

Article

# Developing Women's Authenticity in Leadership

Yoshie Tomozumi Nakamura \*, Jessica Hinshaw and Rebecca Burns 

Graduate School of Education and Human Development, The George Washington University,  
Washington, DC 20052, USA

\* Correspondence: yoshienakamura@gwu.edu

**Abstract:** In this exploratory case study, we examined women's lived experience as leaders and their participation in an in-person leadership development program. More specifically, we studied how women perceived an in-person leadership development program through a lens of authentic leadership. Our method for gathering information included individual interviews, field observation, and archival data. The interviews focused on particular episodes and stories of the participants' leadership experiences in their professional life and learning experiences through the leadership development program. The findings from this study indicated the importance of self-awareness of leader identity and increased confidence, building their authentically balanced approach, and creating a social network through collective learning. This paper concludes with future research and practical implications for women leaders, senior human resource development professionals, and senior managers who design and develop women leadership training programs.

**Keywords:** women leadership development; authentic leadership; informal and formal learning; leader identity



**Citation:** Nakamura, Y.T.; Hinshaw, J.; Burns, R. Developing Women's Authenticity in Leadership. *Merits* **2022**, *2*, 408–426. <https://doi.org/10.3390/merits2040029>

Academic Editor: Huseyin Arasli

Received: 17 September 2022

Accepted: 2 November 2022

Published: 15 November 2022

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



**Copyright:** © 2022 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/>).

Women's work status and their participation in management has changed significantly in the past few decades [1]. Increasingly organizations are focusing on developing women leaders; however, women are still underrepresented in leadership positions. According to a gender-diversity index of Fortune 1000 companies in 2015, women make up only about 19% of corporate directors across all industries [2]. The Global Gender Gap Report [3] stated that the global gender gap "has been closed by 68.1%. At the current rate of progress, it will take 132 years to reach full parity (p. 5)". The gender gap became even more apparent during the pandemic. Women disproportionately carried the burden of additional childcare at home. As a result, more than 2 million mothers left the labor force worldwide due to the COVID-19 pandemic [3].

In today's fast-paced and complex world, women face male-dominant organization norms, gender-biased work conditions, and challenges in balancing work and life [1,4]. In addition, leaders are expected to confront crises, like increasing market demands, severe competition, ethical meltdowns, and even the threat of a global pandemic [5,6]. Leaders must strive to facilitate meaning-making, motivate, and enhance confidence in their organizations despite complex challenges.

In order to deal with such challenges, women leaders need to be authentic through increased self-awareness of their strengths and weaknesses, understanding their leadership values and beliefs and translating these values into action. Authentic leadership has recently received increased scholarly attention [7]. Authentic leadership emphasizes critical qualities to manage the challenging conditions leaders face in their organizations [8]. Despite its popularity and increased attention among scholars, authentic leadership is criticized as gender-neutral. Authentic leadership scholarship seemingly neglects to describe application to women and how women develop authenticity in leadership when they are embedded in male-dominated organizational structures. Understanding how authentic leadership applies and is developed by women is seen as an important research agenda [6,9].

Leaders can cultivate and practice their authentic leadership approach through learning and development opportunities within and outside their organizations [6]. Effective leadership programs promote reflective practices and help participants expand their thinking, experiment with new behavior and attitudes, and provide meaningful interactions with others [10–12]. As a result of such leadership training, leaders can cultivate authenticity by increasing self-awareness of their strengths, weaknesses, and core values; testing new ways of being able to be their true selves; and practicing their authentic approach [13–15]. Furthermore, in order to maximize the benefits of obtaining leadership training opportunities, it is important to note that organizations are responsible for changes in systemic structures and gendered cultural norms toward women. This type of change would allow women leaders to develop authentically and not force them to meet male-dominant organizational standards [16].

### 1. Problem, Purpose, and Research Questions

One major criticism of authentic leadership research is that it has largely appeared gender-neutral. However, scholars argue that it is challenging for women to be authentic leaders concerning predominant gendered roles and social expectations and norms towards women [7,9]. Further, when it comes to women’s authentic leadership development, there is limited research that explores how authentic leadership can be developed in a training context. Therefore, the purpose of this study was to better understand women’s lived experiences and how elements of a leadership development program were helpful, if at all, in developing authenticity in leadership. Overall, this research addresses the following questions.

1. How do women perceive developing authenticity in leadership?
2. How, if at all, do women experience authenticity development through attending a women’s leadership development program?

As a diverse team of researchers, we draw upon our professional experience working as women leaders across sectors including government, higher education, non-profit, manufacturing, information technology, and media, and as cross-cultural scholars who worked in Japan, Nicaragua, and/or in the United States. We used qualitative case study methodology to understand the experiences of seven women leaders who attended a women’s leadership development program. We gathered several data points, including individual interviews, a survey, observation notes, and document reviews such as program materials.

### 2. Theoretical Framework

The concept of authenticity has its roots in the ancient Greek philosophy of “know thyself” and “to thine own self be true”, and humanistic and positive psychology [17,18]. In ancient Greek philosophy, authenticity means understanding self and acting consistently based on this understanding [19]. From a humanistic psychological perspective, authentic individuals clearly see themselves and do not live by others’ expectations [20]. In the leadership literature, authenticity arose in the 1960s and has been seen as a growing area of interest among scholars [21]. Although scholars continue to debate the definition of authentic leadership, it is generally defined as a pattern of leader behavior that is based on positive psychological capacities and a positive ethical climate. Ultimately, the key feature that differentiates authentic leadership from other leadership theories is a focus on a deep sense of self [17].

#### 2.1. *Developing Authenticity in Leadership*

Scholars argue that authentic leadership can be developed at cognitive, attitudinal, and behavioral levels [13,22]. Effective training requires a space whereby learners can comfortably experiment through critical reflection, testing their assumptions, accessing new knowledge, and evaluating performance and actions before transferring these skills and behaviors to their professional lives [23]. Such a laboratory-type learning environment can foster a trusting learning community that both challenges and supports participants, assisting them to develop confidence in practicing new ways of thinking and being [10,24].

Authentic leadership development typically focuses on four areas: self-awareness, relational transparency, balanced treatment of information, and internalized moral perspec-

tive which involves a process of self-regulation [8,13,25]. Increased self-awareness includes discerning one's strengths, weaknesses, leadership styles, values, beliefs, and emotions, while understanding their impact on others [15,17]. Relational transparency relates to relationship building, or how a leader reveals information and thoughts, and demonstrates sincere emotions to others [13,26,27]. Balanced treatment of information indicates that a leader has unbiased openness to different perspectives [8]. Lastly, internalized moral perspective involves a process of self-regulation based on personal values and beliefs that translates into action [13,15].

In the context of training, there are a variety of tools and approaches that help leaders increase self-awareness, such as the Authentic Leadership Inventory (ALI) and a 360-degree feedback survey [28,29]. Although the assessment tools can trigger reflection that can result in increased self-awareness, discussion time is often allocated to further facilitate deep reflection, such as through peer coaching and/or professional leadership coaching [15,30]. Leaders can make meaning of life experiences that may link to survey results through individual and collective reflection [27,31,32]. According to Nesbit [33], reflective practices can support individuals in casual introspective thinking about events and experiences that lead to a deep-level analysis of their ways of thinking and associated leader behavior. Through the process of reflective dialogue, people may experience disorienting dilemmas and critically reflect on their values and actions that, in turn, assist them to further develop their authenticity in leadership. As a result, they obtain a greater understanding of their leadership values and styles. Oftentimes, trusted individuals such as coaches, peers, or mentors' use guided questions to help leaders expand their perspectives on their experiences or situations [22]. Leadership development programs also often incorporate a series of small group discussions, allowing participants to reflect on new behaviors experienced through role plays or by using case materials [10,22].

Furthermore, leadership training often focuses on triggering moments of leaders' lives as opportunities for reflection. For instance, participants can develop an action plan to test scenarios to see how they would authentically react to situations and adjust their approach through reflection-on-action (reflecting on the past event) or reflection-in-action (reflecting during action) [17,34,35]. Triggering events may also facilitate critical reflection that can cause disorienting dilemmas and lead to change in leaders' frames of reference [36,37]. Training programs can include approaches to create conditions that promote triggering events for leaders to practice authentic leadership, such as through appreciative inquiry [38], action learning [39], and coaching [40]. Through such dialogue, leaders can critically reflect to test their own assumptions and clarify ideas that enable them to find solutions to problems, develop action plans, and increase self-awareness and awareness of their behavioral impact on others.

