

Article

Awakenings: An Authentic Leadership Development Program to Break the Glass Ceiling

Miryam Martínez-Martínez ¹, Manuel M. Molina-López ¹, Ruth Mateos de Cabo ¹, Patricia Gabaldón ², Susana González-Pérez ^{1,*} and Gregorio Izquierdo ³

¹ Business Economics Department, Business School, Universidad San Pablo-CEU, 28003 Madrid, Spain; marmar@ceu.es (M.M.-M.); manuelmaria.molinalopez@ceu.es (M.M.M.-L.); matcab@ceu.es (R.M.d.C.)

² Economics Department, Business School, IE University, 28006 Madrid, Spain; patricia.gabaldon@ie.edu

³ Economics Department, Business School, UNED University, 28040 Madrid, Spain; gizquierdo@cee.uned.es

* Correspondence: susana.gonzalezperez@ceu.es; Tel.: +34-(91)594566300

Abstract: Companies are vital agents in achieving the United Nations' Sustainable Development Goals. One key role that businesses can play in achieving the 5th Sustainable Development Goal on gender equality is implementing training programs for their women executives so they can reach top corporate leadership positions. In this paper, we test the effectiveness of an Authentic Leadership Development (ALD) program for women executives. By interviewing 32 participants from this ALD program and building on authentic leadership theory, we find that this program lifts women participants' self-efficacy perception, as well as their self-resolution to take control of their careers. The driver for both results is a reflective thinking process elicited during the program that leads women to abandon the stereotype of a low status role and lack of self-direction over time. Through the relational authenticity developed during the program, women participants develop leadership styles that are more congenial with their gender group, yet highly accepted by the in-group leader members, which enhances their social capital. After the program, the women participants flourished as authentic leaders, were able to activate and foster their self-esteem and social capital, and enhanced their agency in career advancement, increasing their likelihood of breaking the glass ceiling.

Keywords: glass ceiling; women executives; authentic leadership; authentic leadership development program



Citation: Martínez-Martínez, M.; Molina-López, M.M.; Mateos de Cabo, R.; Gabaldón, P.; González-Pérez, S.; Izquierdo, G. Awakenings: An Authentic Leadership Development Program to Break the Glass Ceiling. *Sustainability* **2021**, *13*, 7476. <https://doi.org/10.3390/su13137476>

Academic Editors: Mónica Segovia Pérez and Eva Cifre

Received: 21 May 2021

Accepted: 29 June 2021

Published: 5 July 2021

Publisher's Note: MDPI stays neutral with regard to jurisdictional claims in published maps and institutional affiliations.



Copyright: © 2021 by the authors. Licensee MDPI, Basel, Switzerland. This article is an open access article distributed under the terms and conditions of the Creative Commons Attribution (CC BY) license (<https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by/4.0/>).

1. Introduction

The United Nations (UN) recognize that sustainable development is only possible if women and girls have equal access to quality education, economic resources, and political participation, as well as equal opportunities with men and boys for employment, leadership, and decision making at all levels [1]. In fact, the 5th UN Sustainable Development Goal on gender equality, specifically goal 5.5, looks to “ensure women’s full and effective participation and equal opportunities for leadership at all levels of decision making in political, economic and public life”. Indeed, gender equality and the effective participation of women are both important for effective action on all aspects of sustainable development [2]. Thus, the persistence of a gender gap in corporate leadership positions is a major socio-economic challenge, and the underutilization of the talent and skills of highly qualified women a hurdle to development. Thus, initiatives that close this gap are tools to achieve sustainable development.

The scarcity of women in decision-making bodies has negative effects on society. From an economic point of view, not taking into account half the pool of talent when selecting candidates for decision-making bodies cannot provide an optimal selection. This inefficient allocation of resources would imply losses in productivity and innovation [3,4]. However, women are still not obtaining top corporate positions [5]. In fact, the presence of women tends to decline as the level of management increases, which showcases the

existence of limits beyond formal qualifications in real-life systems. These invisible barriers preventing women from reaching leadership positions have been grouped under the concept of the “glass ceiling” [6]. While previous research has amply identified the external challenges that women face to break the glass ceiling, much less scholarship has explored the conditions under which women can overcome the internal barriers that can facilitate women’s leadership. Therefore, limitations can be identified either from the supply (i.e., women’s internal barriers) or the demand side (i.e., companies) [7]. The measures to reduce these limitations are also classified in terms of the demand and supply sides; thus, any policy or action that incentivizes companies to incorporate women within these corporate positions are grouped as demand-side solutions. The supply-side measures, on the contrary, aim to help women to reach such positions. In any case, both supply and demand are very much interrelated and when women are not present in the highest positions in business, their limited influence on decisions perpetuates inequality in the workplace.

Thus, in this new scenario of searching for Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs), companies can eventually become participants that are fully engaged in the movement [8] through the implementation of demand-side solutions. One straightforward way through which they can contribute to the achievement of gender equality in top corporate leadership positions is truly becoming agents of change (champions) in this field. In particular, companies, together with institutions of higher education, can play an important role in designing and implementing training programs for their women executives so that they can develop the skills, attitudes, and behaviours needed to overcome both personal and corporate barriers and break the glass ceiling.

Authentic Leadership Development (hereafter ALD) is configured as a collection of several components, such as positive psychological capital (e.g., confidence, optimism, hope, and resiliency), positive moral perspective (i.e., inherent ethical/moral component), self-awareness, self-regulation, and relational transparency [9]. Thus, in the search for more suitable training programs to help women executives break their barriers, this positive style of leadership seems especially suitable for them for at least two reasons. First, given that self-awareness and solid moral foundations are central to authentic leadership [9], teaching approaches that promote “reflexive ability”, such as ALD programs, can enable the effective learning of responsible leadership. This way, businesses could redefine their relations with society to play a significant role in preventing human, financial, or ecological crises, allowing these leaders becoming agents of change in this regard. Society needs leaders integrating virtues values, character strengths, and ethical decision making to strengthen an organization’s ethical decision making [8]. Second, ALD programs can elicit women participants’ authentic leadership. Authentic leadership is conceptualized as a communal leadership style positively associated with women; in fact, in their study, Braun et al. [10] found that perceivers have female leaders in mind when prompted to think of authentic leadership. For women, this leadership is more congruent with their gender group. This way, through these programs, companies look both to train future managers in ethics and sustainability issues and provide their women executives with more suitable skills and the capability to be promoted.

In this paper, we examine the Promociona Project as an ALD training program specially designed for women leaders. We consider this to be an ALD program as, according to their own statement, its goal is to promote women to senior management positions but remain aware of their own moral values, perspectives, knowledge, strengths, and the environment they work in, which is closely aligned with the definition of Authentic Leadership. Additionally, the Promociona Project is not a mere collection of classroom-based theory lectures that have proven to have limited effectiveness in developing the personal abilities, attitudes, and behaviour that are required for leadership [11]. The project encompasses executive education with several self-reflection and self-knowledge exercises, as well as feedback evaluation from peers, coaching sessions, a mentoring program, and several networking activities with business leaders and managers. This diversified activity program involving training, one-on-one coaching, and the reframing of critical life events

(trigger events) is considered to be the most promising pathway to develop authentic leadership [12].

Therefore, our aim is to evaluate the effectiveness of the techniques, tools, and processes provided by an ALD program specially designed for women to activate their leadership skills [13] and thus eliminate or at least reduce the internal barriers that prevent women from being promoted to high status positions in their organizations. By drawing on authentic leadership theory [13], women, through this training program, can position themselves as relevant candidates for promotions. We approach this research goal through a mix-method methodology, allowing us to clarify and complement the exploratory analysis carried out with the qualitative method. Our results show how this ALD program acts as a catalyst for authentic leadership [9]. The tools provided by the program activate the different elements of relational authenticity [13] and allow women to move forward in their corporate careers. In particular, we find that the investigated ALD program improves women participants' self-concept, although not through a leader eudaemonic well-being mechanism as predicted by the literature [14], but through a life-story approach that develops high levels of self-resolution to abandon a low status role, as well as raising the women's self-efficacy perception and self-development. The program also has a vitally positive impact in the relational and social capital of participants that sparks after the program, as a way to leverage the newly acquired or activated skills. Indeed, the program offers them leadership styles that are more congenial with their gender group, inspiring identification and trust from followers and peers, and gaining relational authenticity. This confers the confidence and legitimacy required to build up networks and relationships with others relevant to promotions [15]. Finally, we also observe that participants learn to take control of their careers, developing guided reflective thinking that leads to a person-role merger process (i.e., the life-story approach) [16], gaining legitimacy to take control of their own progression and abandoning their tendency to react rather than to act.

In summary, this research makes several contributions to the literature. First, this is one of the few studies [8,17] that tries to understand how authentic leadership can be developed and taught in a training program in the business field. This understanding is critical to advancing theory and research on authentic leadership, a relatively new field. Second, we evaluate the effectiveness of a current and real ALD training program specially designed for women leaders to address internal obstacles that potentially hinder their ascent up organizational ladders, thus providing an answer to scholars' calls for "novel solutions to the persisting challenges for women in leadership" [18]. A better comprehension of these programs would help researchers, practitioners, companies, and governments to better assess and design training programs for women candidates to further advance gender diversity in leadership positions. Finally, we provide empirical evidence to address previously unexamined issues about how women, traditionally considered to be outsiders within leadership elites, can overcome prior obstacles and be perceived as authentic leaders by their peers and followers [13]. In particular, we address how ALD programs can provide women with more congruent managerial styles with their gender group that are acceptable in the leadership field, thus facilitating a genuine leadership style.

2. Theoretical Background

Recently, and from the positive psychology area, there has been growing interest in authentic leadership [19] and authenticity training [17]. After the 2008–2009 recession, many companies aimed to help their leaders to discover their "true" self in an attempt to be trusted and promote public confidence [20]. Authentic leaders are especially needed to solve societal challenges by fostering "positive environments and conduct business in an ethical, socially responsible manner" [12]. Indeed, authentic leadership is considered essential in achieving sustainable business performance [17].

