Female Executives' Strategies for Success:
Interviews with Graduates of the Rutgers Executive Leadership Program for Women (ELP)

Prepared by:
Danielle J. Lindemann
Research Director,
Center for Women and Work
Rutgers University

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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Much previous literature relating to gender in corporate America has focused on their barriers that exist for female executives. Through interviews (n=30) with alumnae of the Rutgers Executive Leadership Program for Women (ELP), we shifted the focus to examine how these women interpreted success, the strategies that they used to achieve successes in their careers, and how a women's leadership development program might play a role in that success.

All but one (96.7%) of the women interviewed for this project said that they thought of themselves as successful in their careers. The most prevalent definitions of success included "happiness" or "satisfaction" (30.0%) and being able to successfully balance work and family (30.0%). However, some women measured success by standard career metrics, such as earning a good income (23.3%) and receiving promotions (20.0%). Moreover, many respondents suggested that their definitions of success had changed at different points in their lives and careers.

When we asked these women to list the strategies they used to achieve success in their careers, the most common response was "networking" (26.7%). A majority of respondents (60.0%), said that they currently had mentors. Moreover, *all* said that they saw themselves as mentors to others, and all but one agreed that they actively cultivate allies who have helped them in their careers.

All respondents said that they saw themselves as leaders, and nearly one fourth (23.3%) specified that being a leader was different from simply managing people. Many interviewees (36.7%) did not think that their gender played a role in their leadership styles. Further, a substantial number (30.0%) mentioned that they did not view gender inequality as an issue in their companies, despite the fact that the majority of these women worked in male-dominated fields. In fact, these findings highlight an interesting paradox: some female executives noticed that there were fewer women than men in the higher ranks of their companies but resisted thinking about these imbalances in terms of gender inequality. This paradox—and the fact that many of these women found the term "Feminist" problematic—perhaps suggests that the typical language used to discuss gender and inequality does not resonate with these women.

However, most of these respondents acknowledged that gender inequity persisted within other companies, and some specifically mentioned that ELP had opened their eyes to these disparities.

Further, respondents generally agreed that male and female executives grapple with some different issues in their careers. The most salient of these issues was work/family balance. In fact, the majority of respondents (83.3%) brought up issues of work/family balance before we specifically asked about them. The most common strategy these executives used to achieve work/life integration was to receive help from their supportive husbands or partners (30.0%). Some mentioned that their partners were stay-at-home dads. When we asked respondents if they had taken any action to make their companies more flexible in terms of work/life balance, more than half (53.3%) volunteered that their workplaces were already very flexible.

Finally, all respondents agreed that participating in ELP had helped them professionally. More than two thirds (68.0%) said that the Program had given them a better sense of what they wanted in their careers, and most (95.7%) said that they use what they gained from ELP in their current jobs.

These results have repercussions and pave the way for future research concerning the nuances of career "success," female executives' perceptions of gender dynamics in the workplace, and work/life pressures within the corporate sphere.

INTRODUCTION

Much previous literature has brought attention to the persistent glass ceiling that exists for women in corporate America. Female workers are less likely than males to ascend to the top of the occupational ladder, and they are paid less when they get there. Although women comprise nearly half (47%) of the overall labor force in the United States, they make up only 6% of corporate CEOs and top executives (Matsa & Miller 2011). And one study of high-level executives found that women earned about 45% less than men (Bertrand & Hallock 2001).

With some notable exceptions (Davies-Netzley 1998; Ragins, Townsend, & Matthis 1998; Williams & Dempsey 2014), most research relating to female employees, and corporate women in particular, has focused on their barriers to career success. One such barrier is women's disproportionate role in the domestic sphere. Numerous studies suggest that career interruptions for childbirth and childcare continue to impede female advancement in the workforce (Miller 2010; Bertrand, Goldin, & Katz 2010). Women, but not men, face a significant wage penalty for having children (Avellar & Smock 2003; Budig & England 2001; Waldfogel 1997). Mothers also face discrimination on the job market (Correll, Benard, & Paik 2007), while women already in the job market may be "mommy tracked" (Miller 2010) when they have children.

Other studies have highlighted additional obstacles that stand in the way of gender equality in the boardroom. For example, women may be discriminated against and excluded from male-dominated corporate networks and mentorship pairings (Athey, Avery, & Zemsky 2000). Some scholarship has highlighted women's need for greater assertiveness and self-promotion (Niederle & Vesterlund 2009), although other work suggests that women's leadership styles may actually be preferable to men's in many instances (Bass & Avolio 1994). Still other research indicates that women are expected to do more office "housework"—administrative tasks, such as taking notes in meetings, that help others in the office but do nothing to advance, and sometimes

impede, their own careers (Kanter 1977; Williams 2014). Women are judged more harshly than men for not engaging in these altruistic tasks at work (Heilman & Chen 2005).

While this previous research is crucial to our understanding of how gender operates in the corporate environment, it is imperative to focus on not only the barriers that female executives experience but also the strategies that these women implement to succeed in their careers. Further, since much of this past scholarship is based on quantitative research, it is particularly important to collect qualitative data in order to gain a full picture of how women in corporate America experience the glass ceiling (Patton & Haynes 2014). Through interviews (n=30) with alumnae of the Rutgers Executive Leadership Program for Women (ELP), we seek to better understand the occupational experiences of female executives, how they interpret success, and the strategies that they use to achieve success in their careers.

RESEARCH METHODS AND SAMPLE

About ELP

We define "executives" for the purposes of this project as alumnae of ELP—an intensive, individualized program developed by Brigid Moynahan, president of The Next Level, Inc. and sponsored by the Institute for Women's Leadership and Center for Women and Work at Rutgers University. The purpose of the Program is to prepare women who are already in leadership roles to advance to more significant senior level positions in industry, the professions, and non-profit organizations.

Data Collection

379 women have graduated from ELP since its inception in 2000. We narrowed that list to 129 women who indicated that they had changed jobs since leaving ELP and for whom we had access to updated contact information[1]. We selected on job change as a loose proxy for "success," though we also asked respondents about their job change(s) since the Program and whether they considered themselves successful in their careers. In fact, only one respondent indicated that she had *not* changed jobs since attending the Program, while one could not recall. Among the 28 respondents who said that they had changed jobs, 11 (39.3%) were now in different roles or different companies, 16 (57.1%) had been promoted, and 1 (3.6%) had taken a "step down."

We randomly selected respondents from this list of 129 women until we reached our target of 30 interviews. Out of a total of 82 sent emails, nine were returned as undeliverable, and one alumna agreed to participate in the project after we had completed data collection. Of the 72 remaining invites, seven women declined to participate in the project and 35 did not reply, for a response rate of 41.7%.

We conducted in-depth, semi-structured interviews with 30 ELP alumna between June 2014 and January 2015. All interviews were done by phone, and the average interview time was about one

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[1]Obtained from ELP administrators.

hour. We asked questions relating to professional experiences, definitions of success, strategies for success at work, professional networks, experiences in ELP, and work-life integration, as well as other miscellaneous and demographic questions.

The Bureau of Sociological Research at the University of Nebraska-Lincoln transcribed all interview responses, and we used the qualitative software NVivo to code and analyze interview responses.

For interview questions and response summaries, see Appendices A and B, respectively.

