Acting, feeling, looking the part: social intelligence capabilities and associated specific behaviours of women in leadership

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Abstract

Purpose – This study aims to investigate how social intelligence is a necessary part of women's executive leadership and how they use this to perform their senior leadership roles effectively.

Design/methodology/approach – Through semi-structured interviews, 12 women in senior leadership positions in an Australian state-level public health-care system (that is evidenced as being dominated by male executives) discussed their lived experiences as they related to the role of social intelligence capabilities in their leadership practice.

Findings – This study finds that social intelligence enables executive women to build and execute four key capabilities: nurturing relationships, navigating complexity, building trust in self and others and enhancing reputation. These capabilities are associated with 12 specific behaviours. For nurturing relationship, they are building rapport with others, active listening and showing empathy; for navigating complexity, they are demonstrating concern, exerting influence, adjusting leadership style and problem-solving; for enhancing reputation, they are achievement of outcomes, managing appearance and personal responsibility for career; and finally, for building trust in self and others, they are seeking connections to reduce loneliness and trusting intuition.

Practical implications – This study has resulted in a framework of social intelligence capabilities and associated behaviours that builds the authors' understanding of the strengths women bring to the executive table.

Originality/value – At an individual level, this study supports women through hearing and sharing the lived experiences and stories of other women aspiring to propel themselves into executive-level positions through hearing and sharing the experiences and stories of other women who have gone before them.

Keywords Social intelligence, Leadership, Women executives, Gender, Career progression

Paper type Research paper

Introduction

Possessing social intelligence to manage personal interactions involving self-regulating, reflecting and adjusting behaviours becomes even more important for senior leaders who are required to deal with more complex forms of social perception and behavioural responses (Liu *et al.*, 2015; Glass and Cook, 2020b; Cheng *et al.*, 2022; Sanders, 2023). These social qualities are perceived as a particular strength of women because they are considered more transparent in their communication, collaboration, provision of care, sense of respect, inclusivity and well-networked behaviours (Place and Vardeman-Winter, 2018; Vroman and Danko, 2020). Women are also considered to have better leadership ability and resilience in times of declining organisational performance (Haslam and Ryan, 2008). Yet they remain underrepresented in the leadership landscape, despite positioning themselves as duly qualified and suitably competitive in leadership roles (Bierema, 2016).

Some of the reasons for the persistent gap in women's leadership include gender stereotypes (Workplace Gender Equity Agency, 2019; Rodriguez *et al.*, 2022), gender-based prejudice (Virick and Greer, 2012) and implicit bias reinforced by biased hiring practices, limited promotion of women once hired and unrealistic performance evaluations (Bierema, 2016; Krivkovich *et al.*, 2016; Bear *et al.*, 2017).

This significant disparity is of concern given the evidence that demonstrates women do in fact have a particular strength in the social aspects of leadership (Hoyt and Murphy, 2016; Samuelson *et al.*, 2019; Manzi and Heilman, 2021). To understand this phenomenon more deeply, this study examines how women in executive leadership use their social intelligence. More precisely, rather than focussing on *why* women do not progress into executive leadership roles at the same rates as their male counterparts, this research seeks to understand *what* social intelligence capabilities are important to their leadership journey.

Literature review

Research suggests there is entrenched thinking in society that focuses on the idea of "think manager, think male" (Haslam and Ryan, 2008, p. 543), with both men and women describing leaders as having masculine characteristics, usually attributed to transactional, *laissez-faire* or command and control leadership approaches (Place and Vardeman-Winter, 2018; Hardaker *et al.*, 2023).

In contrast to this, the personal leadership characteristics generally linked with women are such things as engaging in collaborative decision-making; understanding and managing emotions; and attending to conflict resolution (Vial *et al.*, 2016; Place and Vardeman-Winter, 2018). These characteristics are seen to play a role in elevating the profile of women in leadership (Davis and Maldonado, 2015). As such, the advantages of possessing social intelligence for women in leadership offers a potential avenue through which leadership practices and persistent barriers might be better understood.

Social intelligence

Existing literature establishes a need for leaders to have social intelligence, because leadership is itself a social phenomenon (Chiu *et al.*, 2017; Bohl, 2019; Alvesson and Einola, 2022). Relational transparency is seen as a corner stone of authenticity in leadership and to the fidelity of leadership purpose (Kempster *et al.*, 2019). As such, leaders require a high level of social awareness to attune to the feelings of others, possess social cognition, understand the social environment and be able to facilitate interactions at a non-verbal level (Goleman, 2006; Lee *et al.*, 2017). These capabilities are well reflected in literature

addressing enacted authentic and transformational leadership by all genders, where the leader is considered to strongly influence others. In part because of their ability to emotionally navigate competing expectations (Nyberg and Sveningsson, 2014; Gardner *et al.,* 2021).