Shamir and Eilam [16] define authentic leaders based on the leader's self-concept. This way, authentic leaders are persons that have achieved a high level of merger between themselves and the leader role (person-role merger); high levels of self-resolution that

center around strongly held values and convictions (self-concept clarity), which goals are self-concordant with their values (self-concordance) and whose behaviour is consistent with their self-concept (self-expressive behaviour).

The term authentic leadership includes not only authentic leaders but authentic followership as well; authentic leadership reflects an interactive and authentic relationship that develops between the leader and followers [16]. This way, Walumbwa et al. [21] define authentic leadership as “a pattern of leader behaviour that draws upon and promotes both positive psychological capacities and a positive ethical climate, to foster greater self-awareness, an internalized moral perspective, balanced processing of information, and relational transparency on the part of leaders working with followers, fostering positive self-development”.

Regarding ALD, this term is used to name the developmental process model for authentic leadership by which the leader learns to serve followers with their authentic values, beliefs, and behaviours [19]. This process is based on the development of confidence and self-efficacy, agency in career development, optimism, and resiliency [19]. According to this model, the processes to create authentic leadership requires the development of the individual and the context in which they are embedded over time. Nevertheless, the authors in [19] advocate not waiting for a trigger event to provide authentic leaders but to accelerate their development through designing field interventions, including elements that differ from seminars, such as transformative experiences, e.g., mentoring, or offering alternative role models [22].

In order to create authentic leaders, training interventions should be a genuine program, including “trigger events” that could change careers, challenging previous skills in the search for unconventional solutions and, indeed, offering a strong ethical stand and tailoring to a specific targeted audience [12]. The Promociona Project is an ALD program, an experiential training process enhancing authentic leadership skills among women participants [17]. By focusing on their career and promotion, this ALD program gives women participants the abilities and skills needed to advance in their careers, enhancing the paradoxical aspects of authenticity [20]. In order to ensure leadership development, the training is based within a learning community focused on the development of each member, and the learning experienced is focused on participants [23]. The program is designed so as to offer participants the possibility to holistically overcome their internal barriers for future promotions, tackling at the same time three different authentic leadership traits that eventually could aid their promotion: self-efficacy perception, social capital, and career planning.

Training programs for women leaders have the possibility to activate authentic leadership traits: “To the extent that leader roles gain less traditional definitions and valued management styles are more fluid, women have more opportunities to develop relational authenticity” [19]. These new traits, in the form of recently acquired leadership skills, can form the foundation of their authentic leadership and women participants’ key to promotions. The changes towards authentic leadership aim to promote “authenticity as both owning one’s personal experiences (thoughts, emotions, or beliefs, “the real me inside”) and acting in accordance with the true self (behaving and expressing what you really think and believe) [9]. We draw on this theory to identify how women, through this training program, can improve three elements that allow them to enhance relational authenticity and therefore authentic leadership, increasing their chances of promotions.

The first element is reducing women’s self-limiting behaviours derived from a low self-efficacy perception. Self-efficacy is concerned with judgments about how well one can organize and execute courses of action required to deal with prospective situations containing many ambiguous, unpredictable, and often stressful elements. Lower self-efficacy perception in women in the management field is associated with women’s higher self-imposed standards to apply for top managerial positions and can come from the fact that women generally judge themselves as being less suitable than men for many non-traditional occupations.

The low(-er) self-efficacy perception also has to contend with women's own negative self-views (low self-esteem and low self-confidence) [24,25]. This female cognitive bias has a strong relation with impostor syndrome, the psychological pattern in which one doubts one's accomplishments, which make these women have a persistent internalized fear of being exposed as a "fraud" [26]. This self-limiting feeling [27] is very much in line with the role incongruity these women feel [28] by not showing masculine traits in their corporate behaviour. The ALD training program allows women to embrace their different behaviours, experiences, and values, giving them the chance to project themselves with confidence and emotional control and show themselves to be authentic leaders.

This way, the program elicits the development of authentic leadership among the participants, which has positive and direct effects on their low-self-efficacy perception. Indeed, through the positivism linked to the eudaemonic well-being mechanism [14], participants reinforce and improve their self-concept perceptions, becoming proud of themselves for their fulfilled goals. This is so because one important component of authentic leadership is self-awareness, which should include self-acceptance. In fact, there is a positive link between self-awareness and positive self-concept [29]. Individuals with a positive self-concept have high self-esteem and believe themselves generally capable of accomplishing things; that is, they have high generalized self-efficacy [30]. This way, leaders with more positive self-concepts are likely to exhibit higher self-awareness, which has positive implications for leadership effectiveness and for the leaders' own psychological well-being.

In this regard, activities that seek to develop a skill, learn, or gain insight into something, such as, in this case, authentic leadership, are assessed as specific eudaemonic activities [29]. Indeed, the project is oriented towards the excellence and growth of professional women and aims to develop their potential as authentic leaders; it thus elicits in them the eudemonic well-being that raises their self-realization [29] and, based on the assumption that self-esteem arises as the product of acting in congruence with one's values [31], also their self-esteem. These higher levels of self-esteem that arise through this self-actualization process would improve participants' self-efficacy perception, which would eventually help to overcome this internal barrier and empower participants.

The second element is the enhancement of relational and social capital. Women's traditional reduced access to networks has been identified as one important problem in accessing leadership positions [12,32,33]. Following social identity theory [34], people are categorized as out-group or in-group members based on their salient demographic characteristics, gender being one of them. Those in-group members would be favoured by the majority group's decisions. Therefore, men, considered the majority group in corporate leadership positions and selection processes, would give preference to profiles they understand as similar to themselves, preserving homogeneity in the profiles promoted and limiting the possibility of women being promoted to leadership positions. Indeed, one of the main challenges that women leaders face is frequently being seen as outsiders by their male peers. With men being considered the majority in corporate leadership positions, women struggle to enter this group, preventing them from achieving high-status positions [35]. However, when women start to see themselves and be seen as relevant in their networks, offering similarities in dimensions other than gender, women start to become in-group members [36].

The incongruity that women often experience in leadership roles (female gender roles vs. male leadership roles) makes achieving relational authenticity challenging for many women in positions of authority. Indeed, although authentic leadership is about being who you really are, not becoming something else to be more acceptable, as Eagly [13] stated, it would be bad advice to exhort women and other outsiders to merely be themselves and express their heartfelt values because of the challenges women leaders frequently face in being seen as outsiders by their male peers. In this regard, if women adopt stereotypically masculine styles to be considered an in-group member, this will generate a risk of backlash (i.e., reprisals for counter-stereotypical behaviour) in evaluations and adversely affect pro-

motion considerations [37]; however, overly feminine behaviours that are not recognized as being leader-like can inhibit a woman's advancement to leadership roles. In this regard, in their meta-study, Eagly and Carli [38] show that female leaders often face bias as leaders especially in masculine organizational contexts due to incongruence between stereotypes about their female gender group and attributes associated with success in gender roles. To solve this dilemma, and effectively play their leader role and so elicit the authority, trust, and confidence needed to project their vision for both followers and organizations, women may have to engage in a certain amount of acting.

In this regard, training programs that address the interpersonal processes through which relational authenticity emerges take full advantage of the changes in leadership styles (such as authentic, ethical, and transformational leadership) that have introduced fluidity whereby leader roles have become more congenial to women. In particular, relational authenticity [13] would help women participants to activate certain leadership skills (such as democratic relationships, cooperation, mentoring, and collaboration) that are more congenial to the female gender role than traditional qualities, thus overcoming the prejudicial reactions that can come from the conflict between leader roles and the female gender role, subsequently easing fluid interactions with peers from the elite executive group for women [36]. As there is a progressive shift toward more fluid, valued management styles, ALD programs offer women leadership styles that are more congruent with their gender group yet highly appropriate for leaders, consequently increasing women's opportunity to develop relational authenticity. Indeed, the compatibility women feel with a more suitable management style, together with the legitimacy that stems from a more than probable recategorization as in-group leaders through relational authenticity, would impel women to play a more proactive role in their relationships with others, enhancing their individual mobility between groups, which would allow them to "permeate" into more powerful groups. To sum up, achieving relational authenticity is challenging for many women in positions of authority due to the role incongruity that they often experience in leadership roles. However, the design of ALD training programs that introduce more fluid current leadership roles more congenial to women, through which their relational authenticity can more easily emerge, further increase the odds that women success as leaders.

Finally, the third element of the program targets career planning, as women usually have a lack of agency in career advancement. Since women tend to believe that someone or something else always determines what happens to them in the long run, they also tend to live in the here-and-now [39]. Self-direction over time is not a traditional part of women's role ideology; therefore, women do not usually see themselves as controlling events or taking an active role in their own lives, tending to react rather than act. Henning and Jardim [40] identified that the presence or absence of the ability to plan for the long term was essential for career advancement. An analysis on the personal and professional careers of women who made it to the top showed long-term planning as one of their most important characteristics. Besides, women commonly stop or lag in their careers due to external elements, such as family issues, pushing them further away from full control in such aspects [41]. Furthermore, the work these women are usually involved in is characterized by working long hours and during particular hours and when they do not fit into this model, this directly hinders their job recognition and negotiation [42], and reduces women's agency in deciding on their careers. Women might feel that controlling their careers is also counter-stereotypical in their organizational context [43].