The Sample

The sample included women in diverse companies and industries at different stages in their executive careers (Figure 1). Of the 30 women interviewed for the project, eleven (36.7%) worked in the pharmaceutical industry. Thirteen respondents (43.3%) had the title of director, five (16.7%) had the title of vice-president, four (13.3%) had the title of president and/or owner, two (6.7%) had the title of consultant, one (3.3%) had the title of manager, and five (16.7%) had other titles.

Figure 1:
Sample Composition,
by Industry and Title (n=30)
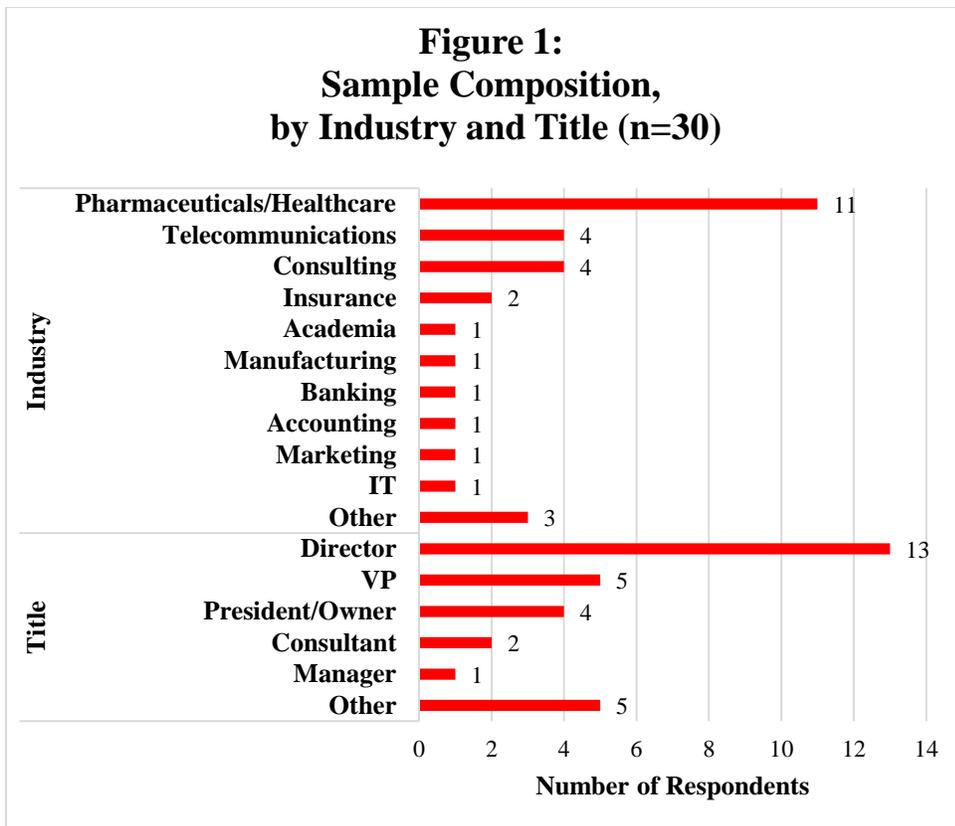
More than three fourths of the sample—23 women (76.7%) — self-identified as White or Caucasian, while three (10.0%) identified as Black, two (6.7%) identified as Asian, one (3.3%) identified as Hispanic, and one (3.3%) identified as biracial. Only one respondent (3.3%) did not have a college degree. Asked about the highest educational degree they had obtained, eight

respondents (26.7%) said that they had received an undergraduate degree (BA or BS), ten (33.3%) had a Master's degree, and eleven (36.7%) held an advanced professional degree (PhD, MBA, JB, and/or MD). Twenty-three respondents (76.7%) were mothers. The average age of women in the sample was 49.5, although they ranged in age from 35 to 63. More than three fourths (n=23, 76.7%) were married or in a committed relationship.

FINDINGS: FEMALE EXECUTIVES' STRATEGIES FOR SUCCESS

Components of Success

"First of all, success means that I'm happy and I come to work and I feel motivated and challenged every day, so that to me is the most important thing…The second thing that I would say defines success is by outsider standards. I have achieved the highest title that there is to achieve at the company. I manage a large group of people, manage a significant project, and have significant responsibilities." –female executive, 50 years old

"I feel like success is doing the things that you love to do and doing them well and being recognized for that." –female executive, 62 years old
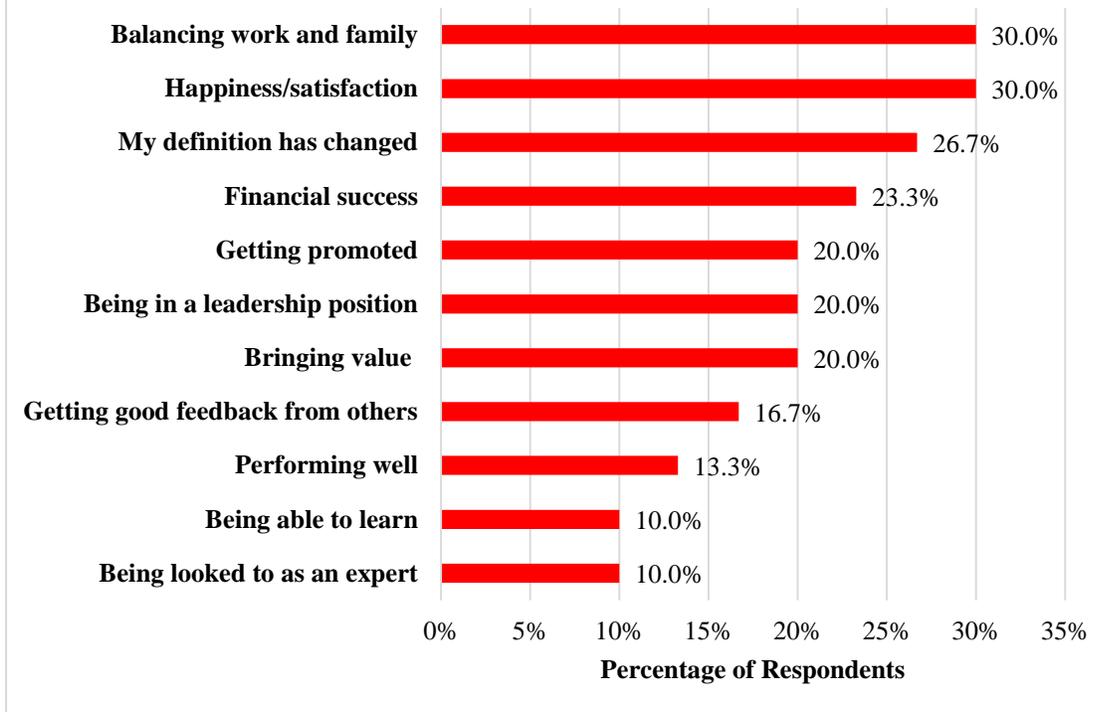
"All joking aside right now, success for me is getting out of the house with two small kids and brushing my teeth." –female executive, 42 years old

The vast majority of the women interviewed for this project thought of themselves as successful. Twenty-nine of the thirty respondents (96.7%) said that they would characterize themselves as successful in their careers, while only one said that she did not know if she considered herself successful.

