

Women Leaders in the Texas Panhandle: The Role of Self-Reliance, Community, and Developmental Networks

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Women leaders who live in the Texas Panhandle exhibit a unique blend of individuality and community. Their development into leaders can be related to a balance of self-reliance and relationship connection. The researchers interviewed 30 women business leaders to understand their identities, experiences, individual stories, and the resources that contributed to their growth. The participants identified developmental networks built from their community, with other leaders, and educational opportunities as central to their success, growth, and development. The paper's conceptual framework is guided by two research questions: "What is the role of developmental networks in the career success of women business leaders in the Texas Panhandle?" and "In what ways do the traditional values and cultural norms of the Texas Panhandle shape the leadership experiences and support systems of professional women?" The researchers employed a collective case study design to understand the lived experiences of women business leaders within the 26 counties that make up the Texas Panhandle. Most participants did not have traditional mentors and developed their own developmental networks. What these women learned and the advice they offer provides insight into the mentoring guidance they sought earlier in their careers, coupled with the wisdom they gained. Their advice is direct and inclusive, showing an understanding of the questions and fears common to those early in their careers or starting a new business.

Keywords: Developmental networks, mentors, career advice

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Introduction

The objective of this paper is to present real-life examples of women business leaders in the Texas Panhandle and their lived professional experience. The women business leaders are often challenged by the Texas Panhandle business environment, which includes a traditional male leadership philosophy and a lack of professional role models and mentors. They credit their community and perseverance as major factors in their success.

The Texas Panhandle is a region that takes pride in its traditional values and way of life. Many residents have deep agricultural roots, which can mean a traditional division of labor as well as a more gendered outlook. Sheryl Sandberg (2014) introduced the concept of "a seat at the table", to describe being included in important conversations and decision making. Women leaders in the Texas Panhandle understand that when they take their seat at the table, they may be the only female. They do not take for granted that they must advocate for themselves. It is in this reality that the women leaders find it necessary to build their developmental network.

Literature Review

Many professional women have been encouraged to find a mentor. The idea may be introduced in college, early career, and is often repeated at professional seminars (Sandberg, 2014). A mentor is traditionally defined as an experienced professional, often from an older generation, who offers guidance and support to a younger associate, referred to as the protégé or mentee, to help them develop and rise in their career (Higgins & Kram, 2001).

While it is true that finding an exceptional mentor will open doors and set the path for career ascent, the reality is that many women often go through their entire career without identifying a mentor (Washington, 2010). Many women have been coached about the importance of mentorship but often struggle to find someone interested in developing a time-consuming relationship (Hewlett et al., 2010; Ibarra, 2010; Sandberg, 2013). Building a developmental network, a trusted group for counsel and support, is a solution to advancing personal and professional growth without an individual mentor (Higgins & Kram, 2001).

Higgins and Kram (2001) expanded the idea of the single mentor/protégé relationship by introducing the concept of a developmental network as the “set of people a protege names as taking an active interest in and action to advance the protege’s career by providing developmental assistance” (p. 268). In their seminal article introducing developmental networks, the authors suggested the term “developer” (Higgins & Kram, 2001, p. 269). Developers can come from different hierarchical positions within the protégé’s organization (e.g., senior managers, supervisors, peers, or subordinates) as well as from domains outside of work, such as family and community (Murphy & Kram, 2010). These developers can provide three different types of support: social support (e.g., sponsorship, exposure and visibility; Chollet et al., 2021), career (e.g., coaching, protection, and challenging assignments), and psychosocial (e.g., counseling, role modeling, acceptance and confirmation, and friendship; Kram, 1985). Developmental networks can also provide legitimacy and opportunities for learning (Dunn, 2019).

Theoretical Framework

An individual’s developmental networks are a component of their social network (Higgins & Kram, 2001). A network’s diversity can be defined in two ways: range, which refers to the variety of social systems within the relationship, and density, which refers to the level of connection among the members (Burt, 1992; Higgins & Kram, 2001).

The density of social networks is measured by strong and weak ties (Granovetter, 1973). Strong ties are relationships that are intimate, emotional, and reciprocal. (Granovetter, 1973), and provides redundant information, as everyone has access to the same information (Granovetter, 1973; Hansen, 1999). Weak ties are acquaintances, friends of friends, and past work colleagues (Granovetter, 1973), which provide non-redundant information (Hansen, 1999).

Social network ties can be further differentiated as bonding ties and bridging ties. (Putnam, 2000). Bonding ties are strong, more similar to network closure, while bridging ties are weaker, more diverse with structural holes (e.g., Coleman, 1988; Granovetter, 1973; Liu & Duff, 1972; McDonald, 2011; Putnam, 2000). Bonding ties include close family, friends, and coworkers who provide social support (de Sousa Briggs, 1997). Bridging ties are acquaintances, past co-workers, and friends of friends who provide unknown information and social opportunity (de Sousa Briggs, 1997). This study examines the following research questions:

RQ1: What is the role of developmental networks in the career success of women business leaders in the Texas Panhandle?