Where individuals are unable to manage their own emotions, they cannot act in a "socially intelligent way" (Goleman, 2006, p. 330). Therefore, social intelligence is a set of interpersonal competencies that support a person to sense or empathise with another person's feelings and translate these feelings into the context of the situation at hand (Bishop-Kinlyside, 2022). It also refers to the capacity of a person to guide social interactions in such a way as to minimise or avoid interpersonal confrontation (Goleman, 2006).

The leadership of those with low social intelligence is considered toxic because of the impact to those they lead negatively, making the follower feel inadequate, frustrated and devalued (Goleman, 2006; Thoroughgood *et al.,* 2012; Mackey *et al.,* 2015). In turn, this fuels conflict and animosity in the workplace (Wawra, 2009; Oc *et al.,* 2023). Collinson (2012) illuminated a different view of low social intelligence to show that leaders can sometimes appear so excessively positive as to dismiss alternative voices when problems and mistakes are raised and admitted. Many highly intelligent individuals have failed as leaders due to an inability to demonstrate proficiency in social interactions and engagement (Ozdemir, 2020; Sanwal and Sareen, 2022).

Social intelligence and women in leadership

Research shows women are very successful in deploying social intelligence (Juchniewicz, 2010; Khan and Bhat, 2017) and tend to have more social intelligence and capital, compared to their male counterparts (Korn Ferry, 2016; Fellmann and Widmann, 2017; Bridges *et al.,* 2021). Known as the glass cliff, women are more likely to be placed into leadership roles during times of crisis, in part due to their social intelligence in terms of understanding, intuition and tactfulness (Reinwald *et al.,* 2022; Zhang and Basha, 2023; Pepple *et al.,* 2024). The precarious nature of these appointments mean women are at a higher danger of losing leadership positions if there are negative organisational outcomes (Sabharwal, 2013; Klein *et al.,* 2019). These high-risk promotions come with a "risk tax" that women endure to experience upward mobility (Glass and Cook, 2020a, p. 637). This is relevant to this study because it shows there is benefit, risk and exploitation in possessing and practicing social intelligence.

Summary

In general, it is recognised that women advancing their opportunities in the labour market also bring substantial macroeconomic benefits (United Nations, 2015; Rai *et al.,* 2019). Organisations that do not continue to focus on increasing the presence of women across all organisational levels, particularly at the executive table, face losses of knowledge, experience and skills as well as the subsequent direct and indirect costs that come with orientating and training new staff (Kurnat-Thoma *et al.,* 2017; Mahoney *et al.,* 2020). From a leadership perspective, not only is it important to have credentials but it is also necessary to understand the personalities and behaviours of people to leverage collective force (Sanders, 2023). A socially intelligent leader must be good at listening, reading body language, influencing and navigating highly complex social networks and interactions (Goleman, 2008).

Given persistent barriers to women pursuing careers in leadership, and that social intelligence appears to be a particular strength of women, understanding how it is used in leadership practice is important (Davis and Maldonado, 2015; Place and Vardeman-Winter, 2018). There remains a

gap in the existing body of research in specifically identifying what social intelligence capabilities help executive women successfully navigate the leadership labyrinth. As such, it is important to note this research is not about what women need to perform to become a senior leader. Instead, it explores what capabilities women executives need to perform effectively in their current senior leadership role by asking the research question:

RQ1. What are the most important social intelligence capabilities for executive women to perform their senior leadership roles effectively?

Research design

This study focussed on the lived experiences of executive women in an Australian state health-care sector. This an appropriate environment in which to investigate the research question. Despite the health-care sector attracting a dominantly female workforce of 75%, women remain underrepresented in senior leadership (Queensland Health, 2017; Cohn *et al.,* 2021).

Qualitative enquiry was identified as an appropriate research method for this study because it enables rich, interpretative data to be collected to discover and understand phenomenon (Yin, 2003; Braun and Clarke, 2014). Alvesson and Einola (2022) support this approach in their advocacy of qualitative methodology in leadership research because it provides a richer and more realistic understanding of the problems faced by leaders.

Sampling

Twelve women occupying senior executive participated in semi-structured interviews, ranging between 45 and 60 min in duration. A semi-structured interview guide with 24 questions were grouped into four categories: eight background questions on their current and previous positions and leadership roles; six questions on social awareness capabilities; six questions on social facility capabilities; and four questions on advancing their leadership careers.