While these women's definitions of "success" varied, there was also some common ground among the respondents. As Figure 2 illustrates, the most prevalent responses to the question "What does 'success' mean to you?" were "happiness" or "satisfaction" (n=9, 30.0%) and being able to balance work and family (n=9, 30.0%). In fact, many of these female executives indicated that their definitions of career success transcended the walls of the boardroom. As one respondent explained,

> "I really characterize success first and foremost in your personal life, right? So, and I know this is about careers, but I really firmly believe that you can't look at part of a person, so my first success is in my personal life. Do I have a wonderful family and a wonderful daughter and, and [am I] happy in that space...?"

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Figure 2:
"What does 'success' mean to you?"
Most Common Responses **(n=30)**

Response	Percentage
Balancing work and family	30.0%
Happiness/satisfaction	30.0%
My definition has changed	26.7%
Financial success	23.3%
Getting promoted	20.0%
Being in a leadership position	20.0%
Bringing value	20.0%
Getting good feedback from others	16.7%
Performing well	13.3%
Being able to learn	10.0%
Being looked to as an expert	10.0%

Percentage of Respondents

However, as Figure 2 also suggests, the quantifiable rewards typically associated with careers—such as financial success (n=7, 23.3%) and receiving promotions (n=6, 20.0%)—were also important to many of these women.

Figure 2 also suggests that the desire to bring value to others was important to some of the women in this sample. Along similar lines, respondents often talked about wanting to "make a difference" within their teams, companies, and/or broader society, and many mentioned their community outreach and other volunteer work. When interviewees were asked to list the three most important things in their lives, "making a difference" was one of the most common responses (n=4, 13.3%). Overall, over one third of respondents (n=11, 36.7%) mentioned, at some point in their interviews, wanting to help others or make a difference. One respondent, for example, said that her job was one of the most important things in her life, but,

> "It's more than that to me. It's not just achievement at work, it's actually kind of contributing positively to society, you know what I mean? And…how I do that, as an individual, happens to be through my work, right? The reason why I work in healthcare is because I want to contribute positively to the world."

Moreover, for the most part, these women felt that they were contributing positively to their companies. When asked, "Do you feel as though you are making positive changes in your organization?," only two respondents said, "No."

As Figure 2 also demonstrates, "being able to learn" was also an important component of success for some of the women in this study. When asked to list the most important things to them in life, 13.3% (n=4) of the women replied "learning" or "intellectual satisfaction." And one fifth of respondents (n=6, 20.0%) mentioned, at some point during their interviews, the desire to remain intellectually engaged and not get bored in their careers.

Changing Definitions of Success over the Life Course

Another salient finding when it came to defining "success" was that more than one fourth of respondents (n=8, 26.7%) said that their conceptions of success had changed over time. One respondent explained, "The job is definitely not as important as it once was for sure…You know what, I'm 56 years old and at 56 you realize that work/life balance really means something," while another replied, "At one point in time I defined myself by my job. I'm just not there anymore." A third interviewee explained:
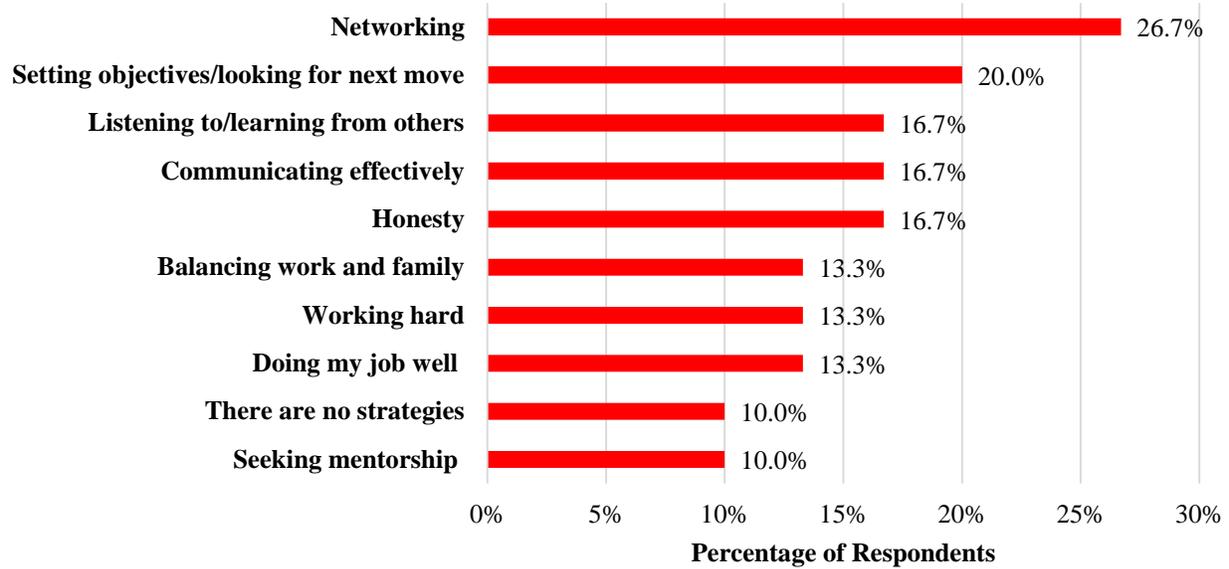
> "When I was younger I was so interested in just sort of climbing the corporate ladder and making a lot of money and this and that. I mean, I'm a very ambitious person, but I have ambitions that lie outside the career, like with my writing and my art, so my success now is a combination of what I do in the [ ] industry and what I do creatively. So that doesn't necessarily fit, maybe the mold of me telling you like, 'Oh okay, now I'm a senior VP and I'm gonna be a CEO in five years,' you know? But that's okay, again it's back to me looking at who I am and saying what's really important to me and how can I personally be a success by my own standards?"

Responses like these suggest that definitions of success varied not only among these women but also *within* these individuals, as they moved through various career stages and make life-course changes.

Most Common Strategies for Success

In addition to asking them to define success, we also asked respondents about the strategies that they used to achieve success in their careers. Figure 3 illustrates the most common responses to this question.

Figure 3:
"Are there particular strategies that you use to try to achieve success in your profession?"
Most Common Responses **(n=30)**

Strategy	Percentage
Networking	26.7%
Setting objectives/looking for next move	20.0%
Listening to/learning from others	16.7%
Communicating effectively	16.7%
Honesty	16.7%
Balancing work and family	13.3%
Working hard	13.3%
Doing my job well	13.3%
There are no strategies	10.0%
Seeking mentorship	10.0%

Percentage of Respondents

As Figure 3 demonstrates, communicating effectively was one of the most common (n=5, 16.7%) strategies that these women used to achieve success in their careers. In fact, the importance of effective communication was a theme that emerged repeatedly throughout these interviews. For example, the most common response to "Are there specific individual strengths that you think you bring to your organization?" was "communicating" (n=6, 20.0%), and when asked how ELP had helped then professionally, 13.3% of the women (n=4) said that the Program had helped them to be better communicators. For example, one respondent told us that the self-reflection exercises that she did in ELP "just changed my communication style. It changed how I speak with others and interface with others, and it was a pretty compelling part of the Program for me."