RQ2: In what ways do the traditional values and cultural norms of the Texas Panhandle shape the leadership experiences and support systems of professional women?

Methods

The chosen group for the study was women business owners and leaders in the Texas Panhandle. Participants were selected through purposeful sampling, allowing the researchers to identify women leaders and business owners who matched the research study criteria. A group of 30 participants were chosen for this research study, providing multiple contexts from which to collect data (Creswell, 2013; Miles et al., 2014). Participants were limited to the 26 counties in the Texas region known as the Texas Panhandle. The participant group was comprised of 30 women purposively selected based on their residency and whether they owned a business or held an executive leadership position at for-profit or not-for-profit institutions in the Texas Panhandle. Leadership experience ranged from five to over 40 years. Educational attainment varied and included high school (2), associate’s degree (1), bachelor’s degrees (15), master’s degrees (10), and doctorate (1). For additional demographic information, please refer to Table 1, Appendix.

After obtaining Institutional Review Board approval, the research team recruited women leaders of the Texas Panhandle community through email invitations to clients of the West Texas A&M University Small Business Development Center (SPDC) and WTEnterprise Center, as well as word-of-mouth. Participants were also recruited through social media, as well as digital and paper-based flyers. Potential participants were given a description of the project, and those who agreed to participate in the study were provided with an electronic signed consent form.

Interested participants met with one of the researchers in person, via Zoom, or telephone. The research interview lasted between 30 to 45 minutes and included questions about demographics, leadership experiences, and leadership philosophies. To protect their privacy and maintain their confidentiality, each participant was assigned a pseudonym. Each participant received a \$40 eGift card via email after all the interviews were completed.

The collective case study was qualitative and conducted through the lens of the social constructivist paradigm. The social constructivist paradigm, which is also known as the naturalistic inquiry paradigm (Erlandson et al., 1993; Lincoln & Guba, 1985), suggests that researchers and participants influence each other (Erlandson et al., 1993). Constructivism facilitates the inductive formation of theories and patterns shaped by the researcher’s prior experiences and background (Creswell, 2013).

Utilizing a qualitative methods design allows

an understanding of a process or system through the participants' perceptions of living and working in a specific region (Creswell, 2013). The data were collected through semi-structured interviews and field notes. Trint.com was used for transcribing data, converting the audio and video files into textual transcripts. The transcripts and recorded interviews were reviewed to verify the transcribed data. Corrections were made as necessary. A prepared Microsoft Excel spreadsheet was utilized to hold the data, with each participant's response organized by row and separate columns containing the interview questions.

Each participant's data was studied to find contrasts and associations between responses (Lincoln & Guba, 1985). Data analysis was conducted using the constant comparative method, which identifies patterns by comparing individual data sections to determine similarities and differences (Merriam, 2009). The researchers further refined the data by selecting and simplifying it during analysis through determining themes and defining categories (Miles et al., 2014). The emergent themes were further analyzed and achieved an inter-coder consensus of 100%. Trustworthiness was ensured through engagement with participants, maintaining an audit trail, and utilizing purposeful sampling.

Discussion

Based on the data collected and the literature reviewed, researchers will present findings from both research questions. RQ1 is discussed in the first section followed by a discussion of RQ2.

RQ1: What is the role of developmental networks in the career success of women business leaders in the Texas Panhandle?

The participants received their support, encouragement, and even sponsorship from various sources, including co-workers, community groups, and church groups. No one in the participant group specified an individual mentor or sponsor as a source of guidance and encouragement in their career. Several noted they had no mentor or a passive mentor. One participant, "Beth", stated, "I never really found a mentor". "Emma" had been assigned a mentor, forthrightly commented, "I had a mentor, and he was a male and he sucked. He did not mentor at all. He [was] just like, 'I don't know, good luck with that. Figure it out.'"

