

Perceptions of Leadership Traits and Gender in the Organizational Context

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1 Introduction

Leadership is recognized as a key element for organizational performance, especially in dynamic and collaborative environments. Despite the extensive literature on the subject, there is no consensus on the definition or the impact of gender on leadership style. In a context where diversity and equity are gaining increasing relevance, understanding how men and women lead and which characteristics they most frequently adopt becomes essential to promoting more effective organizational cultures.

Over the past decades, the debate on gender equity in organizations has advanced significantly, driven by cultural changes, institutional pressures, and the growing participation of women in leadership positions. Nevertheless, structural differences in the recognition and appreciation of leadership exercised by women still persist, particularly in corporate environments predominantly led by men (Torreão, 2007; Kuhlmann et al., 2017; Stevenson, 2021).

A study conducted by Korn Ferry (2017) with CEOs of companies listed in Fortune magazine and large private companies indicated that women, compared to men, tend to work more, have longer careers, be driven by purpose and results, and more frequently distribute power and recognition among teams. In general, these women demonstrated traits such as courage, risk-taking, resilience, agility, and the ability to deal with ambiguity. They often came from finance backgrounds and had not initially imagined themselves in leadership roles.

More recently, Korn Ferry studies (2024) highlight emerging trends in leadership, reinforcing that competencies such as authenticity, collaboration, emotional intelligence, and adaptive vision—traits often associated with female leadership—have become central to organizational success. According to the study, these abilities are seen as essential for building organizational resilience in a constantly changing corporate environment.

Similarly, the Women in the Workplace 2024 report shows that although women currently occupy 29% of senior leadership positions (C-level), significant structural challenges remain. One such challenge is the phenomenon known as the “broken rung,” in which for every 100 men promoted to management positions, only 81 women receive the same promotion (McKinsey & Company, 2024).

It is estimated that achieving full balance will take around 50 years for white women, and nearly as long for Black, Latina, and Asian women. Additionally, women report higher levels of emotional burnout (40% of female leaders versus 29% of men), as well as facing microaggressions, insecurity in the workplace, and difficulties balancing career and personal life. On the other hand, one in five women stated that hybrid work policies or flexible schedules were essential to remaining in their roles or avoiding a reduction in working hours (McKinsey & Company, 2024). These data reinforce both the advances and the fragility of gender equity in contemporary corporate leadership.

Men and women tend to display different leadership styles and traits, often associated with gender stereotypes that shape both the behavior of leaders and the perceptions of followers (Eagly & Carli, 2007; Amaral et al., 2021).

In this context, the present research seeks to address a gap identified by Amaral et al. (2021), whose systematic integrative review revealed a scarcity of empirical investigations that directly explore the perceptions of followers regarding leadership styles and traits associated with gender. Although the conceptual debate is advancing, there is still a lack of quantitative evidence to validate or challenge these associations in the daily life of organizations.

Therefore, this study aims to investigate perceptions about leadership traits and styles associated with each gender, based on consolidated theoretical references and field research with employees of small and medium-sized enterprises in the state of Santa Catarina. The central research questions guiding this investigation are: Is the perceived leadership style associated with the leader's gender? and Do leadership perceptions reproduce gender stereotypes or reflect individual characteristics of the leaders?

The relevance of this study lies in its contribution to advancing scientific knowledge on leadership and gender in the organizational context, by providing empirical evidence that allows for reflection on the influence of stereotypes and social constructs in leadership practices. The results may support the adoption of more inclusive and conscious management practices, as well as foster diversity and equity policies within organizations.

2 Theoretical Framework

Leadership involves interpersonal relationships, power, and strategic direction (Yukl, 1989; Northouse, 2004); this influence occurs in interactive and relational processes in which leaders guide individuals or groups to achieve shared goals (Heifetz, 1998; Burns, 2010; Northouse, 2012). From this perspective, leadership goes beyond formal positions and can be exercised by any individual who mobilizes collective efforts toward a shared purpose (Osborn; Hunt & Jauch, 2002; Hannah & Lester, 2009).