Finally, another theme that emerged in response to this question, but also came up throughout these interviews, was hard work (n=4, 13.3%). Nearly half of the respondents (n=14, 46.7%) discussed the importance of working hard at some point during their interviews.

Networks and Success

"One thing that I got out of ELP that I think is very important that perhaps I didn't know how important it was until I went to ELP is the networking strategy and how everyone is interconnected and how important that is to stay connected to people." –female executive, 56 years old

"Creating that network of leaders and mentors—not only will it help you be more successful in understanding how to be a leader, but…that network can significantly impact how successful you are in any part of your profession." –female executive, 44 years old

Another important strategy for career success that Figure 3 highlights is networking. In fact, "networking" was the most common response to that question, with over one fourth of respondents (n=8, 26.7%) saying that they used this strategy as a means to achieve success in their jobs. Furthermore, respondents emphasized the importance of networking at other points in their interviews as well. For example, asked how their time in ELP had benefited them professionally, more than one fourth of the women (n=8, 26.7%) said that the Program had improved their networking skills.

While networking was a theme that often emerged spontaneously in these interviews, we also asked these women specific questions relating to their networks. Their responses to these questions further underscored how important social connections were to their career achievements. More often than not (n=18, 60.0%), respondents said that they currently had someone they considered to be their mentor, and *all* said that they saw themselves as mentors to others.

Further, when asked, "Would you say that you actively cultivate allies who've helped you in your career?" only one respondent replied, "no." However, in response to this question about cultivating allies, some respondents objected to the word "actively." As one respondent explained, "I don't know that I actively say, 'Well, I want to be sure that I'm always aligned with Sally or Joe or Bob.' I think I see talent and [a] person and I think I identify them as an ally and a connection forever, and then I approach the relationship that way." These respondents indicated that while they sometimes did seek out allies deliberately, at other times these connections were more "subconscious," "natural," or "organic."

Defining Leadership (Versus "Managing")

"To me, 'leader' is being able to present your ideas confidently and also, to me…it's also collaborative. Being able to have open communication with those around you, whether you have authority over them or not, but also being able to make a decision when you need to make a decision." –female executive, 37 years old

"I think being a leader has nothing to do with having people reporting to you. It has to do with how you approach the world and other people and the impressions that you leave." –female executive, 59 years old

All of the women whom we interviewed for this project said that they saw themselves as leaders. Asked to explain what the term "leader" meant to them, nearly one fourth (n=7, 23.3%) specified that being a leader was distinct from being a manager. As one respondent explained, "Being a leader to me means not managing people but teaching people and learning from people as well so it's a two-way process." Another respondent made a similar point when she stated that her view of leadership had changed as a result of her participation in ELP:

> "I used to think of leadership more narrowly. Probably a word defined as 'management.' And I don't look at leadership as management at all anymore. I look at those as two different things. You know just because people report to you and you quote/unquote 'manage' them doesn't mean you're a leader. A leader is somebody who people will want to follow. A leader is somebody who motivates people. A leader is somebody who engages people and a leader is somebody who also makes sure things get done where a manager is more focused on the getting done part where a leader is more focused on the motivating and engaging part."

For these women, there was a component of successful leadership that went beyond having direct reports.

Successful (Women's) Leadership

Though all respondents agreed that they were leaders, they were split as to how much of a role their gender played in their leadership. When asked whether they thought being a woman mattered in terms of how they led in their organizations, half (n=15, 50.0%) said "yes."

Several of these 15 respondents mentioned that their work styles were more "collaborative" than those of some of their male colleagues. One woman, for example, explained, "I definitely have a very—I'm very much about, let's go with consensus and…what does the team think and I don't—at least I try not to kind of—impress my will on people." Another replied, "Women are by nature more collaborative, right? They are." And a third explained that, because her organization was "really matrixed," "you have to work very, very collaboratively and you know I, I think that being a woman helps me with that."

Another theme that came up in response to the question about gender differences in leadership was that, as women, these executives were better listeners and were less "in-your-face" in the way they led their teams. One interviewee pointed out that "there's a crudeness that's acceptable behavior" among the male technicians on her team:

> "They think the biggest baddest guy has to be the boss. And if I were to come in as a female being biggest baddest, I would not be received – nor is it necessary. I don't know me to be the biggest baddest, but nonetheless, I was able to very quickly gain respect because it's not just being the biggest baddest. I was more interested in *you*. 'What did you do today?'"

On the other hand, 36.7% (n=11) of respondents said that gender did not play a role in their leadership styles, and 13.3% (n=4) said that they did not know or did not respond to the question.

Invisible Inequality? "Seeing" Gender Differences at Work

In addition to not seeing gender as a factor in their leadership styles, a substantial number (n=9, 30.0%) of these women mentioned that they did not view gender disparities as an issue within their companies.[2] For example, one respondent described her workplace in the following way:

> "For as long as I can remember, they've rewarded diversity, they've had programs to be inclusive of women. I'm not sure why that is. I do not believe that there's any bias against women here**,** I really don't. I read the same statistics that everyone does about women are 77 cents on the dollar or whatever it is, and I don't believe that that happens here."

However, she also mentioned that, in her organization, "The higher you go, the fewer women there are, but I don't know why." In fact, the majority of respondents stated that there were more men than women at their level in their companies.[3]

Most interviewees who did not view gender as an issue at their companies acknowledged that inequities persisted in other workplaces. In fact, many specifically mentioned that ELP had opened their eyes to the discrimination and disparities that existed elsewhere. For example, one woman recalled:

> "There is a lot of discussion in the ELP program about perhaps being one of the only women at the table or being in a minority at the table when it came to like a senior management meeting and so forth. Now, though I didn't have that direct experience because there were quite a number of women who were in the senior management position in the firm that I worked for, it was interesting to hear that experience from other people's perspective and to see, at least in that little microcosm, how that affected them…[T]hat made me a little more grateful that I didn't have that experience because sometimes it wasn't so fun from their perspective."

Another respondent made a similar point about her time in ELP:

> "What I found interesting was [ELP] definitely helped me understand…that I worked in a better workforce, in a better company than a lot of these other women did. I honestly was naïve to the fact that there was still that much differentiation or prejudice or whatever you want to call it in the marketplace, especially with all that has to get done and the impending factors that each corporation's dealing with today."

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[2]There was no relationship between career stage (title within organization) and whether respondents made this claim.

[3]60.0% of respondents (n=18) said that there were more men than women at their levels in their companies. Five (16.7%) said that there were equal numbers or more women, and four (13.3%) said that they did not know or did not respond to the question.

Feminist: Yes, No, Maybe?

While we initially had not planned to ask questions specifically relating to the topic, Feminism was a theme that came up repeatedly in these women's responses. Specifically, several respondents spontaneously indicated that they did *not* identify as Feminists. For instance, one woman who talked about how gender was not an issue at her company told us:

> "You know, it's funny, but I don't group myself with Feminist beliefs, I don't automatically think—I don't automatically align. Sometimes I think people are saying, 'Well women are cheated on family,' or, 'We should be on this bandwagon because women make less money.' I don't follow, I don't subscribe to that, I don't view things like that. And I think it's mostly because I've had an excellent experience where I don't—I've never had a boys' club experience. And I think that comes up a lot with women and, I don't know. I don't necessarily feel the same way in a lot of situations."

