining six women described emulating transactional qualities, rather than transformational qualities, even when emulating bosses who were categorized as transformational. Thus the teaching role of first bosses and the value and need for first bosses to be transformational versus transactional warrants further study.

*Did the first boss make an impact on the woman’s career?*

All of the women stated that there was some degree of impact that the first boss made on her career. Women who worked with first bosses categorized as transactional reported their influences in terms of task-oriented qualities. Amanda stated, “I became more analytical, trying to look at the big picture and the numbers.” Additionally women with transactional bosses reported learning about the retail industry from their bosses. While the four transformational bosses were all described as having open management styles and/or being open-minded, which are reflective of transformational qualities, the influences that women of transformational bosses reported were task-oriented, similar to
those reported by women with transactional bosses. This finding supports a need for further investigation about the mentoring role of first bosses in career development at a stage of high learning, and the related value of a transformational leader as a teacher and mentor.

*Did the first boss exhibit qualities of the big five personality traits?*

The first bosses, in general, exhibited big five personality traits commensurate with their leadership roles. Each of the traits, however, were reported to be executed at varying levels. There were no observed differences between transactional and transformational first bosses in reference to the big five personality traits. Interestingly it was noted that conscientiousness and extraversion were positive throughout all first bosses. Extraversion was the highest overall ranking between the first bosses. Gabrielle who ranked her first boss high on extraversion (ranking = 10) stated, “In the retail industry you have to be very extraverted and very positive.” Danielle’s first boss (ranking = 9) was also extroverted, “especially when she presented in front of a room, you could tell she was extraverted. She was engaging and I think she took time around the office to be social with people.” Consciousness and extroversion are likely qualities associated with retail career advancement, thus positioning bosses in their supervisory roles. The role of these traits in first bosses’ effectiveness warrants further investigation.

The trait agreeableness was recorded with a widest range of rankings (lowest = 2, highest = 10); this indicates that agreeableness may not lessen or strengthen leadership and management success. Gabrielle’s first boss (agreeableness ranking = 10) had a demeanor where “you always knew from the way she approached you that she cared and
wanted to help even if it wasn’t a positive situation she’d help you learn from that,” whereas Brittany (agreeableness ranking = 2) mentioned that “it was really not about me.”

**Does the leader believe that mentoring is important for leadership success in the retail industry? If so why?**

Because all of the women reported that mentoring is important for leadership success, it is insightful to analyze what makes those relationships positive and successful. Brittany, Cassie, Danielle, Faith, and Gabrielle were all placed in formal mentor relationships, which in some cases, felt forced. Alternately, Emily’s mentor relationship was considered formal but she disclosed in the interview that the relationship felt more informal because her first boss “went above what she was supposed to do” in her formal mentor relationship. Brittany, who has been a role model and mentor many times in her career, stated that informal mentoring has always produced the best relationships for her.

**Were the leader’s first bosses and early career experiences influential in her current mentoring activities, and is she currently mentoring others?**

All of the women responded that they consider themselves mentors to others. It is important to understand the qualities that make a mentor relationship successful because it is the relationship that is being modeled and potentially emulated as the protégés emerge as leaders themselves. Most of the women said that they are currently mentoring more than one person or have had many mentees.

This data analysis reflecting the research questions led to observation of four emergent themes, which are presented and discussed below.
Emergent Themes

1. Generally first bosses are seen as mentors though the role of mentor is not fully defined and not necessarily associated with transactional or transformational leadership.

2. The first boss, regardless of the leadership style or traits, was considered to be an important influence.

3. Transformational first bosses, but not transactional first bosses, were emulated.

4. With respect to emulating first bosses, even though only transformational first bosses were emulated, women noted task-oriented qualities, more reflective of transactional than transformational leadership.

   Because all first bosses were seen as mentors by the interviewees at the time of their early career positions, support for further investigation of the relationship between first bosses and new employees is evident. This could also mean that it makes a difference on one’s career whether the first boss was transformational or transactional, because transformational first bosses were emulated, but transactional first bosses were not.