An ALD program can provide participants tools to organize, define, and structure their future career and aspirations. Indeed, as leaders are authentic to the extent to which the leader's self-concept is expressed in their behaviour, this implies a shift of focus from the current emphasis on the development of skills and behavioural styles to an emphasis on leaders' self-development [16]. In this process, as authentic leaders become more certain of their self-conceptions, they are more inclined to rely on these conceptions to organize their experiences. This gives the leader a framework for defining their existence, organizing experience, predicting future events, and guiding social interactions [44]. This way, the

ALD program provides women a unique opportunity to take a ‘time-out’ from their busy personal and professional lives and to obtain assistance in self-development, so that they can draw personal meanings from their experiences and authoring their life-stories to achieve greater self-knowledge and self-clarity and thus develop a self-concept that can be expressed through the leadership role. Thus, women participants in the leadership program deconstruct the role of the incongruity spiral (via relational authenticity) and learn about their strengths, weaknesses, motives, and values (via a reflection process), gaining the self-resolution to take control of their careers without feeling the constraints of the feminine stereotype of keeping a low status role [39].

After the ALD program, women enhance their agency in career advancement [45], taking control of their professional aspirations and promotion negotiations, breaking vertical segregation in corporations and prescriptive gender stereotypes that have inhibited women from “sit[ting] at the table” [46] when controlling and planning their own careers.

These three elements shape the leadership roles and success of women’s professional careers. By addressing them in the leadership program, we propose the following theoretical model (Figure 1) to explain how an authentic leadership training program can act as a key driver in removing women’s internal barriers to advance in leadership positions.

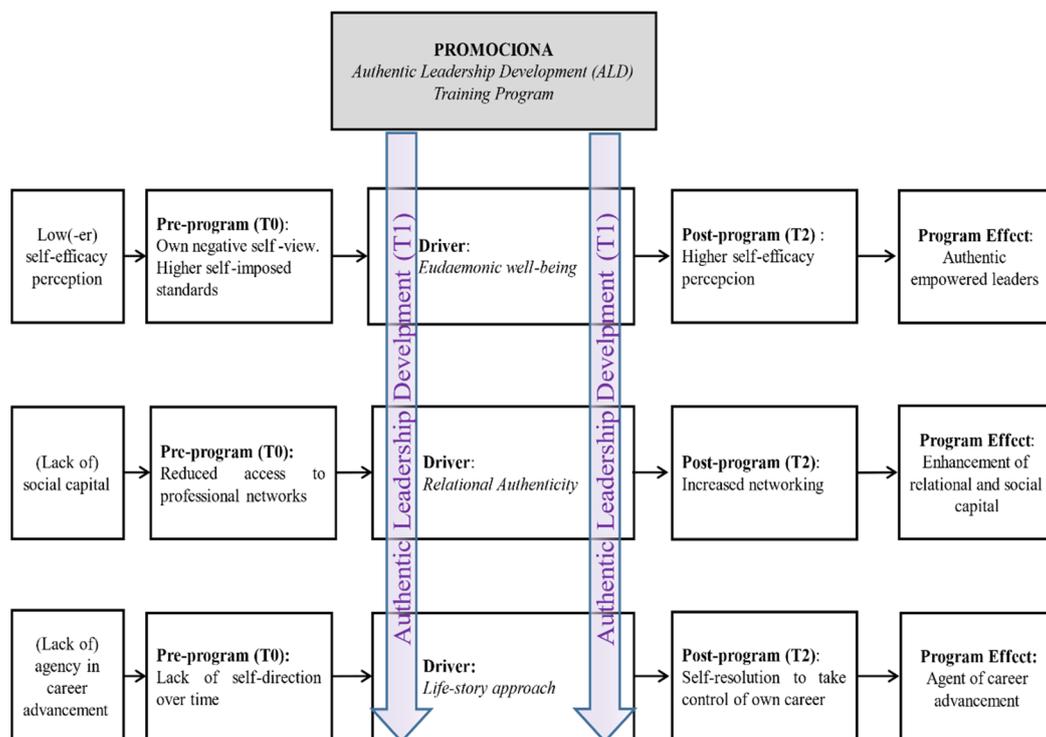


Figure 1. Theoretical model.

3. Materials and Methods

We use a mixed-methods approach, combining the qualitative and quantitative analyses of in-depth interviews to test the importance of an ALD training program to empower women to advance in their corporate careers. Thus, this study employed strategies of data transformation, converting qualitative findings into quantitative data [47]. The qualitative analysis facilitated the identification of patterns, situations, or insights, whereas quantitative methods examined the direction or extent of these insights. Greene [48] identified several purposes for using such mixed methods, including complementarity by integrating qualitative and quantitative data, development to inform future research, initiation to produce possible new insights, and the expansion of theories about the causes that prevent women from attaining top management roles.

3.1. Design

The study was designed and developed by the research team in consultation with other experts familiar with qualitative research. The research team generated hypotheses about possible causes and associated features that prevent women from the top positions based on the theoretical model developed in the previous section. This led to the design of a semi-structured interview [49] to understand the impact of this leadership training for women. Questions related to the barriers that keep women from entering powerful groups in organizations were developed based on previous research on women in top positions [7,50].

To ensure the objectivity of the interview process, the authors carefully wrote and rewrote all the questions (consulting with outside third-party colleagues) both to improve construct validity and to ensure that the authors did not lead respondents in their answers [51]. A common set of questions was presented to all participants in a semi-structured interview to identify both positive and negative experiences that have occurred over the course of the respondents' career and how the participation in the ALD program has influenced their professional career. By establishing a climate of trust, the respondents felt safe in sharing their accurate experiences. Thus, their experiences, rather than the authors' perspectives, drove the research.

3.2. Intervention

The women's leadership training program chosen as the intervention on women's careers is the Promociona Project, an initiative launched in 2013 by the Spanish Confederation of Business Organizations (CEOE, a private non-profit entity, whose primary purpose is the defence and representation of business interests in society, which represents more than 2 million companies and freelancers, 200 regional and sector organizations, and 4500 associations) in cooperation with the Spanish Ministry of Gender Equality.

This project is focused on companies committed to diversity and the professional promotion of women. Candidates are selected from a pool of women managers with at least 15 years of professional experience, and with the explicit support of their companies. Until 2019, more than 600 companies and 936 female managers have participated in this program, and 51% of them have been promoted in their companies afterwards.

The aim of the Promociona Project is to identify and promote women's talents by developing and strengthening their professional and leadership skills and abilities, as well as facilitating their access to senior management positions in companies. Throughout the project, special effort is placed on the different elements of relational authenticity to overcome the barriers that prevent women from being promoted to senior management positions. Specifically, the project starts with several self-reflection and self-knowledge exercises, as well as feedback evaluation from their colleagues, friends, and relatives, to understand how they are perceived. These evaluations and self-reflections trigger a deep revision of their personal and professional lives and constitute the starting point for the individualized coaching sessions and the mentoring process they receive. With this purpose in mind, they are told to design an Individual Development Plan (where they are and where they would like to be).

The Promociona Project also includes some executive education divided into 3 one-week modules. Module 1 focuses on understanding the role of women as leaders, expands the strategic vision in a complex and global environment, and raises awareness of equality and the creation and cultivation of social networks as an essential source of visibility in senior management positions. Module 2 aims to update knowledge in the business management and value creation processes. Finally, Module 3 provides the necessary skills to successfully manage the transition to senior management.

As a whole, the Promociona Project provides a worthy and deep network among participants, teachers, and managers and organizes different networking activities (CEO Forum, breakfasts, etc.) with prestigious business leaders and managers. This way, the

project allows participants to define their personal brand and properly manage their professional networks.

Consequently, the program provides the motivation to achieve a top managerial position through personal authentic leadership, inspiring trusting relationships with peers and subordinates, improving the ability to negotiate, and being deeply aware of how they think and behave and the context in which they work.

3.3. Sample

We conducted 32 in-depth interviews with women executives that have participated in the Promociona Project. For this purpose, we signed an agreement with the CEOE, the institution that supports Promociona, to have access to participants that have already finished the program and were promoted in their organizations at least a year ago.

CEOE provided us with a database with 48 executive women who were promoted after the Promociona Project; after contacting them, 32 agreed to participate in our study. The participants belong to 18 different industries: automotive, healthcare, insurance, consulting, IT, banking, real estate, furniture retailing, catering, travel, law, advertising, electric, oil and gas, NGO, building, manufacturing, and delivery (see Table 1).

Table 1. Interviewees' characteristics.

Interviewee Code	Sector	Tenure (Years in the Position)	Tenure (Years in the Company)	Years between Interview and PROMOCIONA Project
W1	Consulting Firms	2	5	3
W2	Automotive Industry	3	9	6
W3	Banking	4	15	4
W4	IT	3	31	5
W5	Real Estate	4	13	3
W6	Insurance	3	10	6
W7	Manufacturing	4	4	4
W8	Healthcare	3	4	2
W9	Catering services	3	7	5
W10	Travel sector	3	3	2
W11	Catering services	2	21	2
W12	Consulting Firms	4	15	4
W13	Law Firm	2	13	4
W14	Consulting Firms	1	16	3
W15	IT	1	19	1
W16	IT	1	15	3
W17	Marketing agency	5	5	6
W18	IT	2	3	5
W19	Electric Industry	6	27	5
W20	Automotive Industry	4	20	4
W21	IT	2	4	2
W22	IT	1	1	1
W23	Automotive Industry	5	20	4
W24	Electric Industry	2	13	4
W25	Oil and Gas Sector	6	20	6
W26	IT	1	23	1
W27	NGO	2	18	3
W28	Construction industry	2	13	5
W29	Manufacturing	1	1	1
W30	IT	2	25	5
W31	Consulting Firms	2	7	1
W32	Delivery	5	19	4

The average size of the interviewees' firms, measured by the number of employees worldwide, is 117,246 (90% of these corporations are multinationals). The women's ages range between early to mid-30s to 50s, working in their respective companies for an average of 13 years.