Due to the prevalence of respondents' mentions of Feminism, we added the question "Would you consider yourself a Feminist?" midway through the interviews. Half of the women (15) received this question; of these, nine said "no" or had a conflicted relationship with the term. For example, one woman replied that she was "definitely not" a Feminist:

> **"**I think that men and women have equal roles in the workplace, but at home I don't consider myself a Feminist, and I feel like Feminist stigma is more around the home aspects. And like my husband and I we have our set roles and it works for us but I don't think that it's like—I've seen people who, who I would consider Feminists who divide kind of everything down the middle and I don't like that approach."

Others had more nuanced feelings about the term. "I don't identify myself as a feminist," one respondent explained. "However, I may be erring on that…I'm very aware of and feel very strongly that women are kind of the glue that holds this world together to a great degree, and so I'm a 'girl power' person. I don't call myself a Feminist, though." Another interviewee told us, similarly, "I guess I associate the word with sort of radical ideas and certainly I believe women should have equal opportunities. They should be paid equally, but I don't think of myself as Feminist per se." However, she added, "My friends would say I am."

While not an initial focus of this report, our findings regarding the conflict about— and, in some cases, outright resistance to—Feminist identity are relevant to our broader research question about how corporate women define and achieve success. Specifically, most of these respondents do *not* indicate that attaching themselves to a "Feminist" label has been important for their career trajectories.

Successfully Managing Work and Family

"The current work world is designed by men for men and has been that way since the dawn of time, right? They—we have broken in with the men and we're starting to be accepted and we're seeing a lot of women in leadership roles but the basic infrastructure is not geared for a woman

who has children that she wants to take care of and work. It's just, your commitment is always in question." –female executive, 41 years old

"[W]hat ELP reinforced is that—and it was in a very subtle way—is that if you feel that you have a work/life balance problem only you can fix it, and whether that was because you're in a job that requires too much, whether you're in a job that has false expectations of the balance, or whether you have a life partner who isn't doing their part…you're the only person who can solve it. Nobody will solve it for you." –female executive, 50 years old

While a substantial number of respondents felt that gender was not a factor in their personal leadership styles, or in their broader companies, these women tended to agree that male and female executives grapple with some different issues in their careers. For example, when we asked, "Do you feel that professional women can gain something from other professional women that they cannot gain from men?" most respondents (n=22, 73.3%) said, "yes." When discussing what women had to gain from other women, they largely talked about strategies for handling work/family pressures.

Successful work/life integration was a theme that emerged repeatedly throughout these interviews. As discussed above, one of the most common ways of defining "success" (n=9, 30.0%) was "balancing work and family." Similarly, when respondents were asked to list the three most important things in their lives, "family" was the most common response (n=26, 86.7%). By comparison, one fifth of respondents (n=6, 20.0%) said "work" or "career." In fact, while we asked questions about issues of work/life integration toward the end of each interview, the majority of respondents (n=25, 83.3%) brought up these issues before they were specifically asked about them.

When we asked respondents how they managed to balance work and their family lives, they listed multiple strategies that they used to achieve this balance successfully (Figure 4). The most common response to this question was to point out the important role of their spouses or partners in helping to achieve this balance (n=9, 30.0%). For example, one women replied that her primary strategy was, "Choosing a good partner; my husband is very patient and very understanding. I think that that's key. You can't, for someone who wants to be in a relationship, you can't do it alone and so you have to have somebody who is going to do a little give and take for you." Others indicated that their partners were stay-at-home dads, and that this arrangement had played a role in their career success.

Figure 4:
"Are there particular strategies that you use to manage the
challenge of balancing work/life pressures?"
Most Common Responses **(n=30)**

Strategy	Percentage
Spouse/partner plays important role	30.0%
Flexibility	23.3%
Decide what is important/make choices	16.7%
Planning/organization	13.3%
Carve out personal time on your calendar	13.3%
Don't feel guilty/acceptance	10.0%
Outsource/delegate	10.0%
Saying "no" to things	10.0%
Ask for things/be overt about what you want	10.0%

Percentage of Respondents (0% 5% 10% 15% 20% 25% 30% 35%)

As Figure 4 illustrates, other important work/life balance strategies included being flexible (n=9, 30.0%) and deciding what is important and making choices (n=5, 16.7%).

We also asked respondents if they had taken any action to make their companies more flexible for other people. While the majority of respondents said that they had done this (n=20, 70.0%), more than half (n=16, 53.3%) emphasized that their workplaces were *already* very flexible. "We have a huge…flex program," one woman explained. "I mean it's formalized. Not only am I fortunate to be part of it but I also support other people who do, by covering for them, or doing things that, and giving them—for both men and women, we have the option to work from home, we have flexible work schedules." Another interviewee responded, similarly:

> "A huge percentage of our business is driven by phone. I don't think it's as effective as doing it in person, but people work from home all the time. They work at home when they need to, they work at home when their child is sick and they can't go to daycare. People tend to leave whenever they need to leave, and I made a point of checking with my team, like, what's your schedule, here's what I work, just letting you know. I work on—I work at night and I work on the weekends. I'm not expecting a response. I just work when I can fit in my work, right?"

As this response suggests, the flip side of these flexible working arrangements, as many of these women mentioned, was that they were often working from home at unusual times, such as late at night.

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ELP and Success

"One of the things about my experience in ELP was that the facilitators that were chosen for my particular class…were so good at what they did that that made the whole experience incredible. Had that team not been as good as they were…it would have still been a great experience but not nearly as powerful as it was, you know? So I was learning not only from the women in the room but I was watching the facilitators and thinking, my gosh, that they, they live and breathe this. These behaviors are as natural to them as breathing and so that was a huge, a huge positive." – female executive, 59 years old

"[With] any program like that, there's no 'one size fits all.' So there's gonna be content that resonates and content that doesn't resonate. That was my experience, some of the content resonated, some of the content didn't resonate." –female executive, 57 years old