Leadership is a dynamic process of mutual influence that occurs within a group context, aimed at achieving common goals (Northouse, 2004; Amaral, 2014). It can also be understood from the perspective of power relations exercised by the leader over followers with the intent of promoting change, functioning as a tool to reach collective objectives. Another approach defines it based on the competencies required for effective leadership, emphasizing the role of specific knowledge and skills for this performance (Northouse, 2004).

It is an emerging social phenomenon, composed of practices, interactions, and collective processes (Crevani; Lindgren & Packendorff, 2010). In this sense, the triad model—leader, followers, and common goal (Bennis, 2007)—remains relevant.

Among leadership styles, transactional and transformational leadership stand out. The former is based on contingent rewards and hierarchical structure, focusing on task efficiency and goal achievement (Yukl, 1989; Amaral, 2014). Transformational leadership, in contrast, focuses on follower development, inspirational motivation, intellectual stimulation, and individualized consideration (Burns, 2010; Amaral, 2014).

These styles are not necessarily mutually exclusive and can be applied in combination, depending on the organizational context and the leader's profile.

The discussion on the relationship between gender and leadership has sparked increasing academic interest, particularly with the contributions of social role theory (Eagly & Carli, 2004; Koenig et al., 2011). These theories argue that leadership behavior is strongly influenced by gender stereotypes tied to social expectations.

Leadership exercised by women remains surrounded by controversy and marked by assumptions that polarize perceptions of differences between men and women in leadership roles (Moraes, 2008). These assumptions, often grounded in role congruity and social role theories, contribute to a stereotyped view of women, associating them with traits such as altruism, gentleness, and care—qualities valued in social contexts but not traditionally recognized as desirable for leadership positions (Fletcher, 2004; Amaral et al., 2021).

This imbalance generates two types of bias faced by women leaders: descriptive, which views them as naturally less capable of leading, and prescriptive, which suggests they should not aspire to leadership, as it is traditionally considered a male ambition (Cuadrado, García-Ael & Molero, 2015). When women break these expectations, they may face the so-called backlash

effect, a negative reaction to behaviors often interpreted as arrogance or self-promotion—traits that, in men, would be considered assertive and strategic (Moraes, 2008; Amanatullah & Tinsley, 2013). Women who adhere to gender stereotypes, on the other hand, tend to be liked but rarely respected or seen as competent in complex decision-making (Eagly & Carli, 2004; Moraes, 2008).

Although it is important to look beyond stereotypes, women tend to be correlated with a transformational leadership style, emphasizing empathy, cooperation, emotional intelligence, and sustainability (Amaral et al., 2021). Traditionally feminine-labeled characteristics include active listening, interpersonal sensitivity, collaboration, and a care-oriented approach (Eagly & Carli, 2004; Sabharwal, Levine & D’Agostino, 2017). These qualities are often linked to collective well-being and team cohesion.

Men, on the other hand, are more frequently associated with transactional leadership, characterized by hierarchy, efficiency, and results-orientation. Masculine attributes include assertiveness, objectivity, self-confidence, competitiveness, rationality, and focus on outcomes (Cuadrado, García-Ael & Molero, 2015; Prowse, Prowse & Perrett, 2020). These traits are driven by formal authority and goal fulfillment.

It is essential to demystify the tendency to automatically associate female leadership with the transformational style, which is often deemed more compatible with feminine traits, as this risks distorting the image of women as leaders. Recognizing differences should not imply hierarchy or reinforce inequality. Therefore, female leadership should not be treated as a homogeneous or exclusive phenomenon, but rather as a plural and contextual experience, transcending fixed dichotomies between masculine and feminine (Moraes, 2008).