Community

Although there was not a question in the study that specifically addressed community, 20 participants (67%) credited their community as a major factor of support. The Texas Panhandle is mostly rural, and the residents take pride in the strong community spirit. "Rachel" asserted when asked about the factors that contributed to her

business success, "...I think just networking in general, I have a huge network within the farming community, the ag community". "Zena", an active member in her Hispanic community, credited "being in the community... helps overcome a lot of the barriers" and "Just being involved in the community has helped a ton. Like, I wouldn't be where I am now if I wasn't in the women groups". Lastly, "Julie" captured how community can be the foundation of an individual's development network:

Community is very, very important and building relationships is very important... being super involved in your community and with a large understanding of what's happening in the community, as well as... reaching out to people, communicating with them, asking for help. Not just asking for help but asking for advice. Being wise enough to gain a group of people, men and women of all walks of life that have more experience and more wisdom than you do"

Trusted Counsel, Support, and Information

Fifty percent of the participants (15) stressed the importance of networking and finding others that they could trust and rely on for support and information. Identifying trusted counsel was specifically cited as an important element. One participant, "Brenda", was especially straightforward with her advice: "Talk to people. Find mentors. I think it's hugely important to seek advice and counsel from others." Another participant, "Carla", expressed the importance of reaching out for help when needed: "When there is something that [is] not going like you think it should, reach up to somebody who is in [the] position where you want to be so that you [can] get good advice." Beth emphasized trust and advised "...find people that they can trust to [give] counsel. Do not be afraid to ask questions. I find those local resources... Surround yourself with people that you can trust."

Participants shared their perspective that they experienced challenges in their businesses and jobs. Challenges are inevitable and the women leaders built a developmental network of trusted mentors, advisors and friends that can offer insight, support and solutions, as well as ideas on how to be prepared. These participants believed a trusted network was essential for business success.

Learn from Others

Eleven participants (37%) emphasized the importance of learning from others. The participants described a dynamic business world with constant unknowns. These participants clearly expressed the power of ongoing learning as a tool for solving potential and unknown issues. Rachel stressed the importance of learning by saying, "Always be open to learning new things and be open minded," while "Cathy" focused

on learning from role models, “Be able to learn from where they have been in your walk then... be willing to do that.” “Michelle” emphasized continuous learning, stating, “Always learn. Learn how to be a leader. [Learn] how to gain that respect respectfully.” Brenda continued the thought that leadership can be and should be learned: “I think the first, piece of advice I’d give is to learn how to be a leader.”

While learning from others was a primary theme, gaining business knowledge and skills was also emphasized. The participants started business or were promoted to upper management positions and found that they did not have the business expertise they needed to be successful. Janet gave this prescriptive advice: “They need to make good contacts in the community to understand how to correctly run their business.” “Clarissa” also urged women to learn the basics of business and finance, “I would just encourage people... if you’re going to get into this, make sure that you’re educated in all the areas of finance and taxes and laws concerning your specific industry.” “Jackie” gave directions on where a new business leader could find information and help: “First and foremost, start with the SBDC or WTEenterprise, or somebody that can help you write a business plan.”

RQ2: In what ways do the traditional values and cultural norms of the Texas Panhandle shape the leadership experiences and support systems of professional women?

Two themes are discussed in the following sections.

Success in a Male Dominant Work Environment

Eleven participants (37%) pointed towards the challenges of living and working in the traditional culture of the Texas Panhandle. “Diana”, a Texas Panhandle native explained:

It’s probably important for women who are coming from outside to learn about the culture because we are a little bit different. I grew up here, so at least I knew what I was getting myself into, but I’ve still been shocked and surprised. Women business leaders are in the minority, which means that male leadership is the norm. “Lorelei” described the culture as a “hurdle” and acknowledged, “It still is a little backward here in

the Texas Panhandle, where they assume that the men are the ones that are running the businesses”. “Zena” described challenges of being heard, “It’s awkward and hard being the woman leader at the table. Like you don’t get taken seriously... I feel like a woman’s voice is not... taken as a man’s voice”. Most of the participants noted that they have observed a promising change in traditional attitudes. “Liz” explained:

I think that it’s much better... than it was when I first got out of college, [the] discrimination against women. And it wasn’t ever necessarily intentional or hurtful, but it was just the way things were. We were always a little bit behind where the rest of the country is -

The Importance of Perseverance, Confidence, and Not Being Afraid

Eight participants (27%) emphasized how important it is to be confident, take risks, and persevere during times of challenge. Sheryl Sandberg’s advice to “sit at the table” (Sandberg, 2013, p. 27) was endorsed by several participants. “Isabel” captures the need to be brave and remember you have a voice “Don’t be afraid to sit at the table... whatever that table looks like. Your voice matters. Your thoughts, ideas, everything matters.” “Nicole” echoed Isabel’s words with this advice, “[Sit] yourself at the table and [do] not wait for somebody to ask you.” “Heather” emphasized confidence:

I think I would tell them to be confident in their skill set, you know? ...And I would just really encourage people to be confident and stand up for yourself and you’ve got to be able to back it up. You obviously have to have the skills and all the things but never sell yourself short just because you are a female. Know that you can do it.