3.4. Procedure

Women who agreed to participate in our study (two thirds of those contacted) were scheduled for an interview with a woman researcher. Given the sensitive nature of the topics covered in our interviews, interviews began with an explanation of the purpose of the research, a reiteration of the assurance of confidentiality, and an opportunity to allow respondents to ask any questions before starting. While 12 of the interviews were conducted face-to-face in the respondents' offices, the remaining 20 were conducted by phone or online by Skype or similar apps due to COVID-19 mobility restrictions. Phone interviews have been shown to produce as reliable information as face-to-face interviews and, in some cases, may even increase respondents' ability to discuss sensitive information, such as experiences of discrimination [52,53]. Online interviews are particularly appropriate in research that requires access to geographically dispersed research subjects [53], but during the COVID-19 period, its use has been compulsory due to the confinement, restrictions on mobility, and meetings limitations decreed by the Spanish government in March 2020.

Interviewers were instructed to ask all questions in the interview except when a participant had already covered that material in another answer. Each interview lasted one hour on average, was recorded by the interviewer, and transcribed by a cohort of undergraduate students. All of them were supervised and double checked by the authors. Data were collected from January 2020 to November 2020.

3.5. Measure

Transcriptions of all the interviews were entered into Nvivo 12 to organize and manage data. Interview questions focused on three primary areas: low(-er) self-efficacy perception of the respondent; (lack of) social capital; and (lack of) long-term life-working planning. Specifically, we asked for these three topics in two different moments of time: how they felt about them before enrolling in the Promociona Project (T0), and after finishing the Promociona Project (T2). Implicitly (i.e., without direct questioning), we looked for the three drivers that could be leading the improvements experienced by the participants during the training program (T1): leader eudaemonic well-being episodes; relational authenticity; and internal reflections about their own careers (i.e., life-story approach of authentic leaders). Table 2 illustrates the codes and definitions used in this article.

To calibrate the coding methods, three interviews were randomly selected and independently analysed by four authors to identify content representative of the hypothesized nodes, as well as novel themes. After coding, the four readers discussed the nodes and segments of the text representing them and agreed on node labels and definitions, developing a codebook that facilitated reliability among raters. The remaining 29 transcripts were then coded separately by two authors using the codebook and rating interview transcripts according to whether the content appeared to pertain to one or more of the defined nodes.

Transcriptions were completely anonymized. The two coding authors then compared their individual assessments. The reliability of the coding between the authors resulted in 99.38% agreement. Given the assurance of confidentiality to the respondents, the authors did not involve a third party in coding the interviews.

Table 2. Nodes and definitions.

Node	Definition
Low(-er) self-efficacy perception	Self-efficacy is concerned with judgments about how well one can organize and execute the courses of action required to deal with prospective situations containing many ambiguous, unpredictable, and often stressful elements. Women's lower self-efficacy perception in the management field is related with women's higher self-imposed standards to apply for top managerial positions and can originate from the fact that women generally judge themselves as being less suitable than men for many non-traditional occupations.
(Lack of) social capital	It can be described as a person's reduced network of relationships and reciprocity norms within their professional field.
(Lack of) agency in career advancement	It is the lack of clear goals and objectives, accountability, and metrics needed to plan professional and personal work in the long-term and it is related with the lack of self-direction over time.
Eudaemonic well-being	Eudaemonic well-being can be conceptualized in the context of realizing one's true potential across one's lifespan. In the professional field, it is a feeling of fulfillment that occurs when the person feels intensive involvement, a special fit with an activity which makes them flourish, and reflects self-realization, personal growth, and expressiveness.
Relational authenticity	Relational authenticity is a kind of leader behaviour that requires that the values and interests they convey and promote are fully accepted by their followers as advancing the broader interests of the community. Only when the leader achieves followers' personal and social identification with their expressions of values will they gain this kind of authenticity.
Life-story approach	This is a life review consisting of a guided process of reflecting upon, elaborating, editing, and extending one's life story. The life-story conveys the leader's qualities, including both strengths and weaknesses, explains their values and convictions, and justifies their vision and claim for leadership.

4. Results

This research begins with an exploratory qualitative approach, followed by a quantitative analysis of the preliminary results obtained in the interviews. The study design called for the integration of both qualitative and quantitative methods, with the intention of capturing the best of both methodologies [54], as the qualitative analysis facilitated the identification of patterns, situations, or insights, whereas quantitative methods examined the direction or extent of these insights.

4.1. Qualitative Analyses

Our study reveals that once women have finished the program, their development traits of authentic leaders are empowered. These women have raised their self-efficacy perception, are more aware of the importance of taking an active role in their careers, and have learnt how to manage networking, as well as building and maintaining formal and informal networks.

4.1.1. Low(-er) Self-Efficacy Perception

Low self-efficacy is one of the strongest barriers that executive women face. This low self-efficacy keeps women on the back foot in corporations, limits their aspirations, and leads them to feel undeserving of their jobs. "Women lack strong expectations of personal efficacy in relationship to many career-related behaviours and, thus, fail to fully realize their capabilities and talents in career pursuits" [55]. Several examples of participants illustrate their low self-efficacy perception regarding their performance in high executive positions. In particular, when asked about whether they felt ready or not for those positions, one of them states:

“I was offered a new position and I was scared to death. It may seem silly, but after almost 15 years in the company I did not feel confident, and I was not sure if I was going to be able to do it. [. . .] I had never considered a high level of self-demand as a barrier, but on that occasion, when I was offered the position, I clearly realized that it was in my case.” (Woman 23).

This low self-efficacy perception is something they have dealt with for the bulk of their careers. As one participant states, her self-limiting feeling is in line with the advanced role incongruity:

“There are women who come to a position surrounded by brilliant people, hoping themselves to do well. I do not like women who get to a high-level position and apologize for it in their welcome speeches and say they do not know if they are going to do well. Why? I understand that it is to lower expectations to look good. But do you see a man getting on a lectern and lowering his expectations? [. . .] Helping others and taking care of people is wonderful, but women have to learn from men that it is not necessary to apologize for being successful.” (Woman 7).

Nevertheless, once they have enrolled in the Promociona Project, they seem to awake from this false perception. For example, the same executive woman who referred to her low efficacy perception also described her transformational process in this way:

“The program also pushed me to value myself more and to take charge of my professional career. Promociona opened my eyes. I do not understand how, having always led the reins in my personal life, I had never considered doing it professionally.” (Woman 23).

As a consequence, after the program, a significant number of women participants realized that prior to the program, they were experiencing some kind of cognitive bias and tended to readjust their perceptions, judging themselves in a more positive way with higher self-confidence and self-esteem. In this regard, a woman talked about her perception of her profile after completing the program in the following way:

“so, since that moment (after the Promociona Project) I became aware and changed my career, I thought my profile was very good. And I shouldn’t feel bad for believing it.” (Woman 14).

Though the program helps women to overcome low-self efficacy perception, it was mainly via a life-story approach. In fact, there were very few mentions connecting this change to eudaemonic well-being, as mentioned by this participant:

“I loved it, I prepared everything super well, I enjoyed people a lot and learned a lot from them too.” (Women 6).

“I had never seen myself speak. But since then, when I do it, I have such a good time, that I can be on stage forever...” (Woman 6).

Another participant refers to this change in efficacy perception and indicates it was connected to the life-story approach mechanism:

“It is not acceptable that others believe more in you than you do in yourself [...] Promociona has helped me to stop, to think, to say yes I can. I’m never going to stop to wonder if I can, no. I already know that, yes, I can.” (Woman 28).

4.1.2. (Lack of) Relational and Social Capital

Women feel like outsiders in men’s networks. They do not feel they match the masculine organizational context style, and struggle to get into a group in which they are not only seen as women but also as professional. Indeed, several women in the program recognized their status as out-group members in these formal and informal networks. Referring to this situation, two participants mentioned the following:

“As there were so many men in management positions, it was easier for men to establish relationships with those people, because it is a classic: let’s go play paddle tennis! And you stay out. [...] I have now learned to play paddle tennis, but I’m not particularly good at it (...). On the other hand, it is very common between them, but you have to establish the relationship in another way, and it takes longer.” (Woman 14).

“You hear comments like: don’t come on this trip because you will be very busy with your family. (. . .) Sorry! the company’s international president of the company is coming and I want to be there!” (Woman 27).

Women participants consider having reduced access to key influential networks as one of the most important barriers preventing them from advancing in their professional careers. Women tend to neglect their formal and informal professional network. Sometimes, this is due to a neglect of the women, due to work-family issues that do not allow them to spend informal time with their peers, and sometimes they claim they just do not feel they needed to be part of those networking or relational activities to be promoted in their professional career. In this vein, before the program, these women tended to focus on working efficiently, not acknowledging the importance of their networks as key enablers in their careers [35]. According to two respondents:

“(. . .) some of my colleagues were meeting for lunch, meeting to play golf, [. . .] but it seemed to me like a waste of time. I used to work without stopping until 5 pm and then go home.” (Woman 7).

“(. . .) We do not give it importance [to networking] because we are focused on tasks and deliverables, and we do not give importance to that, and that is part of the job and men do very well. I see many of them who say, ‘come on, let’s have a half-hour break, let’s have a coffee’ [...] but you think, no, no, it’s a waste of time...” (Woman 6).

Many women do not realize the importance of these informal networks until doing the program. Indeed, the program opens women’s eyes to the importance of networking and gaining visibility in their networks, finding them to be fundamental in reaching leadership positions in organizations. There were many examples in which women executives recognize the usefulness of the Project in this regard:

“I was so focused, that I had never done this lobbying before. But now, I go and sit with a director and talk about I don’t know what, and I go to the other one, and I dedicate one or two hours a day to the lobbying process because it helps you a lot [. . .] which is also the result of that hidden map of relationships [. . .] The truth is that I discovered it late, but when I discovered it, thanks to Promociona, I thought, yes, I am going to map it myself.” (Women 6).