"I think that I probably would not have pursued the promotion that I went for [if it were not for ELP]. Or, I wouldn't have thought of it as a good fit for me if I hadn't been to the Program. So, it definitely helped me in terms of building confidence that I could take a different role and move to a different position and take that." –female executive, 52 years old
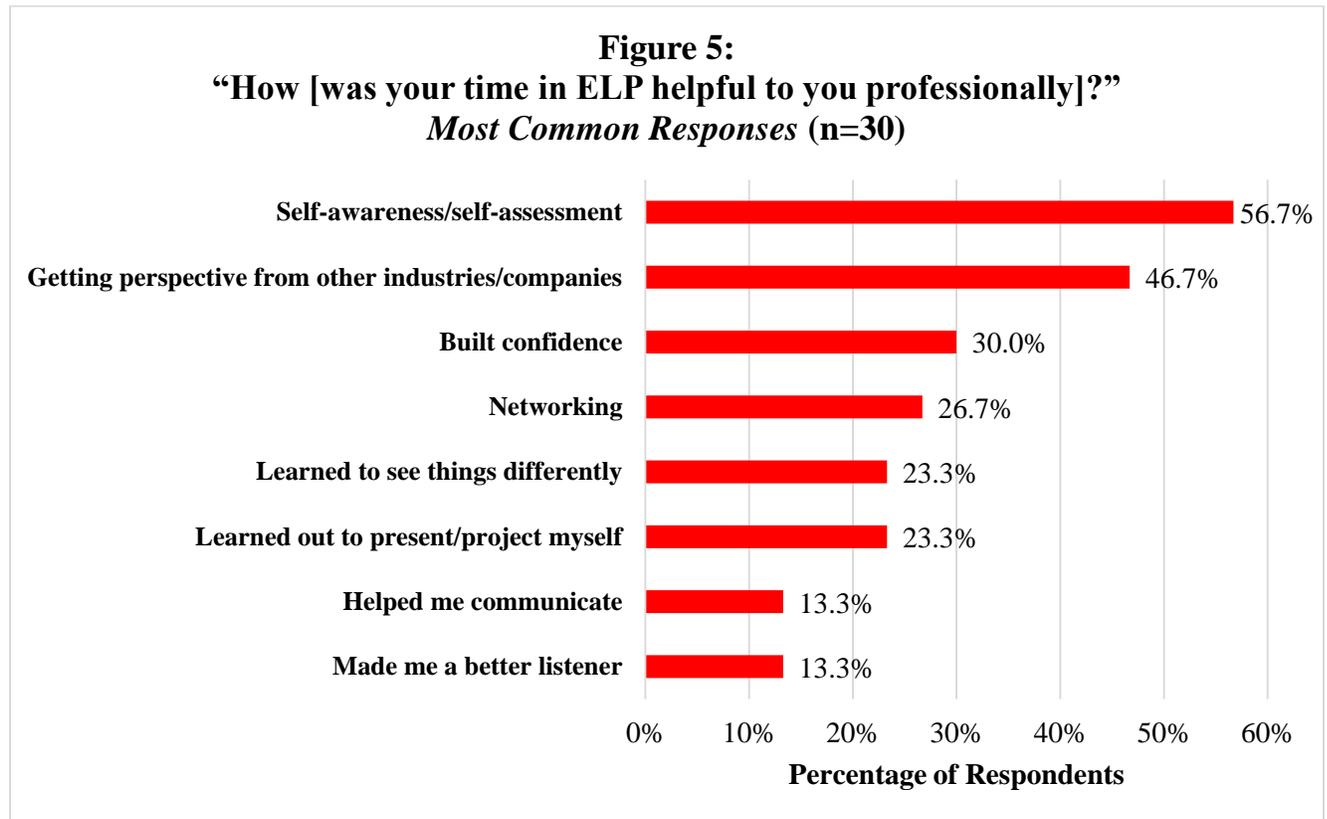
Overall, respondents agreed that participating in ELP had made a difference in their careers. As Table 1 illustrates, when asked, "Was your time in the ELP program helpful to you professionally?" all of the interviewees said, "Yes." More than two thirds (n=17, 68.0%) said that the Program had given them a better sense of what they wanted in their careers, and most (n=22, 95.7%) said that they use what they gained from ELP in their current jobs. In fact, several mentioned bringing specific elements of the Program, such as "Success Circles," into their own workplaces.

Table 1: Responses to Interview Questions about ELP[4]

Question	N	"Yes"	"No"
"Was your time in the ELP program helpful to you professionally?"	30	30 (100%)	0
"Did the Program give you a better sense of what you wanted in your career?"	25	17 (68.0%)	8 (32.0%)
"Do you feel as though you use what you gained from the Executive Leadership Program in your current job?"	23	22 (95.7%)	1 (4.3%)
"Did the Program help you [to cultivate allies in your career] at all?"	20	15 (75.0%)	5 (25.0%)
"When it comes to work/life flexibility, did you gain any strategies from the Rutgers Executive Leadership program?"	24	13 (54.2%)	11 (45.8%)

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[4]N is the number of interviewees who responded to each question. Excludes non-response and "don't know" answers.

On the other hand, when asked whether ELP had given them strategies for work/life flexibility, fewer (54.2%) said, "Yes." Further, some mentioned that one of their regrets about the Program was that there was not a formal mechanism for remaining in touch with other ELP alumnae. "I would tell you the one disappointment that I have," one respondent indicated. "I feel what was unfortunate is I lost contact with folks and it seems like people didn't engage afterwards, and I would've liked for those relationships to kind of continue."

Figure 5:
"How [was your time in ELP helpful to you professionally]?"
Most Common Responses **(n=30)**

Response	Percentage
Self-awareness/self-assessment	56.7%
Getting perspective from other industries/companies	46.7%
Built confidence	30.0%
Networking	26.7%
Learned to see things differently	23.3%
Learned out to present/project myself	23.3%
Helped me communicate	13.3%
Made me a better listener	13.3%

Percentage of Respondents

Still, the comments that these interviewees made about the Program were largely positive. As Figure 5 demonstrates, substantial numbers of respondents said that ELP had given them better self-awareness (n=17, 56.7%) and that it was helpful getting the perspective of women in other companies and industries (n=14, 46.7%). Others said that it built their confidence (n=9, 30.0%) and helped with their networking skills (n=8, 26.7%).

ELP and Success: The Utility of Women's Executive Training

Interestingly, a substantial number of respondents said that the fact that ELP was specifically designed for women was *not* something that initially attracted them to the Program (n=12, 40.0%). Despite this, however, the majority of the women we interviewed (n=25, 83.3%), said that they had in fact found the company of other women to be useful.[5]

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[5]Twenty-five respondents (83.3%) said that the company of other women leaders was useful, while two (6.7%) said it was not useful, and three did not know or did not respond (10.0%)

One theme that emerged among women who found the single-sex aspect of ELP to be helpful was that the Program was a "safe" space where they could "be more honest" and "speak freely" about what was happening in their lives and careers. "I think it being all women created a very safe environment and it also allowed us to talk about issues that relate to women," one respondent explained. Another interviewee told us, similarly, "I can remember driving back after one [ELP] session and I don't remember what the topics were but I thought, 'I cannot think of a single male [whom] if they had been in the room I would have felt as comfortable talking about and doing what we did.'"

Finally, another common thread in the responses to this question was the importance of being able to share issues of work/life balance with other women. For example, one respondent told us that the Program allowed her to discuss issues that were unique to women; asked what these specific concerns were, she replied, "Of course, there's the family/work balance, okay? That's huge when it comes to raising children—being a spouse, a mother, a woman, career woman, this life balancing that needs to take place."

CONCLUSIONS

These results have a variety of repercussions for research on gender, corporate workplaces, and career success. First, they highlight the fact that, for these women, "success" was a multi-dimensional concept, and most interviewees did not view it in starkly economic terms. While some respondents measured success through metrics such as compensation and career advancement, more of them said that it meant being satisfied and having adequate time for both work and family. Furthermore, to many of these women, success meant contributing positively to their companies and broader society. Gender pay inequity and disparities in promotion continue to be crucial workforce parity issues, but it is also important for researchers and policymakers to acknowledge the diverse ways in which corporate women themselves define achievement.

Secondly, while these results underscore the success strategies—such as networking, setting objectives, communicating effectively, and hard work—that female executives utilize in their careers, they also suggest that success is not a static concept to these women. Ideas about what is successful vary not only between individuals but also within individuals as they move through different career stages and make life changes. Still, the vast majority of these women thought of themselves as successful. Further, these results also suggest the potentially positive role a single-sex leadership development program might play in women's careers. Most interviewees agreed that their participation in ELP had aided in their career success.