Interviews were conducted at a time and location convenient to the participant. The sampling criteria meant participants occupied highly influential leadership roles and were required demonstrate capacity to develop and maintain expansive social networks and social partnerships. Participants were recruited via snowball sampling (Vogt, 2005; Smith *et al.,* 2009). The participants occupied their current roles for varied lengths of time, from two months to 13 years. All participants were given pseudonyms to protect their identity.

Data analysis

Firstly, all interviews were transcribed and then given back to the participants to check for reliability to enhance the rigour of the research (Merriam and Tisdell, 2015). Secondly, a process of open-minded reading was undertaken (Price *et al.,* 2015). Transcripts were reviewed multiple times so that content and associated meanings were understood to enhance the data analysis process. The transcripts were uploaded to NVivo to be classified, sorted and coded into the first-order concepts and then second-order themes (Zamawe, 2015).

The initial coding undertaken was open coding. This involved analysing each interview transcript line by line with the aim to identify provisional concepts (Creswell and Poth, 2016).

The subsequent phase involved aligning, refining and analysing the themes and determining how the groups were related to each other. Finally, selective coding was employed to identify the four main emergent themes (see Figure 1). This study has ethics approval (University of Southern Queensland, Human Ethics Committee Approval number – H20REA164).

Findings

Four distinct social intelligence capabilities were identified, along with 12 specific behaviours, visualised in Figure 1.

Capability 1 – Nurturing relationships

Relationships affected every area of the participants' lives from colleagues at work, to partners, friends and child/ren. Kim felt that:

> […] knowing your staff, who each of them are as people, what makes them tick, what their work preferences and interests are, helps to identify when things are not going well […]

Peta described the need "to 'get' the team […] listen and watch for cues to see how each of them is getting along together". Maddy described taking time to understand the team dynamics before taking action:

> I sometimes sit back in a meeting and watch my colleagues or my immediate team. I listen, watch for non-verbal cues, and get a gauge for what is occurring. If something seems 'off', I am unafraid to ask the question […].

Underlying these work-related relationships were narratives about the importance, and at times the "luck" of having a supportive family, child/ren and friends. Kathleen valued the ability to "moderate and sense-check […] in a confidential sort of manner". Peta summed up by saying:
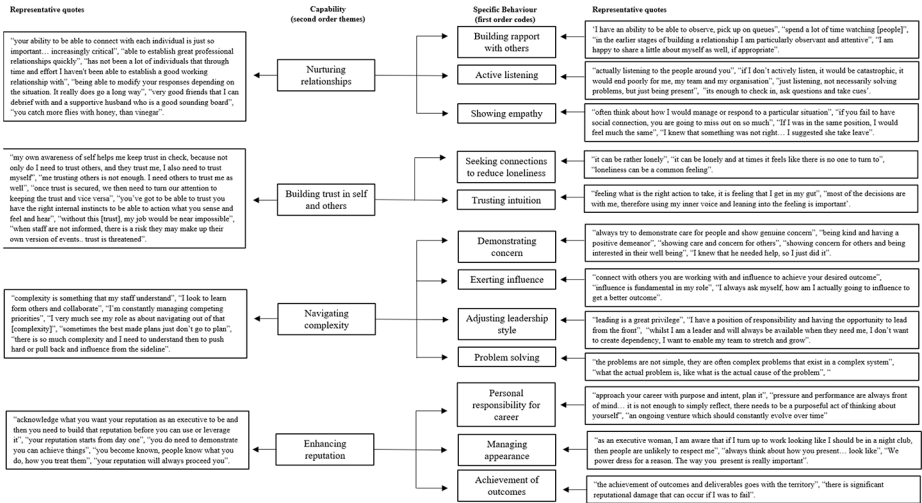

Figure 1. Data coding of capabilities and specific behaviours
Source: Authors' own work

My husband is the stay-at-home dad. One of the things that stops women from doing well or them even trying to get into executive positions is the time that you are at work and if you have got family, you think that you are being a bad mum to have a job […] for women, there is often this struggle between 'I want to be a good mum and I want to work'.

Building rapport with others. Participants leveraged rapport building efforts to progress achievement. For Kim rapport meant she "could ring anybody, and they would say 'yes' to assisting me". Kerry shared a similar view, explaining that rapport meant:

You're taking people on a safe journey. And that relationship is, if it is built early and if it's built strongly, […] means that people will feel comfortable with having discussion and debate about complex [matters] and issues.