Once the program is finished, women directors are fully aware of the importance of never neglecting this aspect of their professional development and dedicate the time and effort necessary to build these networks. One of the participants recognized the importance of networking like this:

“You must dedicate time to it (networking). It’s not a job, but it’s part of your life, your personal brand. Networking is something that will surely add to you, not subtract from you.” (Woman 6).

According to another participant:

“Something that we must work with women is visibility and it’s the ability to do networking . . . the ability to move, because that gives you self-confidence too . . . excluding yourself and devoting yourself to your duties makes you small.” (Woman 18).

The program provided women with gender-congruent leadership styles, which triggers the relational authenticity mechanism that legitimizes them in the consideration for an authentic leader in their organizations. At this stage, women are comfortable enough in their management role and have the confidence to actively try to be part of influential networks without losing their own leadership style. One participant shared the following statement after finishing the project:

“I believe society is changing and companies are beginning to value the role of women for themselves. Women do not have to be aggressive; we do not have to follow the male model, being who we are, now we are valued [...] We are much more valued because everyone has already realized our added value, therefore, there is no more need for women to adopt the male model.” (Woman 4).

Nevertheless, women executives are also aware that to develop this relational authenticity can be challenging for them due to inconsistencies in gender roles in leader roles. This implies that to reassure others that they are competent as leaders, sometimes they have to

slightly modulate their female congruent leadership style to stay within a “narrow band” of appropriate leader behaviour. In this regard, according to two different participants:

“(...) I try to modulate the forms to the circumstances and the people with whom I communicate.” (Woman 18).

“I am quite the way I am. So, the good news for me is that my natural way of being and my values, in general works or has worked for me (...). I always think that you have to be aligned with who you are, to live and to lead. [. . .] I did not have to force myself too much to pretend, simulate, or acquire something that was not my own, because I have a good mix. I have the courage, assertiveness and clarity enough to say what I think, what I want and how I want it, but at the same time I also delegate and leave space. [. . .] I set the guidelines, and everyone knows how I work and what my principles are, but then they have their space.” (Woman 16).

4.1.3. (Lack of) Agency in Career Advancement

Women seem to have little control over their career movements before the project. There was a clear lack of agency in career advancement [45] when controlling and planning their own careers. Our respondents were also aware that there was something about their working life that was not working right in their careers, and that they were not in charge of controlling them. These women were working harder and longer hours than their male colleagues or even sometimes been very strict on themselves. Career planning was non-existent, as women were too focused on delivering (sometimes over delivering) on a daily basis. In the interviews, they recognized these traits as weaknesses derailing their careers. In this regard, there are numerous examples of women executives who described their professional experience until the Project in the following ways:

“Until that moment I had been working like a mule, without looking anywhere. I didn’t know where I wanted to go professionally [...] I was simply working”. (Woman 3).

Another one goes on to say:

“I have the feeling that we always try [to] do our job very well and we just think that someone will notice. Someone will come to recognize me; we do not raise our hand and say here I am. [. . .] I remember once talking to a boss in an annual interview, he told me that he thought that to succeed him, the best candidates were “x” and me, and it was a shame that I did not want to. So, I asked him: why do you think I do not want this position? and he told me: “x” comes to my office to ask for my support, and you have never said anything. Then, I asked him: but do I really have to tell you?” (Woman 30).

This inertia for these women seemed to change during the program. Indeed, the Promociona Project seemed to coincide in time with a moment in their professional careers in which they recognize that just working hard is not enough to climb the corporate ladder. These women also realize that they need to control and have a voice in their own careers, instead of waiting to be discovered and promoted by someone else. According to one participant:

“I have been conscious of planning my professional career as a result of Promociona. [. . .] it is also very important to take the risk that they know me, that they believe that I am competent. [. . .] I would not have thought about those things 10 years ago, I would not have been aware that this was important. Being aware of the importance of thinking about what my next step would be, what I need to do or who should I contact, what do I need.” (Women 30).

Indeed, after the sudden awareness that represents the Promociona Project in their lives, women executives decide to play a proactive role in designing their professional careers and begin to take action. One executive described her new proactive attitude toward her career in the following way:

“Promociona opened my eyes. Right after finishing the program, I went for breakfast with the president of my company . . . and I told him about my commitment to the company and the things I’ve been doing all these years . . . I knew he couldn’t tell me whether I was going to be promoted or not, but I told him about the commitment I had demonstrated and all my work.” (Women 14).

The Promociona Project elicits a review of the participant's life story through which she recognizes her achievements and personal worthiness that somehow justify her claim for leadership. In this regard, the Project boosted women's willingness to think about their goals and objectives and take control of their careers. As two participants mention:

"[. . .] I don't believe in luck either, I believe in personal work. It is true that the context helps a lot, but you also need to look for your own path and be active. You need to be open to new challenges and take advantage of the opportunities that arise." (Woman 20).

"And there comes a time, which also coincides with Promociona, when I decide to promote. I was living in city X and I moved to city Y. I was going back and forth for a year, and I decided to stop and think. And I realized that it was not what I wanted in my life. I needed to breathe, I needed other challenges... Until this moment, I always had been said to stand here or there. Until then, it was all about where the company decided to send me. I had not asked for anything, nor did I know where I wanted to go. Professional life was taking me, but I didn't ask myself if this was what I wanted or not." (Woman 3).

We sum up these statements and assign them to the appropriate moment relative to the Promociona Project in Table 3.

Table 3. Examples of statements referring to the different nodes and mechanisms in the theoretical framework.

Nodes	Interviewee	Reference
T0—(Lack of) long-term life-working planning	W3	(. . .) until that moment I had been working like a mule, without looking anywhere . . . I didn't know where I wanted to go professionally.
	W12	(. . .) I have been educated to do a very good job, to be an excellent worker, to be a little ant, to give myself 200 per cent . . .
T1—Eudaemonic well-being	W6	(. . .) I loved it, I prepared everything super well, I enjoyed people a lot and learned a lot from them too.
	W6	(. . .) I had never seen myself speak. But since then, when I do it, I have such a good time that I can be on stage forever . . .
T2—(Lack of) agency in career advancement	W3	(. . .) it all coincides with the time I stopped, and I started to think . . . this is not what I need in my life . . . I need to breathe, I need other challenges . . .
	W12	(. . .) Promociona helped me a lot... especially at the soft skills level and at being aware of the upcoming situations . . .
	W14	(. . .) Promociona opened my eyes. Right after finishing the program, I went for breakfast with the president of my company . . . and I told him about my commitment to the company and the things I've been doing all these years . . . I knew he couldn't tell me whether I was going to be promoted or not, but I told him about the commitment I had demonstrated and all my work . . .
T0—Low(-er) self-efficacy perception	W1	(. . .) a woman won't apply to a job unless she fulfills with all the requirements, otherwise she would consider herself as a fraud . . .
	W8	(...) if somebody tells you about seven things you are doing right and one thing you are doing wrong, you tend to focus on the bad one . . .
T1—Relational authenticity	W12	(...) you don't have to go through a tube of masculinity to get there . . .
	W12	(. . .) but then, the other woman from Promociona, who is in Washington, is the height of femininity and sweetness and manages relationships, and she's a natural connector. Her greatest asset is her ability to relate to others.
	W12	(. . .) I believe that I am a person of dialogue . . . I listen a lot . . . I have not felt that I have to be a different person from the one I am in order to become a partner.
	W3	(. . .) and you believe in yourself, you believe in women, and you believe that we are not where we belong. You believe it, and you realize that it's true.
	W3	(. . .) I have opened a window of sensitivity, balance, and closeness, which they appreciate very much.

Table 3. Cont.

Nodes	Interviewee	Reference
T2—Lower self-efficacy perception	W3	(...) you have a male environment in your company, and suddenly you get into a group of 40 women with brutal potential, with brutal talent, who generate an energy you couldn't have ever imagine. And you believe in yourself, you believe in women, and you believe that we are not always in the place we should ... You believe it, and you realize it's true.
	W14	(...) so, since that moment (after the Promociona Project) I became aware and changed my career, I thought my profile was very good. And I shouldn't feel bad for believing it.
T0—(Lack of) social capital	W3	(...) some of my colleagues were meeting for lunch, meeting to play golf, or whatever ... but it seemed to me like a waste of time. I used to work without stopping until 5 pm and then go home.
T1—Life-story approach	W12	(...) it is true that Promociona gave me tools I didn't have to make this type of reflections and work on parts I had not worked on before.
	W12	(...) to get here I must keep in mind that I have to manage all of these things in a proactive way ... I have to manage my career development.
	W3	(...) I had not asked for anything, nor did I know where I wanted to go. My professional life was taking me, but I didn't ask myself if that was what I wanted or not ... at that moment I realized that it was not what I wanted. That there was no more challenge, and I did something that nobody does as a rule ... which was to raise my hand and say "no, this is not what I want".
T2—(Lack of) social capital	W7	(...) when I finished the program, I realized about the importance of networking ... I worked a lot on my networking ...
	W14	(...) Promociona helps you a lot with this (networking)... For example, if you go to a party ... I think that rarely a woman [comes to] you to introduce herself and talk ... this is something we've been working on in Promociona, by working in groups.
	W3	(...) you must dedicate time to it (networking) ... it's not a job, but it's part of your life, your personal brand. It's your thing. Networking is something that will surely add to you, not subtract from you ...
	W3	(...) what we must work [on] with women is visibility and it's the ability to do networking ... the ability to move, because that gives you self-confidence too ... excluding yourself and devoting yourself to your duties makes you small.