## *2.2. Applying Authentic Leadership to Women Leaders*

Authentic leadership has been discussed as gender neutral, yet such a view has increasingly been criticized because it ignores the gendered nature of the leadership construct, such as gender differences in leadership and social contexts where women work [7,9]. Authentic leadership is challenging for women leaders because the predominant perspective of masculine leadership behaviors remains a norm in many workplaces and societies. Expectations of masculine leader behaviors include assertiveness, competitiveness, ambition, and self-confidence (agentic) [9,41]. On the other hand, societal norms and expectations portray women as helpful, caring, nurturing, and friendly (communal) [7,41]. As a result, the leader role and the female gender role are inconsistent, which makes it difficult for women to enact 'true self' as they need to meet double-bind expectations [9]. This double-bind exists because women leaders must attempt to embody contradictory expectations between the societal female gender role and the masculine leader role [42]. Even though true self means that leaders are not hindered by others' expectations of them [20], women leaders need to display behaviors that are acceptable to others in their social-cultural contexts [9]. Such dilemmas women face can be explained through the lens of role congruity theory [43,44]

and the lack-of-fit model, which indicates biases against women in leadership based on the set of assumptions of society's expectations for the roles that women should have [45].

As authentic leadership emphasizes the importance of the relational aspect between leader and follower, authentic leadership can be perceived as a communal leadership style [41]. Authentic leaders serve the collective vs. self-benefit [8]. However, in reality, organizational culture and social norms strongly favor individualistic or masculine leadership (agency) as opposed to collective or feminine leadership (communion) [46]. As a result, women leaders can experience rejection as their followers may not trust or accept them as authentic leaders.

### 2.3. Women's Authentic Leadership Development

Given the contextual constraints that women leaders face, it is important to acknowledge that gender differences influence their leadership development experience. Women have ways of knowing that are different from men [47]. Their work experiences are shaped by their subjective reality of being in a male-dominated environment [48]. Thus, the biases and stereotypes about women and the perception of themselves as women influence their leadership development process [49].

Ely et al. [48] argued that leadership development approaches need to be tailored to women focusing on two areas: second-generation bias and identity work. Second-generation bias refers to the subtle forms of bias towards women that create gendered patterns of interaction in the workplace, implicit gender norms, and structures that favor men. This contributes to the double bind that affects the experiences of women, unequitably requiring them to be both agentic and communal [48,50]. Identity work is seen as a process of constructing a sense of identity through active exploration. This identity work can be challenging for women because they need to demonstrate leadership characteristics while following norms about their gender. Therefore, leadership development efforts should take women's unique experiences into consideration, helping them to deepen self and social awareness (second-generation bias), and guide their leader identity construction journey (identity work) through individualized methods such as multi-rater feedback, leadership coaching, mentorship, and networking [49,50]. This requires deep reflection on their ways of knowing and acting based on their past experiences and ongoing reflective practices as they encounter leadership challenges in the workplace.

However, there is a dearth of research that examines women's leadership development, especially as it relates to authentic leadership, and its impact on women's leadership skills and behaviors [48,49]. Prior research has mostly focused on recommendations for organizations to develop women leaders instead of examining training effects [48,49]. Therefore, we aim to shed light on women leaders' experiences of attending a leadership program that focused on developing authenticity.

## 3. Methods

The study adopted a case study approach [51] to make meaning of how women develop authenticity in leadership through a particular program. As an exploratory case study, this research aims to generate insights for women's authentic leadership development that contribute to future research focusing on the advancement of authentic leadership theory for women [52]. The case study focuses on a particular group of women who attended a women's leadership development program offered by a university in the United States. As is the nature of case study methods, we used multiple data sources, including interviews, observations, surveys, and archival data, such as program materials, for data triangulation [51].

The interviews focused on the particular episodes and stories of the participants' leadership experiences in their professional lives and their personal brand of leadership. Each interview took approximately 1 hour. The interviews were conducted within a month after the conclusion of the program. The field observations were conducted during the program as well. These observations helped us to gain a deeper understanding of the participants' responses by observing them during the program. Archival data reviews and

analyses included program-related materials and surveys used during the program, such as a pre-program survey and program agenda. This data clarifies and supports interpretation of the information gathered during the individual interviews.

3.1. Participants

All participants who attended the intensive three-day Women in Leadership course were invited to participate in the study. We explained the study during the program and sent out a consent form for those willing to participate. Seven participants out of 35 agreed to participate in the study, as Table 1 illustrates. Due to the busy program schedule and their heavy demands at work, it was challenging to enroll participants in the study. All participants had more than five years of management experience. The participants represented the chemicals, pharmaceuticals, higher education, manufacturing, media, and research & development industries. Countries of work included Australia, India, Austria, and the United States. To maintain confidentiality, we used a pseudonym for each participant in this paper.

Table 1. Participant Demographics.

Participant	Title	Function	Industry	Country
Anna	President	General Management	Higher Education	US
Nora	Vice President	Partnership Management	Pharmaceuticals	US
Roberta	Producer	Information Technology	Media	Australia
Sally	Executive Director	General Management	Manufacturing	India
Naomi	Director/Owner	General Management	Chemicals	India
Emma	Strategic HR and Scientist	Human Resources	Research and Development	Austria
Yoly	Senior Director	Information Technology	Media	US

3.2. Women in Leadership Development Program Context

The program was designed to develop women in leadership through a series of reflective activities to increase self-awareness and experimentation with new ways of thinking and being a leader. In addition to the selected skills and techniques, such as persuasion and communication, the program particularly focused on increased self-awareness through self- and collective reflective dialogues with multiple assessments, including 360-degree feedback and a social network instrument. Figure 1 shows the elements of the program.

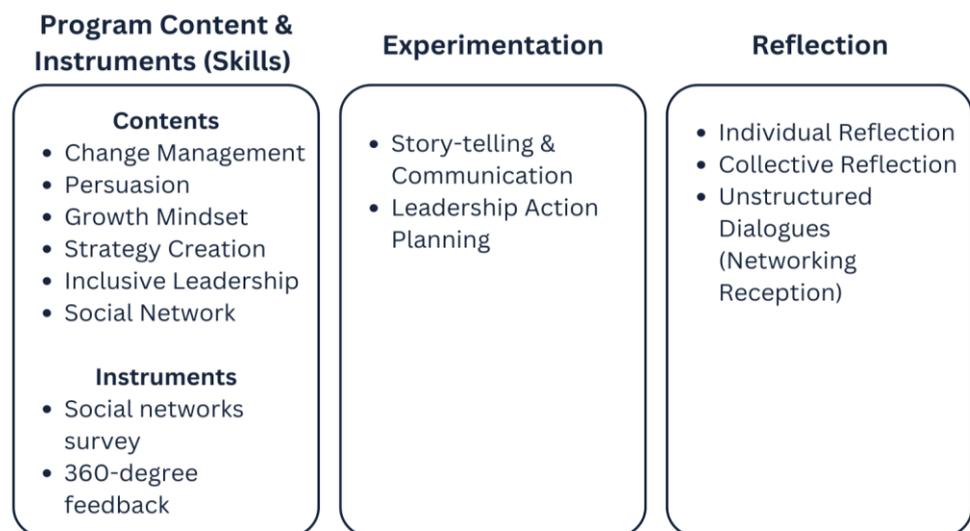


Figure 1. Program Contents.

### 3.3. Data Analysis Process

A multi-step comparative data analysis process was employed in the study [53]. Analyzing data involves organizing, reading, describing, classifying, interpreting, and comparing data while taking notes, reflecting on literature, and discussing among the researchers of the project [54]. After all the interviews were transcribed verbatim, we conducted a transcript analysis that consisted of three cycles of coding: open coding, focused coding, and selective coding. During data analyses, coding plays an essential role where “the researcher develops themes or dimensions through some classification system, and provides an interpretation in light of their views or views of perspectives in literature” [55]. Through the analysis process, we identified core themes [53,56].