The distinction between masculine and feminine leadership traits goes beyond superficial behavioral differences and reflects deeply rooted social and cultural constructions. The study by Amaral et al. (2021) identified in the literature distinct traits and leadership styles associated with male and female genders, which are presented in Table 1 below.

Table 1. Leadership style and characteristics by gender

Leadership Style and Characteristics of Women Leaders	Leadership Style and Characteristics of Men Leaders
Transformational	Transactional
Horizontal leadership	Vertical leadership
Emotional intelligence	Confidence
Internal Stakeholders	External Stakeholders
Greater efficiency in the crisis	Determination
Empathy	Resilience
Compassion	Challenge
Cooperation	Self-efficacy
Community	Psychological capital profile
Vocation to training others	Hierarchy
Dialogue	Self-sufficiency

Relationship	Reflection before decision making
Social skills	Tendency to hire and promote other men
Looking towards the individual	Authoritarianism
Focus on the organization's sustainability	Style seen as the most successful

Source: Amaral et al. (2021).

Although leadership style and traits can be influenced by gender stereotypes, they are not determined by gender itself. Individuals with traits considered feminine tend to adopt more transformational, cooperative leadership styles based on emotional intelligence, while those with traits associated with masculinity often assume a transactional, hierarchical, and more authoritarian leadership style (Amaral et al., 2021). However, these categories are not biologically fixed, as leaders may exhibit a combination of these traits depending on their personal trajectory, professional background, and organizational context (Gartzia & Van Engen, 2012; Brandt, 2020).

Despite this, stereotypes continue to influence how leadership styles are socially perceived and evaluated, assigning greater legitimacy to the masculine model of leadership and imposing on women the need to demonstrate superior performance to gain the same recognition (Stevenson, 2021). Thus, women who incorporate masculine traits may adopt more authoritarian and transactional leadership styles, while men with a more fluid gender identity tend to exercise cooperative and transformational styles (Gartzia & Van Engen, 2012).

Leadership exercised by women is associated with horizontality, concern for internal stakeholders, crisis management, and a focus on interpersonal relationships. Male leaders, on the other hand, tend to favor verticality, hierarchical decision-making, resilience, self-confidence, and a focus on external stakeholders (Amaral et al., 2021). On the other hand, some authors challenge such distinctions, suggesting that style differences may be insignificant (Andersen & Hansson, 2011; Sims et al., 2020), and that both men and women may adopt leadership strategies based on context rather than gender (Funk, 2015; Garcia-Solarte et al., 2017).

The persistence of masculinized leadership stereotypes tends to increase barriers to women's advancement in leadership positions (Denizci Guillet et al., 2019; Prowse, Prowse & Perret, 2020). Even in more diverse contexts, women are pressured to adopt masculine traits to be legitimized as leaders (Cuadrado, García-Ael & Molero, 2015). This reality reveals a dual challenge: to promote gender equity and to rethink the criteria for leadership competence and success in organizations.

Even though there are evident differences in leadership styles and traits between men and women, these differences are not intrinsically attributable to gender but rather to the adoption of stereotypes and individual strategies. There is a noticeable scarcity of theoretical and empirical studies that explore the perceptions of subordinates regarding these traits. This gap justifies the present investigation, which aims to understand how SME employees associate leadership traits and styles with gender, thereby contributing to both the theoretical and practical advancement of the topic.

3 Methodology

This study adopts a quantitative approach, with an exploratory and descriptive nature, based on bibliographic research and conducted through a survey. This methodological choice is justified by the aim to measure perceptions regarding leadership styles and traits attributed

to men and women, taking into account the gender stereotypes that influence the organizational context.

The main objective of this study was to investigate, based on data collected through a structured questionnaire, the perceptions regarding leadership traits and styles associated with each gender, using a consolidated theoretical framework and empirical research. The study was guided by the following research questions:

(1) Is the perceived leadership style associated with the leader's gender?

(2) Do perceptions of leadership reproduce gender stereotypes or reflect individual characteristics of the leaders?