4.2. Quantitative Results

To obtain quantitative measures from the interviews, we developed a quantitative rating on a scale from -1 to 1 for each node. To do this, all the statements corresponding to each node by interviewees were assigned a 1 when the statement coincided totally with the definition of the node, and -1 if it totally dissented, meaning the opposite, with 0 being not applicable. For example, in the node 'Low(-er) self-efficacy perception' a rating of ' 1 ' was given when the interviewee's statement is precisely referring to her negative self-view for managerial positions as a barrier to her promotion, whereas a rating of ' -1 ' was applied when her statement refers to the opposite, meaning she is showing a positive self-concept to occupy leadership positions; a rating of ' 0 ' was given to the interviewee when she did not mention this node. This way, we obtained numerical values for each participant for each node. To minimize personal bias, the rating assignment was accomplished by two independent coders, with a 94.5% rate of agreement. A team discussion process was used to review the remaining cases with discrepancies to ensure that the rating ultimately assigned to verbal data was reached by consensus.

The value for each node and interviewee is the sum of the individual values of all the sentences corresponding to each node (i.e., low(-er) self-efficacy perception, (lack of) social capital, and (lack of) agency in career advancement) by interviewees at times T0 and T2. For instance, an 8 in '(Lack of) social capital' would imply that the interviewee has pointed to the scarcity of social capital as an important barrier to climb up the corporate

ladder a total of 8 times. On the other hand, a -9 in the same node would imply that she has stated her active practice of networking as a tool for promotion 9 times. Figure 2 shows the frequency distributions for the different node values. As can be seen, values rank from -9 to 8 and the frequencies of their appearance are represented by bars (i.e., the number of interviewees that present a particular node value). In all three codes, a drift to the left (i.e., to more negative values) can be observed from T0 to T2, signalling a reduction in the three studied barriers after the Promociona Project.

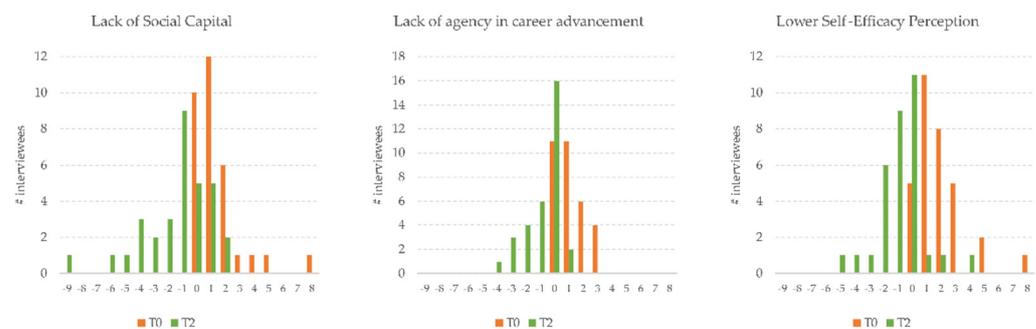


Figure 2. Frequency of quantitative nodes of barriers in T0 and T2.

To test this change, we used the Wilcoxon test for paired samples (a non-parametric alternative to a paired t -test) to assess differences in the mean values of each node before and after the ALD training program. The Wilcoxon test results, demonstrated in Table 4, showed significant differences across the three nodes before and after the Promociona Project (T2–T0). These differences are negative and highly statistically significant. This means that after the project (T2), the barriers highlighted by the interviewees to reach leadership positions in their organizations before the project (T0) are significantly reduced, likely because of the activation by the Promociona Project of the different elements of authentic, empowered leaders.

Table 4. Presence of barriers in T0 and T2 and the Wilcoxon test.

	T0		T2		T2–T0
	Mean	Std.Dev.	Mean	Std.Dev.	Wilcoxon Test
Lack of social capital	1.375	1.699	−1.375	2.6420	−4.066 ***
Lack of agency in career advancement	1.094	1.027	−0.781	1.237	−4.299 ***
Lower self-efficacy perception	1.844	1.568	−0.875	1.362	−4.628 ***

*** $p < 0.01$.

Regarding the nodes that identify the tools provided by the Promociona Project to activate women's leadership skills, the frequency of each appearance (i.e., eudaemonic well-being, relational authenticity, and life-story approach) has also been aggregated for each interviewee. As can be seen (Figure 3), the frequencies are quite similar for each node. Three multiple regression analyses (Table 5) were performed in which the dependent variables are the change in the three barriers between T0 and T2 (i.e., T2–T0) and the independent variables were the three project tools activated during the training program (T1). Results in Table 5 show that both relational authenticity and the life-story approach are able to diminish the barriers regarding lack of social capital and lack of agency in career advancement, respectively, as predicted in our theoretical model. Only in the case of leader eudemonic wellbeing were we not able to observe a significant effect to explain the reduction in the internal barrier represented by low(er) self-efficacy perception.

Nevertheless, and unexpectedly, we find that the life-story approach again acts as a catalyser to improve the self-efficacy perception of the participants.

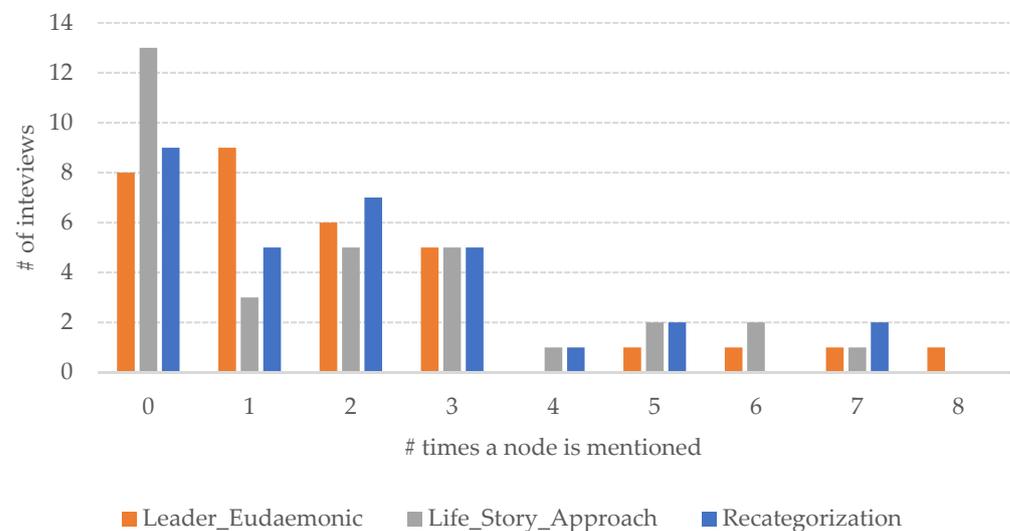


Figure 3. Frequency of intensity project tools.

Table 5. Regression analysis of the impact of the project's tools on reducing the barriers identified by women.

	T2–T0	T2–T0	T2–T0
	Difference Lower Self-Efficacy Perception	Difference Lack of Social Capital	Difference Lack of Agency in Career Advancement
Constant	−2.257 (0.621)	−0.231 (0.685)	−1.303 (0.345)
Leader eudaemonic well-being	0.204 (0.276)	−0.345 (0.304)	0.078 (0.153)
Relational authenticity	0.122 (0.224)	−0.564 ** (0.247)	0.321 ** (0.125)
Life-story approach	−0.591 ** (0.264)	−0.315 (0.291)	−0.753 *** (0.147)

** $p < 0.05$, *** $p < 0.01$.

5. Discussion

Our results indicate promising avenues regarding the triggers that facilitate women's corporate careers. By exploring the experiences and advancements of women participating in an ALD training program, namely, the Promociona Project, we shed light on the internal obstacles that women participants face in their way up the corporate ladder and the processes that could erode these barriers by enrolling in this training program. In particular, our findings indicate that this specific ALD training program for executive women created great improvements in their self-perception and confidence, as well as on their capacity to network and their levels of resolution in becoming agents of their own career in the long term. This way, the effectiveness of this ALD program for women executives to advance their corporate careers acted as a trigger event, making the participants more aware of their strengths and weaknesses and offering them the possibility of learning, reflecting, and uncovering their real traits in authentic leadership to break the glass ceiling.

The ALD program has a strong and reinforcing effect on women participants' authentic leadership by promoting higher self-esteem, relational and social capital, and career advancement agency. With regard to women's self-view, we observe that women participants showed higher self-esteem and self-efficacy perceptions after participating in the ALD program. The theoretical model proposed the catalyser for this higher satisfaction

with themselves would be an eudaemonic engagement process, whereby women activate a search of accomplishment and fulfillment with their professional activity, through which they would improve their self-esteem and, therefore, the perception of their efficacy at work. Instead, we find that it is a different mechanism, although it has a key role when helping women to overcome this personal barrier; this tool is the one known as the life-story approach, through which women give meaning to their experienced circumstances and events and recognize their past mistakes, but also, and most important, their strengths, values, and vision. This life review, with its lights and shadows, seems to be triggering a sense of pride in women's personal and professional growth, which would lead to a higher self-view. It is this ability to achieve self-knowledge that gives women the self-concept clarity to abandon the stereotype of following a low status role and so leads them to negotiate, ask, and claim for leadership, allowing them to increase their visibility as good leaders.

The fostering of their social and relational capital is the second improvement in their career uprising. The ALD program gives them the tools and mechanisms needed to activate their congenial leadership styles, overcoming potential internal barriers (dilemma of role incongruity) and prejudicial external reactions (backlash effects) from the leader-female role conflict, and thus facilitating their followers' personal and social identification with them. Indeed, the results suggest that once women feel comfortable with a more congruent management style and are legitimated as authentic leaders by the Promociona Project, they start using their networks in an instrumental way for their careers; women start becoming part of the influential networks.

In this recategorization process as authentic leaders, the senior manager mentors, assigned by the Promociona Project to each participant through a cross-mentoring program, may play an important role. Indeed, through her mentor, the mentee can learn how to gain legitimacy to exert authority and set the "tone at the top" according to her values and personal qualities. Additionally, mentors that act consistently with the new ways being taught throughout the covered subjects would offer the required guidance in the socialization process that involves training to develop authentic leaders [56], as well as modelling the various positive psychological states of authentic leaders [12].