Another salient finding that has implications for research on gender and work is that, while all of these respondents viewed themselves as women who were leaders, they did not necessarily see themselves as *women leaders*. Many did not think their gender was pertinent to the way they did their jobs, and a substantial number felt that gender disparities were not an issue within their companies. While researchers have used the metaphor of the "chilly climate" to describe women's feelings of exclusion within other workplace contexts, such as academia (Maranto &

Griffin 2010; Sandler 1993), these findings suggest that female executives do not necessarily perceive their organizations as "chilly."

In fact, these findings highlight an interesting paradox: some female executives noticed that the higher ranks of their organizations were male-dominated, yet they did not view inequality as an issue in their companies. This paradox—combined with many of these women's resistance to the term "Feminist"—perhaps suggests that the typical language used to discuss gender and inequality does not resonate with executive women. This finding may also suggest that these women do not feel there is much for them to gain by thinking and speaking about gender inequality in their corporate environments. Additional scholarship is necessary to further explore how women climbing the corporate ladder perceive, interpret, and speak about gender inequality within their organizations. Specifically, research might focus on the meaning and perceived consequences of identifying as a "Feminist" within a corporate context.

At the same time, most of these respondents acknowledged that gender issues persisted within other companies (with some specifically mentioning that ELP had opened their eyes to these disparities), and they largely agreed that male and female executives must contend with some different issues in their careers. The most salient of these issues was work/life balance—a theme that came up repeatedly throughout these interviews.

Many of these women felt that they were working at extremely progressive, flexible organizations; however, they still experienced tension around work/life balance and were often working long hours. These results suggest that institutional flexibility, while beneficial, is not a panacea for women in corporate environs. It is also important to note that these findings reflect the *respondents'* views about whether their workplaces were flexible. It is possible that these workers felt grateful for *any* flexibility and thus interpreted their workplaces as "highly flexible." Future research might develop an objective rubric for "flexibility" and assess to what extent these organizations fit into that heuristic.

In sum, these findings lay the groundwork for potentially fruitful further analysis concerning the nuances of "success," gender dynamics in the corporate sphere, and issues of work/family integration for women ascending the corporate ladder in the United States today.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Danielle Lindemann is Research Director at the Center for Women and Work and Assistant Research Professor, Rutgers University School of Management and Labor Relations.

ABOUT THE CENTER FOR WOMEN AND WORK

The Center for Women and Work (CWW) is an innovative leader in research and programs that promote gender equity, a high-skill economy, and reconciliation of work and well-being for all. CWW is located in the School of Management and Labor Relations at Rutgers, The State University of New Jersey, and is a member of the Institute for Women's Leadership Consortium.

To find out more about CWW, visit our website at: cww.rutgers.edu.

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APPENDIX A: INTERVIEW QUESTIONS

Professional Experiences:

Thanks for consenting to be a part of this project. First, I wanted to ask a few questions about your current experiences in your profession, if that's all right with you:

What is your current job title?

What does your current job entail – could you give me a brief job description?

You were selected for this interview based on your participation in the Rutgers ELP program and the fact that you are a successful woman in business. Would you characterize yourself as successful in your career?

Why or why not? What does "success" mean to you?

Would you say that your job has changed since attending the Program?
  If yes: How so? (Different job title? Doing different things in the same job?)

Are there particular strategies that you use to try to achieve success in your profession?
  If yes: What are they?

Would you say that you see yourself as a leader? Why or why not? What does being a "leader" mean to you?

Has your view of leadership changed as a result of the Rutgers ELP program? How yes or no?

Are there particular strategies that you use to get the people around you to see you as a leader?
  If yes: What are they? Could you tell me about the last time you used such a strategy?

Do you feel as though you are making positive changes in your organization?
  If yes: What kind? Can you give me some examples?

Are there specific individual strengths that you think you bring to your organization?
  If yes: What are they?

Networks

Do you have a mentor?
  If yes: Who is it, and what kinds of things does he/she do as your mentor?

Would you say that you actively cultivate allies who've helped you in your career? How yes or no?
  If yes: Did the Program help you to do this at all? How yes or no?

Do you see yourself as a mentor to others? How yes or no?

Executive Leadership Program:

Now I want to talk a little bit more about your experiences with the Executive Leadership Program.

Was your time in the ELP Program helpful to you *professionally*? How yes or no?

Do you feel as though you use what you gained from the Executive Leadership Program in your current job?
    If yes: How so? What from the Program do you use? Could you give me a specific example?

Some participants in ELP say that one of the things that attracted them to the Program was that it was designed specifically for women. Was this something that was important to you? Why or why not?

Was the company of other women leaders useful? Was sharing your experience specifically with other women leaders helpful to you? Why or why not?

Do you feel that professional women can gain something from other professional women that they cannot gain from men? Why or why not? If yes, what can they gain?

Do you think that being a woman matters in terms of the ways you lead in your organization [do your job]?
    If yes: How so?

How many people are at your level in your organization, and how many of them are women?
    Regardless of answer: Do you have a sense of why this is?

Did the Program give you a better sense of what you wanted in your career? How yes or no?

Are you at the level to which you aspire in your career?
    If no: To what level do you aspire? (What does that mean? How is it different from where you are now?)

Miscellaneous:

If you had to list the three things that are most important to you in life, what would those be?

Would you consider yourself a Feminist? *(added)*

Work/Life Flexibility

Are there particular strategies that you use to manage the challenge of balancing work/life pressures?

　　　If yes: What are they? Could you tell me about the last time you used such a strategy?

When it comes to work/life flexibility, did you gain any strategies from the Rutgers Executive Leadership program?

　　　If yes: What are they?

Have you taken action to make your workplace more flexible for other people?

　　　If yes: Please explain. Could you give me an example?

Demographics:

Finally, I'd like to ask you a few questions about yourself:

How old are you?

Could you tell me what your highest educational degree is?

What is your marital status?

Do you have any children? If yes, how many? How old?

What would you say is your race or ethnicity?

Final:

Is there anything else about your experience of being a professional woman that you feel it is important for me to know?

Is there anything else about your experiences with the Executive Leadership Program that you feel it is important for me to know?

Do you have any questions for me about this project or your participation in it?