Throughout the analysis process, each member of the research team went through the codings of each transcript and discussed until we reached a consensus on the code using a shared Google spreadsheet to work together synchronously and asynchronously [57]. After the completion of coding for all seven interviews, we identified themes and categories that emerged from the coding process. We discussed as a team to come to a consensus.

Furthermore, the research team analyzed interview transcripts as a primary data source in this study. Additional sources such as the field observation notes collected by one of the researchers focusing on both descriptive and reflective elements (notes about hunches and learnings), the program agenda, participants’ application materials, and program surveys were compared with the interview data [54]. Case study methods elevate the importance of multiple sources of data to triangulate understanding [51]. The observations were particularly useful in aiding researcher understanding of participants’ description of their program experiences by clarifying specific terms (e.g., session contents) and providing insight into interactions and participation experiences during the program (e.g., active participation, various discussions in and out of the classrooms such as during lunch or breaks).

## 4. Results

To provide evidence to answer the research questions presented, we have categorized our analysis into two topical areas: women’s development of authentic leadership and program evaluation of a women’s leadership development program.

### 4.1. Women’s Authentic Leadership Development

During the first stage of the interview, participants were asked to reflect on their roles as leaders, provide a description of their leadership style, depict their personal characteristics and social identities, share how they developed their approach to leadership, detail the qualities they are looking to develop as a leader, and explain tensions experienced when balancing personal sense of self with leadership needs of their organizations. Based on their responses, two overarching themes emerged: (1) Learning to Lead and (2) Gendered Performance of Leadership as Table 2 depicts.

**Table 2.** Themes.

Themes	Sub-Themes	Research Question
Learning to Lead	1. Individual Level of Learning	Q1. How do women perceive developing authenticity in leadership?
	2. Social Level of Learning	
Gendered Performance of Leadership	1. Self-Awareness	Q1. How do women perceive developing authenticity in leadership?
	2. Moral Perspectives and Values	
	3. Gender Bias and Gender Roles	

Table 2. Cont.

Themes	Sub-Themes	Research Question
Program Evaluation	1. Developing Self	Q2. How, if at all, do women experience authentic leadership development during a women's leadership development program?
	a. Self-Confidence	
	b. Authentic Self	
	c. Adapt Based on Feedback	
	2. Developing Others	
	a. Helping Others to Grow	
	b. Making Sense of the World	
	3. Creating/Being Embedded in Network	

#### 4.2. Learning to Lead

The participants expressed the ways in which they learned how to lead. These experiences were categorized into sub-themes of individual level of learning and social level of learning.

**Individual Level of Learning.** At the individual level, almost all participants expressed that they learned to become leaders through experiential and incidental learning. For instance, Anna stated “Nobody has ever said to me, ‘Here are the expectations of you [as a leader]’”, indicating that learning to become a leader is not always a formalized process, rather it happens organically. Roberta shared that she “learned everything [dealing with leadership] at work”. Similarly, Yoly “developed [her] leadership style through work . . . hands-on experience”. In addition to experientially learning to become a leader, the participants also noted the formative role of formal education and training, such as university bachelor or masters programs, professional training in Human Resources, and leadership development courses hosted or encouraged by their organizations. Furthermore, all of the participants sought a formal learning opportunity for further development of their leadership skills and voluntarily signed up to attend the leadership development program, which was not a requirement of their organizations.

**Social Level of Learning.** At the social level, participants described the importance of early socialization and observing/learning from other leaders to drive their leadership development. Regarding early socialization, some of the participants expressed being surrounded by positive male and female leadership role models during their childhood or young adulthood. For example, Anna spoke of learning how to become a leader from her father, who was a small business owner. In her 20s, Anna experienced a conflict with a manager who publicly spoke harshly to her. Anna’s father then taught her that “ . . . there’s one rule of business, and that is if somebody has a problem or an issue with you, they invite you into their office or into a place, or whatever, and they close the door”. This left a lasting impression on Anna who taught and utilized this method of more humane feedback with her own co-workers and followers. Like Anna, Naomi had positive leadership influences in her family. She shared that “I had the privilege of [being in] a family of very strong women . . . My mother is a physician . . . I’ve always heard all these conversations happening at the dinner table as I grew up”. While Naomi had early socialization to female leaders, this was not the case for her own mother whose mother-in-law “ . . . came and told her right after she got married that she can’t do that [study to become a physician] anymore, and she has to be at home and look after the house . . . ”. Similarly, Yoly discussed how her culture had certain expectations for women, but that ultimately all “[women are raised] to not necessarily be vocal, or not to believe in yourself, or not being willing to speak up when [they] deserve more”. The socialization process can both support and hinder women’s leadership development and ultimately impact women’s leadership role performance, as discussed in the next section.

Related to socialization, all participants stated that they learned and were motivated in their leadership development by observing other leaders and managers. Some, like Anna, stated the importance of “ . . . watching other women leaders. Their style, their grace,

their sophistication, their confidence . . . ” to develop her own leadership style. Others like Yoly, Nora, and Sally noted that they appreciated being able to witness effective leaders and managers, regardless of gender. They then shared how they adopted and adapted components of these effective leaders’ practices in their own work. For instance, Nora stated “My exact style is, I’m a keen observer of a lot of different managers over the years, and I’ve tried to assemble the things that I thought were the most effective, and that worked with my style and my leadership”.

#### 4.3. Gendered Performance of Leadership

The second theme emerged from the analysis is gendered performance of leadership. Authentic leadership has been described as gender-neutral and unfortunately does not address the narrow range of acceptable behaviors that are expected from women leaders in their organizations [42]. In our study, the participants noted the gendered performance of leadership, as they tried to balance both masculine and feminine-associated leadership qualities and characteristics. This theme included three sub-themes of self-awareness, internalized moral perspectives and values, and gender bias and gender roles.

**Self-awareness.** Participants described how they view themselves as leaders and in performing a leadership role. Participants described a leadership identity that is relational, working to empower others and to motivate through storytelling. They also described a leadership identity that is individual, internalizing self-confidence and assertiveness. Women’s authenticity in leadership is a function of male-dominated views of leadership (i.e., being assertive and relational simultaneously) and views of women’s roles.

For example, Nora mentioned being assertive and relational, “ . . . I use the credibility I have with people to remind them, I understand you’re going through these challenges, and also recognize we have these needs that we need to do that we cannot ignore. I’ve been trying to assert in a kind way”. Sally described a similar assertive and relational leadership identity, “ . . . I might say that we are going to work on this project today. I want it done by a certain date, and if they say, ‘No, I cannot because I have so many other things going on’, . . . I might say, ‘Okay, that’s fine. Get back to me at a later date, and we’ll come up with something’”.

**Moral Perspectives and Values.** The leadership values or morals that women leaders bring to perform their leadership roles include honesty about situations and feelings, transparency about managerial intentions and actions, and being ethically responsible in making decisions. For example, Sally described the leadership values of honesty and being open minded saying, “I’m more accepting of criticism. If I need to change something that isn’t working . . . I’m more flexible. I’m more open to different viewpoints and perspectives that people may tell me”.

In addition to honesty, Nora mentioned transparency about intentions and actions as a leadership value, “...to use my active voice in meetings . . . a lot of the work I did would be done behind the scenes . . . I’m trying to make sure that it’s understood what the work is that we’re trying to accomplish”. Anna also spoke to the values of honesty and transparency, “I’m honest with people. I’m very transparent. I make as much information available to employees, so they know what’s going on, so that they’re not wondering ‘What is management doing?’ . . . Always be honest. Don’t hide things under the rug”.

Additionally, Anna described the leadership value of ethical decisions, giving this example, “You find out that an employee is being harassed by another employee. You either set the tone that says this is absolutely unacceptable, and you do something about it, or you sit and say, ‘Well it’s happened here before, and you don’t really do anything’. I’m the former, not the latter. That’s my approach . . . it just comes from some sense of what is right and what is wrong . . . to be ethical, to be honest, to be [an] upstanding citizen, a role model for others, to have integrity, to mentor and empower other people, to find solutions to problems, to address performance or other issues or processes that aren’t working and find solutions . . . I am fair, honest, approachable, passionate, dedicated”.