Finally, the third effect activated by the program is the realization of the need to be an active agent in their career advancement. The project acts as a driver for a life-review through which participants' vital and professional experiences are revised and redirected. This way, the project assists participants in finding opportunities for growth and development through a guided reflection process. Through this life-review procedure, women learn about their personal and professional strengths and weaknesses and realize the need to find their self-direction over time, thus controlling and gaining legitimacy over their own career and not waiting to be discovered by someone else in the corporation. As a result of this awareness process, women begin to act proactively to enhance their agency and take control of their career.

A key element of this life review process is the construction of personal narratives returning to the experience (replaying it in the mind and/or recounting it to others, often with the help of questions asked by a facilitator, counsellor, or coach), through which individuals attempt to establish coherent connections among life events and drawing lessons from it. This enables him or her to analyse and interpret reality in a way that gives it a personal meaning, and, therefore, provide her/him with the knowledge and clarity about their values and convictions needed to develop their potential to become authentic leaders [16]. In our case, this guided review process that helps women to envision themselves in leadership roles is accomplished through a coaching process designed by the Project through which the women revisit their professional experiences, their life, and where they want to go, helping them to design an Individual Development Plan.

5.1. Practical Implications

One of the main practical implications of the study is that it is possible to design an ALD training program that helps participants to develop the skills needed to exercise

authentic leadership, such as reflexive abilities that foster self-awareness and relational authenticity. This is especially relevant given the challenges associated with learning authentic leadership that have been recognized by many authors [57,58].

In particular, it seems that through a diversified activity program of trigger events, experiential activities, and interactional situations (e.g., personalized cross-mentoring program, coaching, and networking activities, networking events led by prestigious business leaders), women can learn to activate leadership styles that are more congenial with their gender group, likely contrary to the traditional male leadership characteristics but not too far removed to be considered a social out-group in leadership (i.e., neither too masculine or too feminine). Indeed, our results show relational authenticity confers women the similarities needed in other dimensions different from gender to help them becoming recategorized as in-group in leadership and so increase their probabilities to break the glass ceiling in their organizations. This is possible in part because, as Braun et al. [10] argue, the contemporary understanding of what it means to be a good leader appears to lean toward communal attributes, which are associated with female leaders, and authentic leadership represents a communal leadership style.

Finally, the model presented here will assist researchers and practitioners in designing new ALD programs for women leaders or improving existing ones. In this regard, our analysis shows that there are two training facilitators that act as key triggers to activate the phenomena of women's self-perception improvement, fostering their relational capital and truly becoming agents of their career advancement. These drivers are the relational authenticity that comes from the development of more congruent leadership styles and the ability to learn from experience through a life-story approach, which are relatively easy to apply for those who would like to design this type of development program for women managers.

5.2. Limitations of the Study

Although the paper delves deep into women participants' careers and the impact of the ALD program, Promociona, we are also aware of the investigation's limitations. The main limitation of this work is the sample size. Although the current sample size is quite enough to clearly reveal the impact of the ALD program when overcoming women's internal barriers, it would be desirable to increase the sample size to strengthen the validity of the quantitative results.

Another potential limitation is that the data collected for analysis were subjective perceptions of women participants, as they were asked to share their concerns and worries about their professional advancement and the personal abilities, attitudes, and behaviours achieved through the program to overcome their personal barriers. This subjective perception can be a source of errors in the results, given that the interviewed women participants, which are very engaged in the program, can be overvaluing its impact on the reduction of their internal barriers because of its boosting effect. In this regard, to check if the psychological positive capital from this style of leadership development is real and persistent, it would be convenient to track their results over time, in a longitudinal study design. Additionally, it would be interesting to have a control group (i.e., women who applied and were not accepted) to see if their career experiences are less progressive. Besides, authentic leadership needs to be addressed on a long-term and daily basis, not just in an isolated and single training program. As far as men are the majority in top-level positions, they would need to learn how to engage authentically with their female colleagues, in order to foster a more inclusive environment within which authentic female leaders can grow.

Finally, we only focus on women's internal barriers (i.e., supply-side barriers), whereas there could be an important number of demand-side barriers (i.e., conscious or unconscious bias in the promotion processes on behalf of the personnel in charge of hiring and promotions) that women have to struggle with when trying to advance their professional careers. Thus, an analysis including the demand side, that is, the company side, could reveal how the project could also help women participants to gain the confidence to develop coping

strategies of resilience for these external barriers and that they could be managed better or worse when ascending the corporate ladder.

5.3. Future Research

It would be interesting to replicate this analysis in a few years to confirm the potential long-lasting effects of the program and to understand whether the program has been able to compensate the traditional distance between women and men in their career advancements. As authenticity has a strong relational component, a promising avenue of research would be to investigate if the program also helps to change others' views of women as leaders (e.g., peers, subordinates, and superiors). In the present study, we only observed women's perceptions regarding the breakdown of stereotypes about them as women leaders after the program and their improvement in social capital that could signal the fact that they have become recategorized as in-group leaders. Nevertheless, to confirm if this recategorization process is really taking place, we would need to ask male members of the elite leadership in-group before and after women enrol in the program. Another promising line of research would be using a pretest–posttest study to evaluate, in a more quantitative way, if the intervention has been successful in the development of authentic leaders. To do this, it would be convenient to use the Authentic Leadership Questionnaire by Walumbwa et al. [21] and/or create an assessment that models an Implicit Association Test, but adapted to measure an attribute of interest, such as ethical behaviour or morality. Another thread to pull would be to analyse if the development of authentic leadership among the participants could be linked to more ethically concerned companies. An additional area of study could also be to explore how authentic leadership is related to the traits of the traditional leadership styles. To do this, one could use Bass and Avolio's multifactor leadership questionnaire [59]. A suggested line of inquiry would be to address the problematization of authentic leadership style. In this vein, it would be interesting to design and conduct in-depth interviews to address issues regarding authentic leadership downsides, as well as their possible positive or negative links to doing managerial work, taking on responsibility, mastering challenges, and delivering results. Finally, it also would be desirable to examine the training program in different cultural contexts (currently the program is being carried out in Portugal and also in Chile), as the results could be generalized or nuanced depending on the cultural context.

Author Contributions: M.M.-M. conducted the interviews; M.M.-M. and M.M.M.-L. coded the transcriptions; M.M.-M., M.M.M.-L., R.M.d.C., P.G. and S.G.-P. designed, performed, and analysed the research, searched the literature, and wrote the manuscript; G.I. is Coordinator of the Economics Area at the CEOE and he contributed to the data collection, access to the program participants, and also wrote the manuscript. All authors contributed to the article and approved the submitted version, and All authors have read and agreed to the published version of the manuscript.

Funding: This research was funded by (i) the Spanish Government (Project I+D+i FEM2017–83006-R; PID2020-114183RB-I00; funded by AEI/FEDER, UE); and (ii) Chair Universidad CEU San Pablo–Mutua Madrileña (060516-USPMM-02/17).

Data Availability Statement: The raw data supporting the conclusions of this article will be made available by the authors, without undue reservation, to any qualified researcher.

Acknowledgments: We acknowledge the generosity of CEOE (Spanish Confederation of Business Organizations) and specially to Gabriela Uriarte and Susana Sanchiz, former and current Promociona Project directors, without whom the present study could not have been completed. We also thank to Ricardo Gimeno, Teresa Mariño and Almudena Sánchez for their comments and suggestions and Carmen Meneses for teaching the authors how to perform a qualitative analysis. We are also thankful the undergraduate students that helped us to transcribe the interviews. Finally, we would like to thank the interviewees for their generosity and their willingness to tell us about their professional and vital experiences.

Conflicts of Interest: The authors declare no conflict of interest.