The sample consisted of employees from small and medium-sized enterprises (SMEs) in southern Brazil, working at different hierarchical levels. A non-probabilistic convenience sampling technique was used, based on accessibility to the target population and feasibility of application.

The data collection instrument was developed based on the study by Amaral et al. (2021), which systematizes leadership characteristics and styles associated with each gender. The questionnaire included 30 leadership traits, and participants were asked to indicate, for each trait, whether they considered it more associated with male or female leaders. Sociodemographic information (gender, age, sexual orientation, job position, etc.) was also collected to characterize the sample.

Data collection was conducted via the Google Forms platform, ensuring anonymity, voluntary participation, and compliance with ethical principles applicable to research involving human subjects. The data were organized and analyzed to identify patterns in participants' perceptions of gender-associated leadership styles and traits, providing a foundation for interpreting the results.

4 Results Analysis

This section presents the results of the empirical research conducted with 207 employees from small and medium-sized enterprises (SMEs) in the state of Santa Catarina, Brazil. The objective was to identify respondents' perceptions regarding the association between leadership traits and styles and the gender of the person occupying a leadership position.

The data were analyzed using descriptive statistics, based on absolute and relative frequencies. For each of the 30 leadership traits evaluated, the proportions of association with either male or female leaders were calculated, considering the total number of responses. The analyses also included cross-tabulations with sociodemographic variables (gender, age, job position, and race/color) in order to identify patterns and possible differences in perception. Finally, the empirical results were compared with the findings of Amaral et al. (2021), allowing for the observation of convergences and divergences between participants' perceptions and the leadership stereotypes described in the literature.

The diversity of the sample enabled the capture of various perceptions regarding leadership in the business environment. Among the respondents, 113 identified as male and 92 as female. The age range varied from 16 to 75 years. Regarding race/color, 158 identified as white, 37 as mixed race (pardo), and 11 as Black. In terms of professional role, 42 worked in management, board, or executive positions; 23 held supervisory or coordination roles; and 142 worked as assistants, technicians, or general employees.

To support the analysis and discussion of the results, Table 1 was developed, presenting the leadership styles and traits attributed to male and female leaders, along with the corresponding response frequencies provided by the participants.

Table 2. Leadership styles and traits by gender according to survey respondentes

Leadership style and Characteristics		Men	Women	% Men	% Women
Men	Authoritarianism	171	36	82.6	17.4
	Hierarchy	167	40	80.7	19.3
	External Stakeholders	140	67	67.6	32.4
	Focus on the organization's sustainability	134	73	64.7	35.3
	Style seen as the most successful	134	73	64.7	35.3
	Confidence	124	83	59.9	40.1
	Vertical leadership	117	90	56.5	43.5
	Transactional leadership	115	92	55.6	44.4
Neutral	Self-sufficiency	113	94	54.6	45.4
	Challenge	101	106	48.8	51.2
	Greater efficiency in the crisis	100	107	48.3	51.7
	Psychological capital profile	97	110	46.9	53.1
Women	Self-efficacy	91	116	44.0	56.0
	Determination	85	122	41.1	58.9
	Resilience	85	122	41.1	58.9
	Vocation to training others	85	122	41.1	58.9
	Tendency to hire and promote equals	81	126	39.1	60.9
	Reflection before decision making	71	136	34.3	65.7
	Horizontal leadership	68	139	32.9	67.1
	Transformational leadership	65	142	31.4	68.6
	Cooperation	64	143	30.9	69.1
	Community	46	161	22.2	77.8
	Social skills	46	161	22.2	77.8
	Relationship	41	166	19.8	80.2
	Emotional intelligence	40	167	19.3	80.7
	Looking towards the individual	32	175	15.5	84.5
	Internal stakeholders	29	178	14.0	86.0
Dialogue	28	179	13.5	86.5	

	Empathy	20	187	9.7	90.3
	Compassion	12	195	5.8	94.2

Source: Elaborated by the authors (2025).