A few of the participants discussed the importance of owning up to mistakes and being honest and vulnerable. Peta felt that:

[…] as a leader, sometimes I have to make the hard calls, you know, this is what I am there to do. The staff who know me well, know that I stand by my convictions […]. and stand by my decisions.

This also meant it was important to "admit my mistakes when I am wrong". Participants were accomplished at "reading" their colleagues, listening to what is being said and observing their body language. This was advantageous as it created opportunities to consider and assess situations before speaking or intervening, minimising pre-emptive or ill-considered actions. Chloe said that:

I know what makes them [team members] tick, I know what interests them, I know about their families, and I know their passions. This is useful intel for me when I am considering my pitch and my messaging […].

Active listening. Active listening was a valued skill for participants. For Louise this meant "hearing people tell you things, not just learning by your own interactions, but actually listening to the people around you". Pippa said there is a difference between "hearing and listening" and "everything I do, depends on my capacity to be able to listen, process information and make decisions". Chloe shared a similar experience:

Listening is everything as a leader. I need to listen to my staff, listen to our patients, listen to the community, listen to as many people that I can. If you can't listen or are not willing to listen, I don't know that you could ever successfully lead.

Showing empathy. The participants described a range of ways they showed empathy. Kim described an interaction where she knew "things" were not going well for a team member:

I saw the "red flag" and I intervened. She had previously disclosed to me what had been going on, so I was mindful of this. I decided to call her and let her know that I was going to cover the "on call" over the weekend to give her a break.

Kim's example of empathy described knowing "something was not right, so I suggested that she take some leave. She needed the break. It was a no brainer for me [and] whilst initially reluctant, she did agree that a break would be good". Peta shared her own personal struggles and how she used these experiences to support others:

I had a tough upbringing – my family did not have much money, I was the odd one out at school, I had to fend for myself. I get it […] I am happy to share some of my personal struggles. I think that it helps me relate.

Capability 2 – Building trust in self and others
Participants expressed the need to trust in themselves as a way through which others build trust in them. For Vanessa building trust meant "[…] get out of the way. My team know that I trust them, and I think that they trust me". Chloe discussed the importance of trusting oneself when faced with complex problems; "if there is one thing to say to an aspiring leader, it is to back yourself. None of us are perfect". Kerry discussed trust as vital to perceptions of her abilities; "without this, my job would be near impossible. Everything I do is judged and assessed by others, so it is important that I constantly engage in trust-building activities".

Seeking connections to reduce loneliness. As a reaction to loneliness, seeking opportunities to feel "connected" was important. Despite this, Kathleen acknowledged the co-existence of loneliness and leadership:

> Even though I have good relationships with my other executive colleagues, I am often lonely […] it is being able to, I guess, depend on yourself and the higher up you go in these executive roles, you need to be confident […] believe in yourself, make decisions to deal with pressure as you don't have lots of people around you most of the time.

Kerry said being a part of daily operations and community was important, providing:

> […] opportunity to remain connected and to understand the issues on the frontline, which you don't often get when you are an executive sitting in back-to-back meetings for most of the day.

Kathleen described how "really important" it was to:

> Identify people that you are able to connect with, and that you have those good relationships with as you can't achieve much alone […] able to have that shoulder to cry on, or that person who you can bounce ideas off and know that you will do the same thing.

Trusting intuition. Using one's "gut instinct" featured strongly in participant narrative. Maddy said "my gut instinct is usually right". Kim valued her gut instinct, explaining an occasion where she did not listen to her gut instinct:

> I went exclusively with the information in front of me. I sensed pressure from other members of the team, so I just went with the consensus. However, nowadays I am not so shy. I express to the team my feeling and sense about a situation, even if it contradicts the information.

Capability 3 – Navigating complexity
Nearly all the participants navigated complexity by leveraging relationships, trust and establishing a shared sense of purpose within their respective teams. Maddy explained her strength in making sense of complexity:

> I very much see my role is about navigating out of that [complexity], making sense of it, translation of complexity into something that people can understand and act on.

Impartiality when navigating complexity was important. Pippa said "you never want to put yourself in a situation where you commit career suicide". Kerry saw a "need to complete the job objectively, which at times is challenging, given that the task is not necessarily always consistent with my own opinion". Sonya supported this; "it is about knowing the politics of the organisation, gathering the information and thinking through solutions that are appropriate and relevant to the government of the day".