APPENDIX B: SUMMARY OF INTERVIEW RESPONSES *(FREQUENCY REPORT)*

Professional Experiences:

You were selected for this interview based on your participation in the Rutgers ELP program and the fact that you are a successful woman in business. Would you characterize yourself as successful in your career?
Yes: 29 (96.7%)
No: 0
Don't know/did not respond: 1 (3.3%)

Why or why not? What does "success" mean to you?
Most common responses:
Happiness/satisfaction: 9 (30.0%)
Balancing work and family: 9 (30.0%)
My definition has changed over time: 8 (26.7%)
Financial success: 7 (23.3%)
Being influential/bringing value: 6 (20.0%)
Being in a leadership position: 6 (20.0%)
Getting promoted: 6 (20.0%)
Getting good feedback from others: 5 (16.7%)
Performing well: 4 (13.3%)
Being looked to as an expert: 3 (10.0%)
Being able to learn: 3 (10.0%)

Would you say that your job has changed since attending the Program?
Yes: 28 (93.3%)
No: 1 (3.3%)
Don't know/did not respond: 1 (3.3%)

> *If yes:* **How so? (Different job title? Doing different things in the same job?)** *(n=28)*
> Different role/different company: 11 (39.3%)
> Promoted: 16 (57.1%)
> Step down: 1 (3.6%)
> Don't know/did not respond: 0

Are there particular strategies that you use to try to achieve success in your profession?
> *If yes:* **What are they?**
Most common responses:
Networking: 8 (26.7%)
Setting objectives/always looking for the next move: 6 (20.0%)
Honesty: 5 (16.7%)
Communicating effectively: 5 (16.7%)
Listening to others/learning from others: 5 (16.7%)
Doing my job well: 4 (13.3%)
Working hard: 4 (13.3%)

Balancing work and family: 4 (13.3%)
Seeking mentorship: 3 (10.0%)
There are no strategies: 3 (10.0%)

Would you say that you see yourself as a leader?
Yes: 30 (100.0%)
No: 0
Don't know/did not respond: 0

Has your view of leadership changed as a result of the Rutgers ELP program?
Yes: 17 (56.7%)
No: 10 (33.3%)
Don't know/did not respond: 3 (10.0%)

Are there particular strategies that you use to get the people around you to see you as a leader?
Most common responses:
There are no strategies: 4 (13.3%)
Ask questions: 3 (10.0%)
Get feedback from others: 3 (10.0%)

Do you feel as though you are making positive changes in your organization?
Yes: 26 (86.7%)
No: 2 (6.7%)
Don't know/did not respond: 2 (6.7%)

Are there specific individual strengths that you think you bring to your organization?
Most common responses:
Communicating: 6 (20.0%)
Being organized: 5 (16.7%)
Honesty: 4 (13.3%)
A diversity of personal experiences: 3 (10.0%)
Leadership skills: 3 (10.0%)
Networking: 3 (10.0%)
Seeing long term/the "big picture": 3 (10.0%)

Networks

Do you have a mentor?
Yes: 18 (60.0%)
No: 11 (36.7%)
Don't know/did not respond: 1 (3.3%)

Would you say that you actively cultivate allies who've helped you in your career?
Yes: 28 (93.3%)
No: 1 (3.3%)

Don't know/did not respond: 1 (3.3%)

If yes: **Did the Program help you to do this at all? How yes or no?** *(n=28)*
Yes: 15 (53.6%)
No: 5 (17.9%)
Don't know/did not respond: 8 (28.6%)

Do you see yourself as a mentor to others?
Yes: 30 (100.0%)
No: 0
Don't know/did not respond: 0

Executive Leadership Program:

Was your time in the ELP program helpful to you *professionally***?**
Yes: 30 (100.0%)
No: 0
Don't know/did not respond: 0

How [was your time in ELP helpful to you professionally]?
Most common responses:
Self-awareness/self-assessment: 17 (56.7%)
Getting perspective from other industries/companies: 14 (46.7%)
Built confidence: 9 (30.0%)
Networking: 8 (26.7%)
Learned out to present/project myself: 7 (23.3%)
Learned to see things differently: 7 (23.3%)
Made me a better listener: 4 (13.3%)
Helped me communicate: 4 (13.3%)
Interacting with other successful people/women was helpful: 3 (10.0%)

Do you feel as though you use what you gained from the Executive Leadership Program in your current job?
Yes: 22 (73.3%)
No: 1 (3.3%)
Don't know/did not respond: 7 (23.3%)

Some participants in ELP say that one of the things that attracted them to the Program was that it was designed specifically for women. Was this something that was important to you?
Yes: 15 (50.0%)
No: 12 (40.0%)
Don't know/did not respond: 3 (10.0%)

Was the company of other women leaders useful?
Yes: 25 (83.3%)

No: 2 (6.7%)
Don't know/did not respond: 3 (10.0%)

Do you feel that professional women can gain something from other professional women that they cannot gain from men?
Yes: 22 (73.3%)
No: 3 (10.0%)
Don't know/did not respond: 5 (16.7%)

Do you think that being a woman matters in terms of the ways you lead in your organization [do your job]?
Yes: 15 (50.0%)
No: 11 (36.7%)
Don't know/did not respond: 4 (13.3%)

How many people are at your level in your organization, and how many of them are women?
More men than women: 15 (50.0%)
Equal or more women: 5 (16.7%)
Don't know/did not respond/not applicable[6]: 10 (33.3%)

Did the Program give you a better sense of what you wanted in your career?
Yes: 17 (56.7%)
No: 8 (26.7%)
Don't know/did not respond: 5 (16.7%)

Are you at the level to which you aspire in your career?
Yes: 12 (40.0%)
No: 14 (46.7%)
Don't know/did not respond: 4 (13.3%)

Miscellaneous:

If you had to list the three things that are most important to you in life, what would those be?
Most common responses:
Family: 26 (86.7%)
Health: 11 (36.7%)
Work/career: 6 (20.0%)
Financial security: 5 (16.7%)
Happiness/enjoyment/fun: 5 (16.7%)
Friends: 4 (13.3%)
Connections/relationships: 4 (13.3%)
Learning/intellectual satisfaction: 4 (13.3%)
Making a difference: 4 (13.3%)

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[6]Some respondents worked freelance.

Faith: 3 (10.0%)

<u>Work/Life Flexibility</u>

Are there particular strategies that you use to manage the challenge of balancing work/life pressures?
Spouse/partner plays important role at home: 9 (30.0%)
Flexibility: 7 (23.3%)
Decide what is important/make choices: 5 (16.7%)
Carve out personal time on your calendar: 4 (13.3%)
Planning/organization: 4 (13.3%)
Ask for things/be overt about what you want: 3 (10.0%)
Saying "no" to things: 3 (10.0%)
Outsource/delegate: 3 (10.0%)
Don't feel guilty/acceptance: 3 (10.0%)

When it comes to work/life flexibility, did you gain any strategies from the Rutgers Executive Leadership program?
Yes: 13 (43.3%)
No: 11 (36.7%)
Don't know/did not respond: 6 (20.0%)

Have you taken action to make your workplace more flexible for other people?
Yes: 21 (70.0%)
No: 4 (13.3%)
Don't know/did not respond: 5 (16.7%)
Mentioned workplace already flexible: 16 (53.3%)

<u>Demographics:</u>

How old are you?
Range: 35-63
Mean: 49.5
Median: 49.5

Could you tell me what your highest educational degree is?
Some college: 1 (3.3%)
Undergraduate degree (BA or BS): 8 (26.7%)
Master's degree: 10 (33.3%)
Advanced professional degree (PhD, MBA, JB, and/or MD): 11 (36.7%)

What is your marital status?
Married or committed relationship: 23 (76.7%)
Single: 3 (10.0%)
Widowed: 3 (10.0%)
Divorced: 1 (3.3%)

Do you have any children?
Yes: 23 (76.7%)
No: 7 (23.3%)

What would you say is your race or ethnicity?
White/Caucasian: 23 (76.7%)
Black: 3 (10.0%)
Asian: 2 (6.7%)
Hispanic: 1 (3.3%)
Biracial: 1 (3.3%)