   Regardless of the leadership style of the first boss, the first boss position makes an important influence on the new employee. However, the traits learned from the first boss and the traits emulated from the first boss do not appear to be related to the type of leadership style the first boss practices.
Limitations

The small number of interview participants limits the insight and prevents generalization of results. The positions of women who participated varied; therefore, comparisons between women with similar positions or career paths could not be made. The genders of all the first bosses were female, thus limiting the comparison between male and female first bosses. The geography of the participants, which was primarily mid-western and southeastern U.S., may affect interpersonal relationships and work cultures. Although the scope of implications are limited, the exploratory nature of this study, as intended, provides insight and opportunities to identify areas worthy of further research.

Suggestions for Future Research

Despite the limitations, the exploratory qualitative study provided insight and rationale for future research. This study, commensurate with the purpose of qualitative research, identifies a variety of concepts for future research which are categorized into four topics, (a) further investigation of first boss relationships with new employees based on first boss characteristics, (b) mentor influences throughout career paths, (c) success of mentor programs in the retail industry, and (d) gender and mentoring.

First Boss Relationships with New Employees

When examining the first boss, it became evident that the women were likely more impressionable at that early point in their careers because it was their first career position and they were learning about the industry. Faith described her relationship with her first boss as a mentor relationship at the time because she was more impressionable in
her first career position. She did not have another boss to compare and contrast, to understand what good leadership qualities are and what are bad practices. The experiences of the first boss and preparation to be a supervisor, teacher, and a mentor, and leadership ability, clearly affect the success of the relationship for the early career employee. Future research examining the amount of time the women had spent with the first boss would enhance the understanding of time associated with successful mentoring. Some of the mentees only held these positions for a few months while others were employed in those positions for a longer period.

The geography of the participants was a limitation in this study but presents an opportunity for future research. Geography, resulting in cultural practices that influence workplace norms, could affect interpersonal relationships between mentors and protégés. For example, when Cassie was asked how she would rate her first boss on agreeableness she said, “I don’t know if it’s New York, but I haven’t really seen a lot of agreeableness, as a result I don’t know if it’s everywhere but definitely at my company and to be a project manager you have to have kind of an edge about you.” Thus future studies that seek to compare first bosses and mentor relationships by geographic region would add value to the scholarly literature.

**Mentor Influences throughout Career Paths**

Among the seven interviews, only five of the women described her first boss as being a mentor, but all of the women said that her first boss made a degree of impact on her career. At the conclusion of the interviews, two women wanted to talk about their most influential bosses. Investigating the characteristics and traits of the most influential
boss would expand knowledge about mentoring in the workplace. Specifically looking at neuroticism with regard to the trait being a positive as well as a negative influence on mentors and bosses. Identifying when during the career the most influential boss was established would promote additional insight.

**Success of Mentor Programs in the Retail Industry**

Most of the women indicated that her first career position had a formal expectation that the boss would be the mentor. Future research that focuses on formal versus informal of mentors and which are more effective, would contribute positively to the body of research. It would be insightful to understand the value of having a network of mentors who are called on in certain situations versus having one mentor who is called upon in every situation. For example, when the women were asked whether they had an/other influential mentor(s) in their careers, Brittany, Faith and Gabrielle said they had at least two or more strong mentors in their careers. Insights into mentor networks will further expand knowledge about mentoring. Thus, mentoring networks would be a fruitful topic for future research.

Success of mentor programs implemented in companies in the retail industry is an area identified for future study. Emily described her experience by saying, “I think a lot of companies have a lot of specific mentoring programs and I honestly don’t think those are as successful as when they develop almost naturally. I think we all find mentors in our business world whether they are coworkers or vendors or customers and I think that when we find them naturally we learn more and share more than when they are preselected mentorship.” A study investigating formal versus informal mentor
experiences, as well as a study researching the qualities that make a successful mentor program, would both add value to the scholarly literature.

**Gender and Mentoring**

All of the participants in this study had first bosses who were women. If there were a wider range of first bosses being male or female, future research could compare and contrast the differences. During the interviews the women were asked whether they had an/other influential mentor(s) in their careers. Danielle, Emily and Gabrielle all stated that they had had an influential boss who was male; therefore analyzing the differences in character traits and leadership styles between mentors of different gender could lead to a possible benefit for career development.

To enhance the understanding of mentors and mentees, future research on the same topic but with participants who all started at the same position or who are all currently in the same position would be beneficial. Reducing the number of variables and focusing on mentor experiences could enhance the opportunity to extract applicable outcomes to improve mentor programs.
References


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