Managing complexity was acknowledged as frustrating when there was a lack of control. Kathleen said "there is no one source of truth and an ever-changing reprioritisation of problems". Similarly, Pippa said that:

Sometimes the best-made plans just don't go to plan, as the system requires a different response, or something urgent comes in that I need to attend to. It is a moving feast of priorities, which does make it frustrating at times.

Demonstrating concern. Concern for others was a contributing factor in cultivating relationships, trust, and a positive work environment. Peta, felt it was important to "Take the time to do that little bit extra for others....it role models proactive, positive interactions for others, so that when they are concerned, they will also help others". Kerry explained:

I have no doubt that when my teams treat each other well and shows care and concern for each other […] they can focus on what they are there to do, as opposed to office politics or petty 'he said, she said' stuff.

Exerting influence. Exerting influence helped cultivate relationships and trust, easing the navigation of complexity. Vanessa articulated how she can "connect with others that you are working with and influence to achieve your desired outcome". Kathleen was aware of the extent of her ability to influence:

I am aware of my sphere of influence. I know that there are some things that I cannot control, and I don't tend to get too caught up in those things, but I do believe that at the very least, I still have a role in influencing an outcome.

Kerry was mindful that:

[…] sometimes it can be quite overwhelming, when you feel like a little fish in a big pond, and I probably do sometimes underestimate the influence that comes with my role. I am probably just subtler about how I go about influencing others.

Peta explained her approach to influencing:

The essence of leadership is influence, not authority. I think that it's really important. You can easily influence people, but you don't have to be bossy, you don't have to be perceived as a bitch to get what you want.

Adjusting leadership style. When leading in complex environments, participants felt they adjusted their leadership approach. Kerry said "there is no magic bullet for leadership in complex settings. It requires constant awareness of the situation, knowledge of the individual personalities, and an assessment of appropriate response". Vanessa said that "as a woman, I have a tender, softer side and communicate with passion and purpose". Pippa explained how she was:

[…] a bit worried about my leadership style which is very much 'peace, love and mung beans' and that it might be perceived as unprofessional […] what I have realised is that my style makes people feel at ease.

Louise expressed her leadership as:

[…] an honour to receive and provide. I really enjoy having the opportunity to steer the future direction […]. I am mindful of the staff who deliver the services. They really are the heroes.

Problem-solving. Participants recognised that what previously worked in straight forward situations was unlikely to work when more complex problems arose. Louise described first wanting to "listen, collaborate, and share the why and then engage on the how, as I don't have all the answers". Louise said:

[…] as leaders we always need to be mindful of not jumping to solve problems pre-emptively […] you think you solve the problem, only to find out that you haven't solved the problem at all, rather that you have created yet another problem.

Peta discussed carrying a personal and professional burden to solve problems:

I felt a huge amount of pressure to solve all of the problems, I guess, maybe because I also wanted to prove myself. But I was stuck in a state of analysis paralysis. What I have learnt is that yes, the buck stops with me, but sharing responsibility and being vulnerable in saying that I don't have all the answers, is completely okay.

Capability 4 – Enhancing reputation
There was a common belief that it was necessary to deliberately build a reputation of credibility, professionalism and to be recognised for the achievement of outcomes. Louise felt it important to "be mindful of what you do, what you say, who you associate with, as this all contributes to the building of your reputation". Louise also said part of preserving her reputation was to "[…] be mindful. I don't let my guard down". Ashley suggested a bolder approach; "Be courageous – put your big girl undies on and get on with it. Be a trailblazer". Vanessa explained reputation building in a way that shows you do not "annoy or get others offside". Pippa observed leaders being "let down" by their reputation:

If you behave poorly, lie, manipulate, and treat others without regard, your executive reputation will spread like wildfire […] relationships are so ingrained, your reputation will follow you.

Achievement of outcomes. Achievement of outcomes was critical to reputation. Vanessa said she knew herself to be "a doer and as a doer I get things done. This often means that I get more to do". Chloe said her "success as a leader is more than simply the achievement of tasks […] maybe a women's touch helps". Kim said, "you become known, people know what you do". She extended this reflection by saying "it's about being memorable, being credible, being professional or being in the right place at the right time […] [people know] how you treat them".

Managing appearance. This significant theme determined how others perceived the participants and was attributed to gaining respect. Chloe stated laughingly "we can always throw a bit of red lippy on to get a little more power or we can put some stilettos on if we need to command the room". Kim explained social norms as directing what is appropriate (or not); "I always aim to dress professionally and take pride in my personal grooming. You don't want to come across as stiff or unrelatable, so there is a balance". For Chloe this social norm was associated with her height:

I'm quite tall. Those are social things that you need to be aware of when you go into situations, as it will determine how empowered you feel in that moment, and whether I feel empowered because I am at eye level with most of the men or whether I am more conscious of having to look down at women or shorter men and then how I change my approach accordingly.