**Gender Bias and Gender Roles.** Participants faced gender bias and gender role challenges, such as discrimination and the double-bind, power struggles, and balancing mul-

tiple roles of work and life. Yoly mentioned experiencing gender bias and gender role challenges, “As a woman, and a woman of color, but also a woman who grew up in a Latin culture where women don’t necessarily have a say or have presence, and it’s mostly a male-dominated culture... and having certain expectations about what a woman should behave like, and what a woman should do for a living, and how a woman should respond in given situations, whether it’s in the workforce or in a personal setting, a professional setting . . . one of the biggest challenges I have is that, culturally, we were, or at least I feel like I was not necessarily encouraged to speak up, and even when I did speak up, just because it’s my character to speak up and have strong convictions, I was never really supported and I was told that that’s not ladylike or proper”.

Emma reported that her organization had not been inclusive of women leaders. She said, “Gender is a topic because all my other colleagues are mostly men. Finance is male, and law is male, and both managing directors are male, and that’s not so much shaped my leadership style, but how much I probably can achieve . . . I know of one employee who really considers me a lightweight and has done so for ages”. Sally also mentioned her experience with gender bias explaining, “We haven’t always had so many female executives as we do today on the board . . . or a woman in power or in high positions. It’s relatively still not accepted by everyone in society . . . a lot of people took me for granted . . . even though I was really educated and I graduated with honors”. Sally also shared how difficult it was as a woman to become a leader, “I did have to prove myself . . . I know who I am and how educated I am and what I am capable of . . . there’s always going to be people in the world . . . that are going to doubt. From that perspective . . . It’s more about finding that way to uplift other people and to move in the right direction . . . how am I going to move forward beyond all this criticism and skepticism out there”?

In addition to difficulties in gaining leadership positions or being recognized by their organizations, Naomi described her experience balancing multiple roles of work and family. She said, “...we’re pulled many times . . . when the kids were growing up, their exams were more important, so you postpone traveling so you’ll be with them. And it’s usually the woman who has all these responsibilities . . . the woman who’d be left with all these decisions to be with the kids if they’re really sick, or balance work and home”. Relatedly, Sally also spoke to the challenges of balancing work and life saying, “I recently got married . . . I had to decide what I wanted to do, how to keep myself involved in the company and how to keep on attending meetings so that people will continue to recognize that I’m still a part of the company . . . I’ve been able to make this work out, although it’s been very difficult having this work-life balance . . . ”.

#### *4.4. Program Evaluation and Training*

To understand how women experience authentic leadership development during a leadership training program, participants were asked to describe what, if anything, they were doing differently in their practice after the program’s conclusion, if and how what was learned in the program had supported them in addressing leadership challenges. Furthermore, they were asked to answer how they would rank the program on a scale of 1 to 5. Three major themes emerged from the participants’ responses and included developing self, developing others, and creating/being embedded in a network.

##### *4.4.1. Developing Self*

The participants noted that the leadership development program helped them to develop their own self-confidence, authentic self, and adapt based on feedback.

**Self-Confidence.** All seven participants noted that the program supported them in gaining self-confidence and/or becoming more assertive. Some of the participants specified that the program helped them overcome perceptions of the double-bind, or simultaneously trying to be both nurturing and assertive enough. Roberta shared, “We worked out that if I just get over my fear of being seen as bossy sometimes and [to work towards becoming] clear and confident and able to practice asking when I don’t understand something”.

Similarly, Yoly learned to shift her perspective about being assertive, stating that “We [women] find reasons not to speak up, not to learn a little bit more about something. I think when you change that it actually opens up a whole other dimension in terms of what contribution you can put in”.

Others shared how they were bringing their self-confidence to the workplace. For example, Anna described a story where she had to stand up to her board of directors to defend and support a colleague’s work. After she expressed herself, she was almost surprised, saying “It just came out of my mouth. I felt as if it needed to be said. After I said it, I thought to myself, ‘My god, these people, they’re my bosses basically’”. Emma shared that during her work she reminded herself to be confident to freely express herself by remembering one of the activities she completed at the training (which used a symbol of a kite). She shared, “...but I have my [action plan symbolized as a kite] to bring with me... And sometimes in meetings I look at it and I go like, ‘Well, okay. Let it fly’”. Sally said she also found a way to feel, “...more prepared to deal with certain situations that may come up . . . I have remembered to be more confident in the way I speak and I present myself to others, as well as just being able to convince others that I am the person I am, that I am a leader”.

Other women leaders recognized that being self-confident opened the doors for them to continuously learn and improve. Yoly said, “I’m willing to even just say, ‘Look, I don’t have the full story or I don’t have all the data in front of me, but how ‘bout we start talking about this?’” Additionally, Yoly expressed that “The program has allowed me to feel that I have the experience and it’s just a matter of tapping into that experience, but also spending a little bit more time growing as a leader. So it’s at least initiated a conversation with myself, and it’s forced me to actually take my leadership and management skills just as seriously as my other technical skills . . . ”.

**Authentic Self.** In addition to developing self-confidence, participants shared how the program helped them to discover how they could match who they are with their leadership. Anna and Yoly both mentioned how the program assisted them to create their own authentic brand, especially by using personal storytelling. Yoly stated “For me it was really managing up and focusing on your personal brand as well as ensuring that you’re controlling the narrative, the perception that’s in the company of yourself. So that’s mostly what I focused on, and I think in this short period of time already I’ve seen, at least I feel like it’s been received well.” Similarly, Anna also appreciated the opportunity to think about and create her own unique brand, “...We talked about the, what is your brand concept. What is it that you stand for. I guess trying to be consistent with what it is that I said, who I am... I thought, I’m a lot more comfortable in my skin knowing what I know and what I don’t know, and being okay with [the fact that] I don’t have to know everything”.

Roberta and Sally also mentioned how the program assisted them in accepting their authentic selves. Roberta stated that she particularly appreciated a session where the facilitator emphasized, “Don’t change who you are because who you are has got you this far. Don’t feel like you’re broken and need to totally rebuild. That’s not useful and that’s too hard and you can’t do it”. Sally said that she is still facing challenges in maintaining her authenticity, but that the program highlighted this as something important for her. She said, “I guess just trying to stay true to myself would be a significant challenge. Because, like I said, changing my perspective was easy to just say that I’m not going to listen to certain people’s opinions anymore, but just trying to listen to that voice in my head and saying that this is the right direction I’m going in”.

**Adapt Based on Feedback.** Another important takeaway about the leadership development program from the participants centered on receiving feedback as a way to continuously learn and improve. Most participants mentioned the importance of 360-degree evaluations and it seemed like this was a new technique introduced to many. Anna shared that “... we did this 360 review, and it’s really fascinating to do it because you get some honest feedback. As scary as that is, it’s very helpful, and I learned some things about myself . . . ” Likewise, Sally appreciated feedback and noted she could improve both professional and personal aspects. “After looking at all the feedback from the people that had taken the survey, that

made me realize that these are my strengths and these are things I need to work on, but it isn't as bad as I thought it would be. It was very realistic in pinpointing what I had to work on as a person, as well as a leader".

Feedback from Emma's co-workers helped her to gain a more positive and in-synch view of her leadership, "[the 360-degree evaluation] has a couple of things that I thought I was doing a lot better and there's a couple things that I want to go, 'Not so good', but overall the assessment, it was pretty well-balanced. So it's what I saw and my boss saw, and my colleagues saw . . . the [feedback] was necessary for making the decision that was pretty much in sync". She also said "... I really know that I have, that I personally have, the backing of my peers, and my bosses, and that's what 360 really taught me".

After the program, Nora realized that an informal approach to seeking out feedback would also be beneficial to her leadership development, "I need to find...someone who can help me maintain [my progress in developing leadership stories/narratives]... I want to partner with someone to give me some more immediate, direct feedback".

Furthermore, deep reflection seemed to occur between participants as they engaged in peer discussions about the feedback they received. The research team observed that many of the participants continued conversations with their peers not only during the facilitated discussion time but also after the session during the program. For instance, discussions were continued even during coffee breaks.

#### 4.4.2. Developing Others

In addition to developing self, the participants in the program learned about and reflection on helping others to grow and making sense of the world around them. First, many participants mentioned the importance of supporting others in their leadership and professional development, sharing instances where they helped others to grow and adapt. They also made-sense of complicated situations, delegated tasks and roles to others.