References

- United Nations. *The Millennium Development Goals Report*; United Nations: New York, NY, USA, 2015; pp. 1–75.
- OECD. *Women's Economic Empowerment*; Gendernet; OECD: Paris, France, 2012.
- Flabbi, L.; Macis, M.; Moro, A.; Schivardi, F. Do Female Executives Make a Difference? The Impact of Female Leadership on Gender Gaps and Firm Performance. *Econ. J.* **2019**, *129*, 2390–2423. [[CrossRef](#)]
- Torchia, M.; Calabrò, A.; Gabaldon, P.; Kanadli, S.B. Women directors contribution to organizational innovation: A behavioral approach. *Scand. J. Manag.* **2018**, *34*, 215–224. [[CrossRef](#)]
- World Economic Forum. *Global Gender Gap Report 2020*; World Economic Forum: Cologny, Switzerland, 2021.
- Gorman, E.H.; Kmec, J.A. Hierarchical Rank and Women's Organizational Mobility: Glass Ceilings in Corporate Law Firms. *Am. J. Sociol.* **2009**, *114*, 1428–1474. [[CrossRef](#)] [[PubMed](#)]
- Gabaldon, P.; De Anca, C.; De Cabo, R.M.; Gimeno, R. Searching for Women on Boards: An Analysis from the Supply and Demand Perspective. *Corp. Gov. Int. Rev.* **2015**, *24*, 371–385. [[CrossRef](#)]
- Corriveau, A.-M. Developing authentic leadership as a starting point to responsible management: A Canadian university case study. *Int. J. Manag. Educ.* **2020**, *18*, 100364. [[CrossRef](#)]
- Avolio, B.J.; Gardner, W.L. Authentic leadership development: Getting to the root of positive forms of leadership. *Leadersh. Q.* **2005**, *16*, 315–338. [[CrossRef](#)]
- Braun, S.; Peus, C.; Frey, D. Connectionism in action: Exploring the links between leader prototypes, leader gender, and perceptions of authentic leadership. *Organ. Behav. Hum. Decis. Process.* **2018**, *149*, 129–144. [[CrossRef](#)]
- Conger, J.A.; Benjamin, B. *Building Leaders: How Successful Companies Develop the Next Generation*; Jossey-Bass: San Francisco, CA, USA, 1999.
- Cooper, C.D.; Scandura, T.A.; Schriesheim, C.A. Looking forward but learning from our past: Potential challenges to developing authentic leadership theory and authentic leaders. *Leadersh. Q.* **2005**, *16*, 475–493. [[CrossRef](#)]
- Eagly, A.H. Achieving relational authenticity in leadership: Does gender matter? *Leadersh. Q.* **2005**, *16*, 459–474. [[CrossRef](#)]
- Ilies, R.; Morgeson, F.P.; Nahrgang, J.D. Authentic leadership and eudaemonic well-being: Understanding leader–follower outcomes. *Leadersh. Q.* **2005**, *16*, 373–394. [[CrossRef](#)]
- Gaertner, S.L.; Mann, J.; Murrell, A.; Dovidio, J.F. Reducing intergroup bias: The benefits of recategorization. *J. Pers. Soc. Psychol.* **1989**, *57*, 239–249. [[CrossRef](#)]
- Shamir, B.; Eilam, G. "What's your story?" A life-stories approach to authentic leadership development. *Leadersh. Q.* **2005**, *16*, 395–417. [[CrossRef](#)]
- Baron, L.; Parent, É. Developing Authentic Leadership within a Training Context: Three phenomena supporting the individual development process. *J. Leadersh. Organ. Stud.* **2015**, *22*, 37–53. [[CrossRef](#)]
- Hogue, M.; Lord, R.G. A multilevel, complexity theory approach to understanding gender bias in leadership. *Leadersh. Q.* **2007**, *18*, 370–390. [[CrossRef](#)]
- Luthans, F.; Avolio, B.J. Authentic Leadership Development. *Posit. Organ. Scholarsh.* **2003**, *241*, 258.
- Ibarra, H. The authenticity paradox. *Harv. Bus. Rev.* **2015**, *93*, 53–59.
- Walumbwa, F.O.; Avolio, B.J.; Gardner, W.L.; Wernsing, T.S.; Peterson, S.J. Authentic Leadership: Development and Validation of a Theory-Based Measure. *J. Manag.* **2007**, *34*, 89–126. [[CrossRef](#)]
- Bennis, W.G.; Thomas, R.J. Crucibles of Leadership. *Harv. Bus. Rev.* **2002**, *80*, 39–42.
- Baron, L. Developing Authentic Leadership through Experiential Training: An Empirical Study. *Acad. Manag. Proc.* **2012**, *2012*, 11088. [[CrossRef](#)]
- Bandura, A. Self-efficacy: The exercise of control. *Am. J. Health Promot.* **1997**, *12*, 8–10. [[CrossRef](#)] [[PubMed](#)]
- Bandura, A. Self-efficacy: Toward a unifying theory of behavioral change. *Psychol. Rev.* **1977**, *84*, 191–215. [[CrossRef](#)]
- Langford, J.; Clance, P.R. The imposter phenomenon: Recent research findings regarding dynamics, personality and family patterns and their implications for treatment. *Psychotherapy* **1993**, *30*, 495–501. [[CrossRef](#)]
- De Vries, M.F.R.K. The Impostor Syndrome: Developmental and Societal Issues. *Hum. Relat.* **1990**, *43*, 667–686. [[CrossRef](#)]
- Bark, A.S.H.; Escartin, J.; Schuh, S.C.; Van Dick, R. Who Leads More and Why? A Mediation Model from Gender to Leadership Role Occupancy. *J. Bus. Ethic* **2015**, *139*, 473–483. [[CrossRef](#)]
- Huta, V.; Ryan, R.M. Pursuing Pleasure or Virtue: The Differential and Overlapping Well-Being Benefits of Hedonic and Eudaimonic Motives. *J. Happiness Stud.* **2010**, *11*, 735–762. [[CrossRef](#)]
- Judge, T.A.; Locke, E.A.; Durham, C.C.; Kluger, A.N. Dispositional effects on job and life satisfaction: The role of core evaluations. *J. Appl. Psychol.* **1998**, *83*, 17–34. [[CrossRef](#)] [[PubMed](#)]
- Huta, V. *Pursuing Eudaimonia versus Hedonia: Distinctions, Similarities, and Relationships*; American Psychological Association (APA): Worcester, MA, USA, 2013; Volume 1, pp. 139–158.
- Kanter, R.M. *Men and Women of the Corporation*; Hachette: New York, NY, USA, 1977.
- Ragins, B.R.; Townsend, B.; Mattis, M. Gender gap in the executive suite: CEOs and female executives report on breaking the glass ceiling. *Acad. Manag. Perspect.* **1998**, *12*, 28–42. [[CrossRef](#)]
- Tajfel, H.; Turner, J.C. The Social Identity Theory of Intergroup Behavior. In *Psychology of Intergroup Relations*; Nelson Hall: Chicago, IL, USA, 1986; pp. 7–24.

35. Broadbridge, A. Social capital, gender and careers: Evidence from retail senior managers. *Equal. Divers. Incl. Int. J.* **2010**, *29*, 815–834. [[CrossRef](#)]
36. Zhu, D.H.; Shen, W.; Hillman, A.J. Recategorization into the In-group: The Appointment of Demographically Different New Directors and Their Subsequent Positions on Corporate Boards. *Adm. Sci. Q.* **2014**, *59*, 240–270. [[CrossRef](#)]
37. Rudman, L.A.; Phelan, J.E. Backlash effects for disconfirming gender stereotypes in organizations. *Res. Organ. Behav.* **2008**, *28*, 61–79. [[CrossRef](#)]
38. Eagly, A.H.; Carli, L.L. The female leadership advantage: An evaluation of the evidence. *Leadersh. Q.* **2003**, *14*, 807–834. [[CrossRef](#)]
39. Eagly, A.H.; Karau, S.; Makhijani, M.G. Gender and the effectiveness of leaders: A meta-analysis. *Psychol. Bull.* **1995**, *117*, 125–145. [[CrossRef](#)]
40. Henning, M.; Jardim, A. *The Managerial Woman*, Garden City; Anchor Press: New York, NY, USA, 1977.
41. Evers, A.; Sieverding, M. Why do Highly Qualified Women (Still) Earn Less? Gender Differences in Long-Term Predictors of Career Success. *Psychol. Women Q.* **2013**, *38*, 93–106. [[CrossRef](#)]
42. Goldin, C. A Grand Gender Convergence: Its Last Chapter. *Am. Econ. Rev.* **2014**, *104*, 1091–1119. [[CrossRef](#)]
43. Artz, B.; Goodall, A.H.; Oswald, A. Do Women Ask? *Ind. Relat. A J. Econ. Soc.* **2018**, *57*, 611–636. [[CrossRef](#)]
44. Swann, W.B.; Hixon, J.G.; Stein-Seroussi, A.; Gilbert, D.T. The fleeting gleam of praise: Cognitive processes underlying behavioral reactions to self-relevant feedback. *J. Pers. Soc. Psychol.* **1990**, *59*, 17–26. [[CrossRef](#)] [[PubMed](#)]
45. Bowles, H.R.; Thomason, B.; Bear, J. Reconceptualizing Women’s Career Negotiations: Asking, Bending, and Shaping. *Acad. Manag. Proc.* **2018**, *2018*, 17452. [[CrossRef](#)]
46. Sandberg, S. *Women, Work, and the Will to Lead*; Penguin Random House: New York, NY, USA, 2013.
47. Caracelli, V.J.; Greene, J.C. Data Analysis Strategies for Mixed-Method Evaluation Designs. *Educ. Eval. Policy Anal.* **1993**, *15*, 195–207. [[CrossRef](#)]
48. Greene, W.H. *Econometric Analysis*, 5th ed.; Pearson: Upper Saddle River, NJ, USA, 2011.
49. Marshall, C.; Rossman, G.B. *Designing Qualitative Research*, 3rd ed.; Sage: Thousand Oaks, CA, USA, 2014.
50. Martínez, M.M.; Molina-López, M.M.; de Cabo, R.M. Explaining the gender gap in school principalship: A tale of two sides. *Educ. Manag. Adm. Leadersh.* **2020**. [[CrossRef](#)]
51. Gibbert, M.; Ruigrok, W. The “What” and “How” of Case Study Rigor: Three Strategies Based on Published Work. *Organ. Res. Methods* **2010**, *13*, 710–737. [[CrossRef](#)]
52. Cachia, M.; Millward, L.J. The telephone medium and semi-structured interviews: A complementary fit. *Qual. Res. Organ. Manag. Int. J.* **2011**, *6*, 265–277. [[CrossRef](#)]
53. Sturges, J.E.; Hanrahan, K.J. Comparing Telephone and Face-to-Face Qualitative Interviewing: A Research Note. *Qual. Res.* **2004**, *4*, 107–118. [[CrossRef](#)]
54. Creswell, J.W. A framework for design. In *Research Design: Qualitative, Quantitative, and Mixed Methods Approaches*; SAGE Publications: Thousand Oaks, CA, USA, 2003; pp. 9–11.
55. Hackett, G.; Betz, N.E. A self-efficacy approach to the career development of women. *J. Vocat. Behav.* **1981**, *18*, 326–339. [[CrossRef](#)]
56. Schein, E.H. *Organizational Culture and Leadership*; John Wiley & Sons: Hoboken, NJ, USA, 2010; Volume 2.
57. Byrne, A.; Barling, J. When She Brings Home the Job Status: Wives’ Job Status, Status Leakage, and Marital Instability. *Organ. Sci.* **2017**, *28*, 177–192. [[CrossRef](#)]
58. Kuechler, W.; Stedham, Y. Management Education and Transformational Learning: The Integration of Mindfulness in an MBA Course. *J. Manag. Educ.* **2017**, *42*, 8–33. [[CrossRef](#)]
59. Bass, B.M.; Avolio, B.J. Multifactor leadership questionnaire. *West. J. Nurs. Res.* **1996**. [[CrossRef](#)]