Of the 30 leadership traits evaluated, 18 were predominantly associated (i.e., with more than 55% of attributions) with women, eight with men, and four were considered neutral, as they presented attribution percentages between 45% and 55%, indicating an equivalence between genders in the exercise of these leadership competencies.

It is noteworthy that only two characteristics—authoritarianism (82.6%) and hierarchy (80.7%)—were strongly associated with men (with more than 80% of responses), while seven traits surpassed that threshold among women. Among them, empathy (90.3%) and compassion (94.2%) were most strongly attributed to female leaders, with over 90% of attributions.

Although the set of characteristics associated with women appeared more frequently, it is striking that the most successful leadership style was predominantly associated with the male gender, evidencing a dissonance between perceived competence and recognition of success in leadership.

Women were more often associated with traits such as compassion (94.2%), empathy (90.3%), dialogue (86.5%), concern for internal stakeholders (86%), focus on the individual (84.5%), emotional intelligence (80.7%), relationship building (80%), social skills (77.8%), and community concern (77.8%). Additionally, other traits such as cooperation, collaboration with subordinates to identify necessary change for the good of the organization (transformational leadership), bringing people together and granting more autonomy to the team (horizontal leadership), reflectiveness, aptitude for training, resilience, determination, and self-efficacy were also predominantly associated with women. This reveals a broadened perceived repertoire of female leadership. This pattern suggests that, regardless of traditional gender stereotypes, participants recognize in women a broader and more diversified set of leadership traits.

The characteristics predominantly associated with men were authoritarianism (82.6%), hierarchy (80.7%), focus on external stakeholders (67.6%), organizational sustainability, and the perception of a more successful leadership style (64.7%). The survey also showed that confidence, management style with well-defined roles, information control and strategy (vertical leadership), demanding rule compliance and goal achievement, and performance-based reward systems (transactional leadership) were traits attributed to male leaders.

When analyzing responses by age group, younger participants (aged 16–35) demonstrated greater openness to diverse leadership styles and less adherence to traditional hierarchical models, whereas older participants (over 45 years old) tended to associate success and efficiency with traditionally masculine traits.

By job function, operational workers more frequently associated relational traits with women but maintained the perception of men as more effective leaders. Those in managerial roles exhibited more balanced perceptions.

The analysis by race/color revealed that Black respondents tended to value female competencies more strongly, suggesting a more critical perspective on hegemonic leadership models.

The analysis by gender identity showed that men attributed traditionally masculine traits—according to the classification by Amaral et al. (2021)—to women in 51.7% of the responses. This suggests that, from the male perspective, female leaders are more associated with traits such as results orientation, assertiveness, and control. Only 34.4% of responses aligned with the theoretical model, while 13.7% were neutral. In contrast, women demonstrated stronger adherence to Amaral et al.'s classification, with 69% congruence, reinforcing the association between female leadership and traits such as empathy, emotional intelligence, and

dialogue. Trans and non-binary participants, though present in the sample, did not assign specific traits to either gender, possibly due to low representation or discomfort with the binary nature of the questionnaire.

In terms of sexual orientation, heterosexual participants showed 58.6% incongruence with the theoretical model, also attributing traditionally masculine traits to female leaders. Homosexual participants followed a similar pattern, with 53.3% incongruence, but exhibited a slightly greater tendency to value balanced leadership styles. Respondents who chose not to disclose their sexual orientation demonstrated more diverse perceptions, with 46.6% incongruence and 33.3% congruence. These findings suggest a reconfiguration of the social imaginary: regardless of identity or orientation, there is growing recognition that women demonstrate assertive, strategic, and results-driven leadership—breaking away from traditional gender stereotypes.

The results show strong convergence with the findings of Amaral et al. (2021). Most characteristics aligned with the associated gender, especially regarding transformational styles for women and transactional styles for men. However, this study also reveals signs of change in traditional gender perception patterns in leadership.