Helping Others to Grow. Anna said that after the program she was "... eager to help more, some of the younger women or more junior women, to grow within the organization here". She then shared how she encouraged a woman co-worker who was being "bullied by [her] boss". Anna used narrative to describe a personal experience of a time when the chief financial officer of her company was being treated harshly by the board of directors and how she intervened as a leader. She encouraged the woman who was being "bullied" to be more assertive by saying the following to her boss, "I understand you're under a lot of pressure, and you need to meet this deadline, but I would appreciate if you didn't yell at me. It's not going to help me get there any faster. When you talk to me, could I ask you please, just to speak in a quieter tone". Nora also coached a woman co-worker to take on leadership responsibility. She said, "I think this is your opportunity, this is your opportunity to shine, to show him (a supervisor) what you're about, what you can do" and encouraged the young woman to lead a meeting, which had positive results. Nora concluded that, "Everyone on the call was executive director through, let's see, we had two senior VPs on the call, and she did very, very nicely, setting it up, outlining it, orchestrating the discussion. I'm hopeful this continues, and I'm going to continue to coach her". Relatedly, Naomi wanted to support others in her family's business by creating a positive work environment where employees could use their talents. She stated, "You know, it's not about me . . . I want you all to feel that [the business is] yours. So I want you to know, and I ask you to deliver your strengths and things like that . . . I want you to be in a place where, like I told you, you look forward to coming to work everyday".

Making Sense of the World Around Them. A key component of leadership is making sense of a complex world, and helping to conceptualize and give sense, or direction, to others when needed. As part of sense-making, one of the leaders wrote about the impact that a lesson on pattern recognition had on her (a part of the leadership development program). Nora said, "The thought that [the program facilitator] described of pattern recognition, when a partner starts acting differently than they have in the past, we start to recognize that and know that something's going on. Then we try to go figure out what

that is . . . That's how we get into our interventions and try to fix things to get them back on track. That whole discussion really just came alive for me, because that's my role, and my team's role, is that whole pattern recognition. Seeing those trends and trying to jump ahead before the trend gets too big . . . ”.

To communicate such patterns and to make sense of the world around them, participants highlighted the importance of storytelling, another key session of the leadership development program. Naomi shared that storytelling was already one of her skills that she did not realize was an important part of her leadership. She stated, “... I'm one of the fortunate few, when [the leadership program facilitator] was talking about storytelling and the importance of storytelling, I didn't realize that I already use that skill to persuade, and I think it's part of my personality”. Nora said that “I'm working on my stories. About knowing your stories and having your stories prepared . . . having them more refined . . . I think having them front of mind and refined, and then also including numbers. We're confident, we're prepared, and right before this call, I met with one of my prior managers who's now the head of strategy. I used one of my stories on him, and it worked”.

In addition, participants also spoke of the importance of learning to delegate to others. Anna said that she has learned that as a leader she needs to be able make sense of and communicate the vision for the organization while delegating specific tasks to others based on their knowledge and skills. For example, when talking about her CFO, she said, “It's good that I'm here, because I can look at the bigger, broader picture, but I don't necessarily have to know how every one of these things works... I said, 'Look, here's what I see as the important issues. All this looks great, and you're figuring out every possible metric for quarterly payouts. Here's what the board is going to want to know'”. Nora had five new direct reports and she said that “I need to delegate more, and that's something that came out from this course. [With a] little bit of setting their expectations, there's going to be some more delegation from me. But also, it's been good dialogue, because we say okay, now for these new managers of people, are they doing the right thing around delegating? We're trying to take these learnings and really use them . . . ”.

#### 4.4.3. Creating/Being Embedded in Network

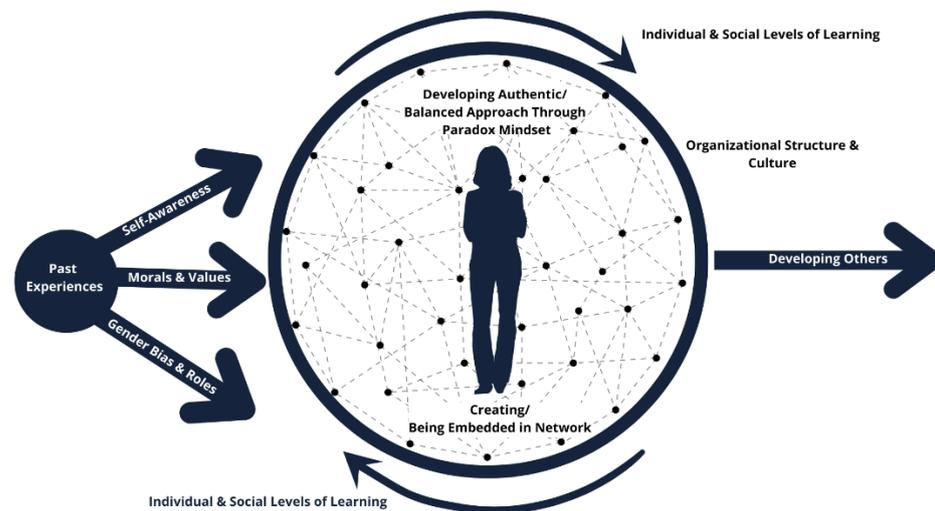
All of the participants noted that networking was one of the most important topics they took away from the leadership development program. Many participants noted that the program connected them with other women leaders who often shared similar experiences. Anna said “It was just an amazing group of women. I really felt like it was just so incredible. There were just so many very interested, and talented women . . . ” She even went on to invite one of the other program attendees to apply for a job at her organization. Yoly appreciated the diversity of women in the program, “We have people from all over the world. People who have a vast array of experiences both very early in their leadership career all the way out to, like, very, very mature and very successful. So it was a good diversity of not just people geographically, but people in terms of where they are in their career, so it was a great experience”. Nora appreciated how networking continued outside of the program, “... WhatsApp has really taken off, and we're continuing to share articles and ideas. I think that's just a nice grassroots way to keep people involved and reminded about what we're trying to do”. Naomi and Sally appreciated the solidarity they were able to construct with other people in the program, especially as leading/leadership can be isolating. Naomi shared that “...looking at them [program participants], I think it was just so inspirational to see that I had so much in common with everyone, as a woman, as a leader. You know, we all face similar issues, similar problems . . . So it makes you feel less sad about yourself. You end up saying, 'Oh, this is something that everybody faces, not just me'”. Similarly, Sally said, “We're not alone. Everyone else in the class said that we are not alone. Everyone is going through this, men and women alike, all over the world, so it is not just women that are doing this. It is everyone . . . ”.

Overall, the participants saw the value of attending the leadership development program and the average rating of the program was 4.6 out of 5 scale. The participants were

generally satisfied by learning what they could do (potentials or opportunities) in addition to what they should do (expectations), which can be related to cultivating a balanced approach and mindset. Furthermore, the research team noticed during observations that the women participants seemed to form a trusting network during the program. The women appeared to comfortably share their thoughts with and be supportive of each other. In order to facilitate networking among participants, seating assignments were changed every day and the participants were grouped together for various small group discussions with different members throughout the program. During the sessions, the women often responded to their peer's comments or questions, which often contributed to active discussions. They seemed willing to spend time to continue discussion in and outside of the classroom. For example, some went out to dinner together after the program had concluded for the day.

## 5. Discussion

The findings revealed women's experiences, struggles and support factors that contribute to their leadership. The data analysis also uncovered how the leadership development program influenced participants' authentic leadership development. A model was developed that illustrates women's authentic leadership learning and development, as seen in Figure 2.



**Figure 2.** Developing Authentic Women's Leadership Model.

The model illustrates key interrelated areas in developing women's authentic leadership. The model shows that women's past experiences influence their self-awareness, morals and values, as well as experiences of gender biases and challenges. A circle that surrounds a woman and a web of her networks indicates that organizations influence women structurally and culturally. Arrows surrounding the leader indicate the critical role of continuous learning. Included in learning are both informal and formal learning at both individual and social levels. Women's learning can occur informally, such as at work or through experience. Learning may also occur more formally through leadership development programs inside or outside of their organizations [6]. Self and collective reflections through observation of role models, learning from family members, and/or active experimentation dealing with leadership challenges can assist women in developing leadership skills and behaviors [15,30]. With the self-assessment tools, such as a multi-rater, 360 degree feedback instrument [28,29,50], women leaders can make meaning of life experiences through individual and collective reflection [27,31–33]. They can develop their authentic leadership stories based on deep reflections with their trusted peers, mentors, or coaches that they can use to communicate with followers [15,58]. This work needs to constantly be revisited to rework or update as they gain more experiences throughout their careers.