“Cindy” urged women to “First, believe in yourself. Believe that you have tools within yourself. Utilize them. Relax. Don’t take anything personal. Be brave. Confident.” Cathy’s advice was to “Be strong. Don’t let your emotion overtake you... You have to persevere.” Lastly, Zena captured how difficult it is to take a risk by simply advising, “Do it afraid. So don’t be afraid to start.”

Table 2:
Responses

Responses	Occurrences	Percentages
Community	20	67%
Network. Seek trusted counsel	15	50%
Male Dominated Workplace	11	37%
Always be learning	11	37%
Persevere. Be confident and do not be afraid.	8	27%]

Conclusion

The women of the Texas Panhandle can be described as confident and resilient with strong community ties. They negotiate the traditional business and career landscape by advocating for themselves and establishing developmental networks, their trusted group for counsel and support. Their advice for other women captures what they consider to be important information for Texas Panhandle women seeking to ascend to leadership in business and careers.

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Appendix

	Alias	Job title	Education	Leadership	Business Type	City	1. Annual Salary
1	Heather	Insurance Agency Owner	Bach Agribusiness	20 Years	Crop Insurance/ Farming	Claude, TX	\$150,000
2	Rachel	CEO	MBA, M Public Accounting	15 Years	Banking and Farming	Amarillo, TX	\$400,000
3	Laura	Company Owner	BS Economics	3 Years	Ag Accounting	Amarillo, TX	\$50,000
4	Emma	n/a	MS General Business	24 Years	Banking - Finance.	Amarillo, TX	
5	Marie	Senior Vice President Commercial Loans	MBA	15 Years	Banking - Finance.	Amarillo, TX	\$90,000- \$110,000
6	Katherine	Vice President of Business Development	BS Finance MBA	24 Years	Consulting/ Education	Amarillo, TX	\$90,000- \$110,000
7	Ashley	Executive Director	BS General Studies	6 Years	Consulting/College Success	Amarillo, TX	\$40,000- \$50,000
8	Julie	Executive Director Non-Profit	MS Administration	8 Years	Non-Profit	Amarillo, TX	\$40,000
9	Joyce	Economic development consultant	BS Accounting	34 Years	Economic development	Amarillo, TX	\$80,000- \$100,000
10	Evelyn	Owner	High School	8 Years	Food Product - Salsa	Amarillo, TX	
11	Zena	Community Development	Masters Degree	15+	Business Consulting/Typing	Amarillo, TX	\$10,000- 15,000
12	Beth	President	Associates Degree	3 Years	Magazine Publication	Amarillo, TX	\$90,000
13	Isabel	Executive Director	Bach Business Mgmt	25 Years	Non-Profit - Ed, Arts, Cultural	Amarillo, TX	\$70,000
14	Cathy	Executive Director	BA Merchandizing	30 +	Non-Profit - Children	Canyon, TX	\$40,000
15	Cindy	Founder/Owner	BS Systems Engineering	25+	Consulting Company	Amarillo, TX	\$150,000
16	Tina	Financial Advisor	Bachelor	6 Years	Financial services, Retirement planning	Borger, TX	\$200,000
17	Michelle	Owner/Vice- President	High School	3 Years	Commercial Construction	Amarillo, TX	\$350,000- \$500,000
18	Carla	Sales Director	Bach Accounting	22 Years	Cosmetic Sales	Amarillo, TX	\$35,000
19	Jena	Private Practice Counselor	PhD	10 Years	Counseling and Consulting	Amarillo, TX	\$10,000
20	Jackie	Owner	Bachelors Education	5+ Years	Honey and Skincare	Canyon, TX	\$60,000
21	Janet	Co-Owner	Masters Degree	20 Years	Retail Meat Business	Gruver, TX	\$48,000
22	Sara	F o u n d e r / President	Masters Degree	9 Years	Non-Profit - Service Dogs	Amarillo, TX	\$36,000
23	Martha	Co-Owner/Vice- President	High School	5 Years	D e s i g n / S c r e e n Printing	Amarillo, TX	\$30,000
24	Jennifer	Owner	Master's degree	9 Years	Mobile Bartending Service	Amarillo, TX	\$60,000
25	Diana	Owner	Bachelor's Degree	20 Years	News Media	Spearman, TX	\$60,000
26	Nicole	CEO	MBA	20+ Years	Business Consulting	Amarillo, TX	\$160,000
27	Lorelei	Owner	BBA - Marketing	25 Years	Estate Auction Co	Amarillo, TX	\$80,000
28	Madilynn	Owner	Bach General Studies	7 Years	Small Bookkeeping & Tax Service	Amarillo, TX	\$36,000
29	Liz	President	Bachelors Journalism	40+ Years	Marketing/PR	Amarillo, TX	\$120,000
30	Clarissa	Owner	Bachelors Communication	6 Years	Flower Shop	Amarillo, TX	\$50,000