Traits such as tendency to promote same-gender peers, determination, resilience, and self-efficacy—traditionally associated with male leadership (Amaral et al., 2021)—were, in this study, more frequently attributed to women. This finding suggests an expansion of the female leadership repertoire to include not only relational competencies but also action-oriented, focused, and decisive traits.

Conversely, focus on organizational sustainability, typically identified in the literature as a female trait, was attributed to the male gender by participants, revealing an empirical inversion of theoretical assumptions. Moreover, traits traditionally marked by gender distinctions in the literature—such as psychological capital, challenge management, and crisis effectiveness—showed gender-balanced distributions in the survey. This points to a trend toward neutralizing certain attributes, with leadership being seen increasingly as functional and contextual, rather than inherently gendered.

5. Conclusion and Contribution

This study aimed to investigate the perceptions of employees from small and medium-sized enterprises regarding the leadership traits and styles associated with gender, based on theoretical references and empirical data. With a quantitative, exploratory, and descriptive approach, the research employed a structured questionnaire applied to 207 respondents from the state of Santa Catarina, Brazil. Descriptive statistical analyses enabled the mapping of 30 leadership characteristics in terms of their association with either the male or female gender, as well as the identification of possible patterns of perception influenced by sociodemographic variables.

The results revealed that 18 out of the 30 leadership traits assessed were predominantly attributed to women, eight to men, and four were considered neutral. Women were more frequently associated with traits linked to transformational leadership and relational competencies, such as empathy, compassion, emotional intelligence, and cooperation. However, they were also recognized for traits traditionally linked to male leadership, such as resilience, self-efficacy, and determination, indicating a broadening of the perceived repertoire of female leadership. On the other hand, traits such as authoritarianism, hierarchy, and focus on external stakeholders remained strongly associated with men.

The research questions that guided the study—whether the perceived leadership style is associated with the leader's gender and whether perceptions reflect gender stereotypes or individual characteristics—were answered affirmatively. The results indicate that although

there is a trend toward reconfiguring traditional perceptions, there remains a strong influence of gender stereotypes in the attribution of leadership traits and styles. At the same time, signs of change are evident, with growing appreciation for historically feminine attributes and the expansion of the repertoire associated with leadership practiced by women.

This study contributes to the advancement of knowledge on leadership and gender by offering empirical evidence that challenges stereotypes still present in organizations. Moreover, it highlights a transformation in social representations of leadership, now more plural and aligned with contemporary challenges. The findings may assist organizations in adopting more inclusive and equitable management practices, encouraging diversity policies and the recognition of different leadership styles as legitimate and effective. This movement may help to overcome structural barriers, such as the glass ceiling, broadening opportunities for women to access and remain in leadership positions.

Among the study's limitations, it is worth noting the application in a single geographic region and the use of convenience sampling, which restrict the generalization of the results. Future research should broaden the geographical scope, increase the sample size, include other organizational cultures or countries, and adopt qualitative or mixed methodologies to deepen the understanding of gender dynamics in leadership and their implications for organizational performance.

Use of Generative AI in This Research

In this work, we used the Generative Artificial Intelligence tool ChatGPT, developed by OpenAI, to support technical and linguistic tasks. The AI applications occurred in the following stages: grammatical and language review of the text in Portuguese; revision and conversion of bibliographic references to APA style; adjustment and calculation of numerical data for presentation in percentage format, based on research result tables provided by the authors; and translation of sections of the article into English, respecting academic context and specific terminology in the field. The tool was trained on publicly available datasets until April 2023, with no personalized fine-tuning or use of private databases for this study. We emphasize that all analyses, interpretations, discussions, and conclusions presented in the article are original and the result of human researchers' work. The content generated with AI assistance was critically reviewed, validated, and supplemented by the authors, ensuring its reliability, scientific rigor, and alignment with the research objectives.

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