Through learning, they can cultivate a creative, authentic and balanced approach that can be described through a lens of a paradox mindset (vs. dilemma mindset) [59] that women leaders seem to strive for. For example, Nora mentioned that she is trying to be both assertive (agentic) and relational (communal). It indicates that many of the women participants, like Nora's case, are exploring a creative and unique way to incorporate both contradictory forces in their leadership.

Social networks play a critical role as women continually learn and cultivate their authentically balanced approach. As the model illustrates, women develop their own networks that can be from the leadership development program, or elsewhere, as well as organizational networks regardless of gender. Such networks help them test ideas, seek advice, and obtain emotional support. A social network is seen as important in leadership development [60,61] as leaders can access useful resources including knowledge, information, and support.

Furthermore, the model indicates that their authentic development journey can lead to a social or organizational level of change as some women leaders may eventually choose to develop others around them. This is more a collection of efforts by women leaders and may occur across generations. The more women learn to acquire a balanced approach through cultivation of their authentic leadership, the more they can help others learn through role modeling and mentoring [50,59]. Women can expand their support network [62] that facilitates their authentic leadership development journey where they can stay 'true' to themselves while they operate in the male-dominated environments, and eventually lead to organizational change and greater societal acceptance of women leaders.

### *5.1. How Do Women Perceive Developing Authenticity in Leadership?*

The study results highlight that the women participants learn informally and formally to develop authenticity in leadership. On a surface level, it seems that some of the qualities and values of authenticity in leadership, as well as the ways they develop their leadership skills, are gender-neutral. For example, having a role model in work and/or family contexts regardless of gender is helpful in developing leadership skills [6]. Many of the participants reported that they had a role model (good or bad) or mentor in their young adulthood or even in childhood. Reflecting on their experiences with these role models, they gained insights about being effective leaders and adopted those leadership qualities in their own work. Speaking of reflective practice, authentic leaders, regardless of gender, find reflective space important for improving their leadership [6,15].

Interestingly, the women participants seemed comfortable and confident with demonstrating some of the critical components of authentic leadership; internalized moral perspective [13,15] and relational transparency [13,26,27]. The participants reported honesty, transparency, flexibility (open to different perspectives), and/or fairness as core values explained through their work episodes. Even though these values/morals are "gender neutral" or fairly typical to all leaders, they may seem somewhat natural to women as they are often emphasized in feminine or communal leadership styles. Further, such values and morals may have been informed by participants' lives/experiences as women [41,46]. Walumbwa et al. [8] describe that authentic leaders serve the collective vs. self-benefit. In the study, participants described how their values of taking care of others exemplified values-based actions.

When it comes to their leadership style, however, the participants described their leadership approach as not only communal but also agentic [7,9,41]. For example, they are assertive and self-confident (agentic) while caring for others (communal). Balancing this communal and agentic leader identity seemed a challenge for women leaders. In fact, the agentic aspect of leadership is one area they identified as needing further improvement, such as being assertive and confident. Some of the participants seemed to struggle with balancing being assertive enough with being collegial and collaborative enough due to the double-bind expectations [9]. This combined agentic and communal leadership identity may be because of the gendered workplace and social norms towards women that

significantly impacted their leadership identity constructing processes throughout their lives [48]. In order to be successful in their current male-dominant workplaces, they felt the need to adopt an agentic approach, yet wanted to be communal. This indicates that organizational cultural gendered norms are a strong factor that requires organization-level change in addition to societal and individual change [16].

Fostering balanced agentic and communal identities can be explained through a concept of paradox mindset (vs. dilemma mindset) in which women successfully diffuse “agency-communion tensions and strengthening women leaders’ resilience, gender and leader identity coexistence, and leadership effectiveness” [59]. Zheng and colleagues [59] argue that women with a paradox mindset embrace a ‘both-and’ framework in which they see the contradictory forces as potentially complementary or mutually reinforcing instead of opposing to each other. This leveraging of tensions can foster creativity and authenticity in their leadership approach as they cultivate their own unique path by exploring possibilities of coexistence between opposites [63]. With a dilemma mindset, however, women incorporate ‘either-or’ framework in which they see agency and communion as mutually exclusive opposites [59]. As a result, women with a dilemma mindset face the conflicting relationship between agency and communion, resulting in a struggle to select one pole or the other. Therefore, fostering the paradox mindset can be a critical part of self-awareness raising for women in leadership. On the other hand, it is necessary for organizations to make efforts to eliminate gendered norms towards women leaders so that they have less hurdles to overcome, allowing them to portray their true authentic selves . . . not authenticity that is defined by male-centric leadership norms.

### *5.2. How Do Women Experience Authenticity Development through the Women’s Leadership Development Program?*

The women’s leadership program seemed to have an impact on the women participants in two ways. One is individual level to foster a balanced approach. The program seemed to help women develop the agentic side of leadership skills [7,9]. Many of the participants claimed that they felt more confident and comfortable being assertive after the program. The enhanced agentic skills were seen as useful for them to be successful in their current male-dominant workplace and society. Coupled with the self-assessment tools, such as 360 degree feedback report, the participants gained not only a better understanding about self as a leader, but also learned some practical persuasion and communication techniques. They were able to test these techniques in a safe learning environment, which may have contributed to increased confidence incorporating an agentic approach.

It is noteworthy that the women participants, even though their state of mind towards a balanced approach with a paradox mindset [59] seemed varied, they indicated that they wanted to accept their authentic selves, which largely consisted of having both communal and agentic leadership skills. What makes it ‘balanced’ may be dependent on each individual as every woman leaders’ situation is different and contextual. Women leaders in our study desired to take authentic ownership of their leadership style, attempting to stay true to themselves as they navigated the double bind. The double bind has emphasized that women leaders are either competent/agentic or communal, rarely striking the right balance between the two, given gender role expectations [64]. By first recognizing that women’s leadership development cannot be unlinked from these societal norms, women leaders can reflect and realize why they have developed certain behaviors. They may also be able to work with/develop others to change societal expectations and bias in the long-term. Secondly, women can develop a balanced, paradox approach to leadership that allows them to integrate agency and communion (instead of seeing them as diametrically opposed concepts) in a way that is authentic and beneficial to them in their specific contexts.

Some participants appreciated being reminded by instructors in the leadership development program to stay true to themselves. Being reminded by this simple acceptance statement of ‘being true to self’ may have contributed to the women avoiding the trap of having a dilemma mindset. It provided an opportunity for them to be creative in making

meaning of 'being true to self' while acquiring an agentic approach tailored to their own authentic way. Furthermore, the participants were able to introspectively reflect on their workplace, make sense of having a balanced approach, and develop and practice their authentic leadership life stories with other peer participants during the program. For example, many participants reported that they were able to find their own way of 'being assertive' by shifting perspectives (e.g., asking more when they do not understand instead of searching for reasons for not asking, making it appear like they already had all the answers).

In developing a balanced approach, women saw the value of the learning community built into the program. Through the sharing of their leadership life stories with each other, they were able to experiment new approaches in the laboratory environment [22,27,31,32]. They not only received feedback but also learned from their peers' leadership experiences and styles, which made them realize they were not alone and helped them increase confidence [10,24]. Collective reflective space was given throughout the program so that the participants could work on their stories and contribute to development of an authentic brand of leadership.

On a collective level, the leadership program may have served as a good starting point for empowering the women to influence their organizations. Some of the women participants described how they had been making efforts to develop a younger generation of leaders through mentoring or delegating tasks that are developmental. Zheng and colleagues [59] pointed out the importance of having a role model to foster the paradox mindset. The participants are in the midst of their authentic mindset development journey, yet they can also start being role models for their people, especially the next generation of women leaders, by demonstrating a balanced approach. Creating a network of support groups is another important area that they can continue to strengthen and expand beyond the program community [61].

In summary, understanding strengths and weaknesses, testing their assumptions and ideas, and crafting their stories through the program with peer support may have enabled participants to better balance their leadership approach in an authentic way, while encompassing their leadership values in male dominant organizations. Yet, it is important that their leadership journey be viewed as an ongoing process of learning, experiencing, and continuously developing. Leadership develops as life challenges and opportunities unfold. Continuing to expand their support network and helping others learn to lead is also critical.