Taking an internalised perspective of managing appearance, Louise said:

I want to make sure that when I am in a room full of men in suits, that I don't look out of place, but I also make the effort with my appearance and my overall conduct, as it makes me feel good about myself and I know that first impressions count.

Louise then went on to say:

> I actually like wearing nice clothes, having my hair done nicely. It gives me confidence, and so long as I do not look out of place, there is no harm done. I am proud of my role, and it is about the whole package – attitude, attire and being able to perform the role.

Participants reported experiencing judgement about their age and appearance. Kim explained how she has:

> […] always been a fairly determined person, and up until my recent appointment, my age had never been mentioned by anyone, however I had a staff member enquire about my age during my first week in the role, as they thought that I was not old enough to be in this role.

Vanessa described this incident:

> When I first started in the role, I was so excited. I looked the goods, I knew the goods and I was ready to go; however, my line manager at the time took me to a ward to meet some of the staff and there was an individual towards the back who I heard say, "Who's the blonde?" This really hurt. I thought to myself, stuff you buddy!

Personal responsibility for career. There was a strong sentiment that women needed to be deliberate in how they progress their careers. Chloe felt what "people think about you and how they speak of you matters to your career. It is really about the process and not thinking that you have made it to the top and that's it". Kim reported how she "learnt to not burn any bridges in the process of securing my next role". In a similar sentiment Ashley said, "if you are not at the table, you are likely on the menu", reflecting that "[…] women do have a more challenging time progressing their careers than men. Once we have made our mind up, we need to explore all options to help us achieve our goals".

Mentoring was important. Pippa thought there was a need to "look for people who inspire you. Ask them to share their real-life practical experience. This will help you on your career journey". For Louise mentoring meant guiding others "towards improvements that can be made to help with social engagement". There were also feelings of (un)worthiness that needed to be overcome. Chloe felt that:

> […] women are particularly self-critical about themselves and their worthiness for executive roles, whereas I have not experienced many men engaging in such self-criticism, well at least not sharing it.

Summary

[Figure 2](#) summarises the four key capabilities that emerged: *nurturing relationships, navigating complexity, enhancing reputation* and *building trust in self and others*. Along with twelve specific behaviours of the capabilities also contribute to the role of each capability.

Discussion

In addressing the research question of *what* social intelligence capabilities are of most importance to women in leadership positions, a greater understanding of the nuances and contribution of women to leadership, and by extension organisational success, is achieved.

Nurturing relationships

It is understood that higher levels of social skills and social intelligence improve relationships with others (Stichler, 2007; Beheshtifar and Norozy, 2013). There was strong sentiment that women who built and maintained positive working relationships were more successful. There was also a strong and consistent view that if actively listen occurred in an
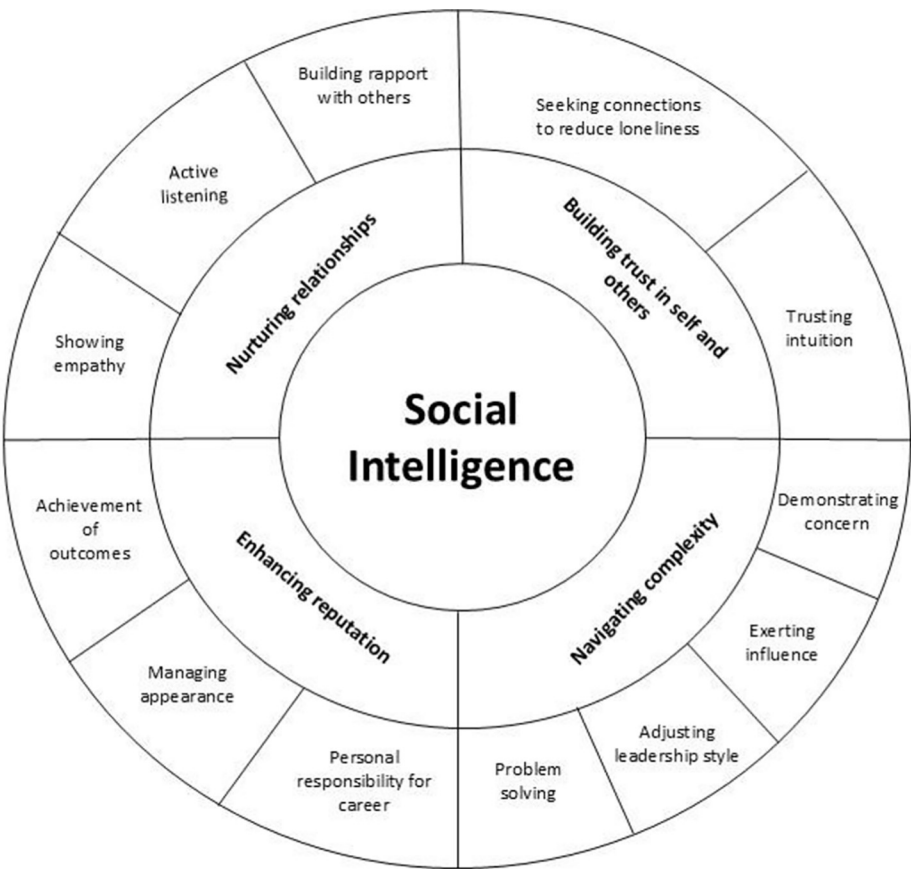
Figure 2. Social intelligence capabilities and associated specific behaviours
Source: Authors' own work