## 6. Implications for Future Research and Practice

It is important to note that there are several limitations in this research of women's authentic leadership development experiences. First, even though the study employed an in-depth exploration of the selected leadership program participants' experiences as a study, it limits the generalizability of the data beyond the case. Second, the research was based on voluntary participation, which limited the amount of data. Third, the study focused on gender binaries of male and female leadership. With these limitations in mind, future research can increase the sample size and should also include non-binary or gender fluid leaders, as well as include a focus on intersectionality to allow researchers to examine how societal powers and pressures impact leaders differently based on their identities and backgrounds. Furthermore, a longitudinal study could help researchers better examine women leaders' authenticity development process over many years. With a longitudinal study design that uses multiple points in time to collect data (e.g., pre, during, after interventions), researchers may be able to examine critically reflective and development moments by utilizing the critical incidence technique [65].

Considering the theoretical contribution, it may be worth further exploring the 'balanced approach to developing authenticity in women's leadership', which is argued through the lens of the paradox vs. dilemma mindset to foster the coexistence of gender and leader identity [59]. That being said, with the advancement of a theoretical construct for women leaders, authentic leadership construct can incorporate the cognitive mechanism of mindset for women, being communal yet agentic, and situational aspect that may influence how women handle ethical issues, and be honest to self and others.

In terms of practical implications, informal and formal learning opportunities are important for women to develop authentic leadership throughout their careers. In addition to the constant feedback about their leadership through various instruments, guided reflections with a trained executive coach, facilitator, mentor, and/or trusted peers help women cultivate their authentically balanced approach as they test their assumptions and experiment with a new way of being. Story-telling exercises can be incorporated into learning processes, which enables leaders to practice how they articulate who they are as a leader, considering their audience. They can also utilize storytelling to help develop and mentor others. Through such in-depth reflective practice with experiential learning methods, they can build self-confidence to navigate systems and structures that often favor male counterparts.

Furthermore, a courageous learning place where tough conversations can be had for women leaders is useful where they can explore their identity, gain a deeper understanding of self, as well as share learning with other women leaders. Women leaders' learning communities of practice can provide both practical advice and emotional support as women deal with male-dominant social norms that discriminate against women in the workplace. This community can be expanded as they mentor and serve as role models for the next generation of women leaders, which can lead to organizational or social change in the long run.

## 7. Conclusions

The exploratory case study showed women's lived leadership experiences through the lens of authentic leadership. The on-going reflective learning processes are part and parcel of building authenticity in women's leadership. Given the social and organizational gender bias that exist in today's society, women continuously need to cultivate a balanced authentic leadership approach to be successful. These cultivation efforts can be well served as change agents in a broader societal level that can support the next generation of women leaders as the younger generation of women can have role models. We are hopeful that the findings of the study provide practical and scholarly insights into what ways a leadership development course impacts participants' authentic leadership development experience that can be useful for HRD professionals, leadership development consultants, and women leaders.

**Author Contributions:** Conceptualization, Y.T.N.; Methodology, Y.T.N.; Software, Y.T.N., J.H. and R.B.; Validation, Y.T.N., J.H. and R.B.; Formal Analysis, Y.T.N., J.H. and R.B.; Investigation, Y.T.N.; Resources, Y.T.N., J.H. and R.B.; Data Curation, Y.T.N.; Writing—Original Draft Preparation, Y.T.N., J.H. and R.B.; Writing—Review & Editing, Y.T.N., J.H. and R.B.; Visualization, Y.T.N. and J.H.; Supervision, Y.T.N.; Project Administration, Y.T.N. All authors have read and agreed to the published version of the manuscript.

**Funding:** This research received no external funding.

**Institutional Review Board Statement:** The study was conducted in accordance with the Declaration of Helsinki, and approved by the Institutional Review Board of Columbia University (AAAR6326 and 23 October 2017).

**Informed Consent Statement:** Informed consent was obtained from all subjects involved in the study.

**Data Availability Statement:** Data is not available.

**Acknowledgments:** The authors wish to recognize the contributions and support provided by Jennifer Goetz in the early stages of this research endeavor.

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

## References

1. Seo, G.; Huang, W.; Han, S.C. Conceptual review of underrepresentation of women in senior leadership positions from a perspective of gendered social status in the Workplace: Implication for HRD research and practice. *Hum. Resour. Dev. Rev.* **2017**, *16*, 35–59. [[CrossRef](#)]
2. Chakradhar, S. Boardroom bound: Efforts to bring more women into biomed industry's top ranks. *Nat. Med.* **2017**, *23*, 141–143. [[CrossRef](#)] [[PubMed](#)]

3. Global Gender Gap Report. Global Gender Gap Report Insight Report. *World Econ. Forum* **2022**. Available online: <https://www.weforum.org/reports/global-gender-gap-report-2022/> (accessed on 10 August 2022).
4. Adame, C.; Caplliure, E.; Miquel, M. Work-life balance and firms: A matter of women? *J. Bus. Res.* **2016**, *69*, 1379–1383. [[CrossRef](#)]
5. Contreras, F.; Baykal, E.; Abid, G. E-Leadership and teleworking in times of COVID-19 and beyond: What we know and where do we go. *Front. Psychol.* **2020**, *11*, 590271. [[CrossRef](#)] [[PubMed](#)]
6. Williams, E.N.; Grande, S.; Nakamura, Y.T.; Pyle, L.; Shaw, G. The development and practice of authentic leadership: A cultural lens. *Eur. J. Train. Dev.* **2021**. [[CrossRef](#)]
7. Liu, H.; Cutcher, L.; Grant, D. Doing authenticity: The gendered construction of authentic leadership. *Gen. Work. Organ.* **2015**, *22*, 237–255. [[CrossRef](#)]
8. 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.* **2008**, *34*, 89–126. [[CrossRef](#)]
9. Hopkins, M.M.; O’Neil, D.A. Authentic leadership: Application to women leaders. *Front. Psychol.* **2015**, *6*, 1–5. [[CrossRef](#)]
10. Eich, D. A grounded theory of high-quality leadership programs. *J. Leadersh. Organ. Stud.* **2008**, *15*, 176–187. [[CrossRef](#)]
11. Tillema, H.H. Authenticity in knowledge-productive learning: What drives knowledge construction in collaborative inquiry? *Hum. Resour. Dev. Int.* **2006**, *9*, 173–190. [[CrossRef](#)]
12. Woerkm, M. The concept of critical reflection and its implications for human resource development. *Adv. Dev. Hum. Resour.* **2004**, *6*, 178–192. [[CrossRef](#)]
13. 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](#)]
14. George, B.; Sims, P.; McLean, A.N.; Mayer, D. Discovering your authentic leadership. *Harv. Bus. Rev.* **2007**, *85*, 129–138. [[PubMed](#)]
15. Klepper, W.M.; Nakamura, Y.T. The Leadership Credo. *Dev. Lead.* **2012**, 24–31. Available online: <https://developingleadersquarterly.com/dlq-issue-008/> (accessed on 1 July 2022).
16. Diehl, A.B.; Dzubinski, L.M. Making the invisible visible: A cross-sector analysis of gender-based leadership barriers. *Hum. Resour. Dev. Q.* **2016**, *27*, 181–206. [[CrossRef](#)]
17. 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](#)]
18. Lawler, J.; Ashman, I. Theorizing leadership authenticity: A Sartrean perspective. *Leadership* **2012**, *8*, 327–344. [[CrossRef](#)]
19. Jensen, S.M.; Luthans, F. Relationship between Entrepreneurs’ Psychological Capital and Their Authentic Leadership. *J. Manag. Issues* **2006**, *18*, 254–273.
20. Maslow, A.H. *The Farther Reaches of Human Nature*; Penguin: New York, NY, USA, 1971.
21. Gardner, W.L.; Coglisier, C.C.; Davis, K.M.; Dickens, M.P. Authentic leadership: A review of the literature and research agenda. *Leadersh. Q.* **2011**, *22*, 1120–1145. [[CrossRef](#)]
22. Kets de Vries, M.F.R.; Korotov, K. Creating transformational executive education programs. *Acad. Manag. Learn. Educ.* **2007**, *6*, 375–387. [[CrossRef](#)]
23. Ciporen, R. The role of personally transformative learning in leadership development: A case study. *J. Leadersh. Organ. Stud.* **2010**, *17*, 177–191. [[CrossRef](#)]
24. Beechler, S.; Ciporen, R.; Yorks, L. Intersecting journeys in creating learning communities in executive education. *Action Res.* **2013**, *11*, 253–278. [[CrossRef](#)]
25. Iliès, R.; Morgeson, F.P.; Nahrgang, J.D. Authentic leadership and eudaemonic well-being: Understanding leader–follower outcomes. *Leadersh. Q.* **2005**, *16*, 373–394. [[CrossRef](#)]
26. Shamir, B.; Eilam, G. ‘What’s your story?’ A life-stories approach to authentic leadership development. *Leadersh. Q.* **2005**, *16*, 395–417. [[CrossRef](#)]
27. Sparrowe, R.T. Authentic leadership and the narrative self. *Leadersh. Q.* **2005**, *16*, 419–439. [[CrossRef](#)]
28. Neider, L.L.; Schriesheim, C.A. The authentic leadership inventory (ALI): Development and empirical tests. *Leadersh. Q.* **2011**, *22*, 1146–1164. [[CrossRef](#)]
29. Yorks, L.; Beechler, S.; Ciporen, R. Enhancing the impact of an open-enrollment executive program through assessment. *Acad. Manag. Learn. Educ.* **2007**, *6*, 310–320. [[CrossRef](#)]
30. Maltbia, T.E.; Marsick, V.J.; Ghosh, R. Executive and organizational coaching: A review of insights drawn from literature to inform HRD practice. *Adv. Dev. Hum. Resour.* **2014**, *16*, 161–183. [[CrossRef](#)]
31. Mälkki, K. Rethinking disorienting dilemmas within real-life crises: The role of reflection in negotiating emotionally chaotic experiences. *Adult Educ. Q.* **2012**, *62*, 207–229. [[CrossRef](#)]
32. Michie, S.; Gooty, J. Values, emotions, and authenticity: Will the real leader please stand up? *Leadersh. Q.* **2005**, *16*, 441–457. [[CrossRef](#)]
33. Nesbit, P.L. The role of self-reflection, emotional management of feedback, and self-regulation processes in self-directed leadership development. *Hum. Resour. Dev. Rev.* **2012**, *11*, 203–226. [[CrossRef](#)]
34. 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](#)]
35. Schön, D.A. *The Reflective Practitioner: How Professionals Think in Action*; Routledge: London, UK, 2017.
36. Merriam, S.B.; Baumgartner, L.M. *Learning in Adulthood*, 4th ed.; Jossey-Bass: San Francisco, CA, USA, 2020.

37. Mezirow, J. Learning as transformation. In *Learning to Think Like An Adult: Core Concepts of Transformation Theory*; Jossey-Bass: San Francisco, CA, USA, 2000; pp. 3–34.
38. Puente, S.; Crous, F.; Venter, A. The role of a positive trigger event in actioning authentic leadership development. *SA J. Hum. Resour. Manag.* **2007**, *5*, 11–18. [[CrossRef](#)]
39. Baron, L. Authentic leadership and mindfulness development through action learning. *J. Manag. Psychol.* **2016**, *31*, 296–311. [[CrossRef](#)]
40. Kiersch, C.; Peters, J. Leadership from the inside out: Student leadership development within authentic leadership and servant leadership frameworks. *J. Leadersh. Educ.* **2017**, *16*, 148–168. [[CrossRef](#)]
41. 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](#)]
42. Debebe, G. Navigating the double bind: Transformations to balance contextual responsiveness and authenticity in women’s leadership development. *Cogent Bus. Manag.* **2017**, *4*, 1313543. [[CrossRef](#)]
43. Eagly, A.H. Achieving relational authenticity in leadership: Does gender matter? *Leadersh. Q.* **2005**, *16*, 459–474. [[CrossRef](#)]
44. Eagly, A.H.; Karau, S.J. Role congruity theory of prejudice toward female leaders. *Psychol. Rev.* **2002**, *109*, 573–598. [[CrossRef](#)]
45. Heilman, M.E. Gender stereotypes and workplace bias. *Res. Organ. Behav.* **2012**, *32*, 113–135. [[CrossRef](#)]
46. Ibarra, H. The Authenticity Paradox. *Harvard Bus. Rev.* **2015**, 52–59. Available online: <https://hbr.org/2015/01/the-authenticity-paradox> (accessed on 1 July 2022).
47. Belenky, M.F.; Clinchy, B.M.; Goldberger, N.R.; Tarule, J.M. *Women’s Ways of Knowing: The Development of Self, Voice, and Mind*; Basic Books: New York, NY, USA, 1986; Volume 15.
48. Ely, R.J.; Ibarra, H.; Kolb, D.M. Taking gender into account: Theory and design for women’s leadership development programs. *Acad. Manag. Learn. Educ.* **2011**, *10*, 474–493. [[CrossRef](#)]
49. Gipson, A.N.; Pfaff, D.L.; Mendelsohn, D.B.; Catenacci, L.T.; Burke, W.W. Women and leadership: Selection, development, leadership style, and performance. *J. Appl. Behav. Sci.* **2017**, *53*, 32–65. [[CrossRef](#)]
50. Kimball, T.D.; Reichard, R.J.; Chan, E.L. Women’s leader development programs: Current landscape and recommendations for future programs. *J. Bus. Divers.* **2021**, *21*, 1–19.
51. Yin, R.K. *Case Study Research: Design and Methods*; Sage: Thousand Oaks, CA, USA, 2009; Volume 5.
52. Eisenhardt, K.M. Building theories from case study research. *Acad. Manag. Rev.* **1989**, *14*, 532–550. [[CrossRef](#)]
53. Charmaz, K. *Constructing Grounded Theory*; Sage: Thousand Oaks, CA, USA, 2006.
54. Creswell, J.W.; Creswell, J.D. *Research Design: Qualitative, Quantitative, and Mixed Methods Approaches*, 5th ed.; Sage: Thousand Oaks, CA, USA, 2018.
55. Creswell, J.W. *Qualitative Inquiry and Research Design: Choosing Among Five Approaches*; Sage: Thousand Oaks, CA, USA, 2007.
56. Saldaña, J. *The Coding Manual for Qualitative Researchers*, 3rd ed.; Sage: Thousand Oaks, CA, USA, 2016.
57. Ose, S.O. Using excel and word to structure qualitative data. *J. Appl. Soc.* **2016**, *10*, 147–162. [[CrossRef](#)]
58. Brue, K.L.; Brue, S.A. Leadership role identity construction in women’s leadership development programs. *J. Leadersh. Educ.* **2018**, *17*, 7–27. [[CrossRef](#)]
59. Zheng, W.; Kark, R.; Meister, A.L. Paradox versus dilemma mindset: A theory of how women leaders navigate the tensions between agency and communion. *Leadersh. Q.* **2018**, *29*, 584–596. [[CrossRef](#)]
60. Carter, D.R.; DeChurch, L.A.; Braun, M.T.; Contractor, N.S. Social network approaches to leadership: An integrative conceptual review. *J. Appl. Psychol.* **2015**, *100*, 597–622. [[CrossRef](#)]
61. Nakamura, Y.T.; Yorks, L. The role of reflective practices in building social capital in organizations from an HRD perspective. *Hum. Resour. Dev. Rev.* **2011**, *10*, 222–245. [[CrossRef](#)]
62. Nanton, C.R. Shaping leadership culture to sustain future generations of women leaders. *J. Leadersh. Account. Ethics* **2015**, *12*, 92–112.
63. Miron-Spektor, E.; Ingram, A.; Keller, J.; Smith, W.K.; Lewis, M.W. Microfoundations of organizational paradox: The problem is how we think about the problem. *Acad. Manag. J.* **2018**, *61*, 26–45. [[CrossRef](#)]
64. Esser, A.; Kahrens, M.; Mouzoughi, Y.; Eomois, E. A female leadership competency framework from the perspective of male leaders. *Gend. Manag.* **2018**, *33*, 138–166. [[CrossRef](#)]
65. Brookfield, S.D.; Preskill, S. *Discussion as a Way of Teaching: Tools and Techniques for Democratic Classrooms*; John Wiley & Sons: Hoboken, NJ, USA, 2012.