interaction, for example, if an individual is excited about a certain topic and shows genuine interest and empathy, rapport can be more easily established and maintained.

Interactions which challenged participants posed a risk to the viability of some relationships, creating the necessity to be vigilant in ensuring interactions remained professional and productive. Though literature on conflict, and emotional and social intelligence exists (Gerardi, 2015; Moeller and Kwantes, 2015; Gunkel *et al.*, 2016), the extent that this literature discusses and explores social intelligence is limited.

Navigating complexity
Leaders are faced with rapidly increasing levels of complexity because of unpredictability, uncertainty and rapid change (Uhl-Bien and Arena, 2017). This study establishes that when navigating complexity, leveraging relationships, trust and establishing a shared sense of purpose within respective teams are key capabilities. Participants were concerned they needed to have the capacity to know what is required in a social situation.

Participants discussed their frustration about the perceived lack of control when working in complex systems. This is consistent with Lovelace *et al.* (2007) who found that organisational leaders are often asked to spearhead changes which can take frustrating emotional and cognitive tolls on leaders when demands to implement certain government and organisational priorities and policies involve redundancies or holds on recruitment activities. Despite executive leaders being in command of critical resources and decision-making authority (McMullen and Adobor, 2011), this study shows there is also tension when trying to manage organisational demands, while also attending to the day-to-day priorities, which require a level of agility and flexibility.

Influence and trust were used as counterpoints to meaningfully impact the ease in which participants were able to navigate through complexity and achieve organisational objectives. Influence guides behaviours of others and impacts organisational outcomes. The use of influence in complex organisations is particularly important as there are large numbers of multiple and varied types of stakeholders who need to work collectively (McGrath and Whitty, 2017; Franken *et al.*, 2020). For these participants, exerting influence was coupled with leadership and problem-solving skills, bringing others in to collaborate in complex situations. Such that a diversity of views and experiences could be honoured and incorporated in solution finding.

Enhancing reputation
There is little dispute about the importance of an employee's reputation in an organisation (McKeever *et al.*, 2015; Khumalo *et al.*, 2022). When referring to corporate organisational reputation, Fombrun and Van Riel (2003, p. 4) state that reputation matters because it is appealing to others: "A good reputation is an excellent calling card as it opens doors, attracts followers, brings in customers and investors – it commands our respect". Due to women's minority status in senior leadership positions, they are often seen as women first and leaders second, resulting in reputational issues (Glass and Cook, 2016).

In this study, reputation meant participants felt they were seen as credible, professional and recognised for the achievement of outcomes. Reputation was seen to not only impact their day-to-day activities and tasks but also their leadership journey. Put simply, participants thought that a woman who wants to be an executive is responsible for getting herself there and keeping herself there. That it is necessary for women to take particular care of their reputation, perhaps because one of the main reasons women do not secure leadership roles is due to the "perception that they are incapable" (Anderson *et al.*, 2015, p. 44). A desire to have a reputation of proficiency drove participants to set greater standards of achievement for themselves.

Building trust in self and others
In a climate of trust, leaders do what they say they are going to do and behave in a manner that is predictable (Islam *et al.*, 2021). As trust pertains to social intelligence, those who are proficient in understanding other people's personalities and their own, subsequently use that understanding in social interactions. These individuals are able to maintain a high level of trust, whereas the opposite is true for those with a low level of social intelligence (Yamagishi, 2001; Cherry, 2021).

This significant finding forefronts the distinct relationship between social intelligence, trust and associated humility and an indicator of performance (Chandler *et al.*, 2022). Having a high degree of social intelligence not only gains the trust of others, but impacts the trust and belief in one's own ability to achieve outcomes (Yamagishi, 2001). Notwithstanding, participants also said their roles came with feelings of loneliness which they had to endure because of social and

hierarchical distance within the organisation and the pressures of the role. Loneliness exists to the extent that a person's network of social relationships is smaller or less satisfying than wanted and that they are without the type of relationships desired (Tanskanen and Anttila, 2016). Loneliness is not only a disposition, rather, it is an absence of relationships that a person experiences in his or her social environment (Ozcelik and Barsade, 2018).

Loneliness occurs for many senior executives due to the demands of their role, the social distance that occurs from other members of the organisation and the fatigue associated with the pressures of the position (Zumaeta, 2018). This acknowledged co-existence between loneliness and leadership was navigated with the help of a strong family and friend network that afforded the confidentiality to debrief. This finding supports Ezzedeen and Ritchey (2009) who also found that executive women access professional supports – managers, peers and mentors; personal support – friends, family, role models; and spousal support, and that such support networks play a significant role in assisting their careers (Grünberg and Matei, 2019). Executive women seek these support networks to reduce their loneliness and subsequently to perform their leadership role effectively.

Dark side of social intelligence – managing appearance

The dark side to social intelligence is also revealed. Managing appearance can be studied from the lens of "aesthetic labour" suggesting workplaces induce images based on such things as race, gender and class that influence recruitment practices and drives appearance and performance expectations in the workplace (Devine *et al.*, 2021; Kele *et al.*, 2022; Faiz, 2023). One of the crucial factors of women's executive presence is the way they dress and that whilst skill, knowledge and experience are also important and relevant, women are judged on presentation (Killelea, 2016).

This study documented participants strong compulsion to look and act a certain way, because they will be judged by others. Although there was no indication that appearance enhanced their performance, there was very strong sentiment that appearance mattered. At times this meant participants had to compromise or adjust their appearance. And that the social dynamics of the workplace meant they must consider and make decisions about their presentation, attire and mannerisms if they were to be considered legitimate leaders.

Participants were compelled to have to actively consider and change the way they dressed to maintain their reputation as legitimate leaders. The most concerning is that these modifications appear to be enacted to appease or to appear "normal and acceptable". Even, when in the case of Chloe, that modification was to try to minimise or downplay her natural, human trait of tallness.

In some instances, this change in behaviour necessitated these women to either exploit a feminine feature such as red lipstick to "command" legitimacy and respect or to act more "manly" to blend in with their male counterparts so as not to call undue attention to their gender. Participants described how they were conscious of how they "turned up" each day to perform the functions of their role. As a demonstration of managing appearance, participants felt pressure to ensure that they were not only achieving organisational objectives but also presenting themselves in a certain way that was observed and judged by others. The aesthetic labour demonstrated by the specific behaviour of managing appearance as a part of the capability to enhance reputation for women senior leaders should be of significant alarm and concern.

Limitations and future research

The size and nature of the sample are obvious limitations of this research. The sample are in public health care, which might have a specific culture, in Australia and in a largely female workforce. This study does not recognise which of the interviewed executive women were

actually performing well and does not determine their measure of performance levels in their roles. Therefore, the identified capabilities and behaviours may not be directly associated with effective senior leadership, as we only have a sample of 12 women who expressed their personal feelings and reflection on their performance as senior leaders. In addition, the professional backgrounds of the sample are not considered. The snowball sampling strategy in this study initiated from a single purposefully selected participant, and then the other participants are potential work colleagues in a group who may likely have shared views. This is another limitation of this study.

While framing the social intelligence framework (Figure 2), some of the groupings of specific behaviours can map to multiple capabilities, e.g. "demonstrating concern" can easily align with "nurturing relationships" as well as "navigating complexity". "Seeking connections to reduce loneliness" is mapped with "building trust in self and others" but it can also align with "nurturing relationships". While we acknowledge that a specific behaviour may align with multiple capabilities, we have allocated each behaviour to a particular capability based on our analysis of how closely the collected data (first-order codes) map with a capability (second-order themes). This is subject to researcher bias and is a noted limitation of this study.

Future research could consider the previous professional backgrounds of senior leaders (male or female) and the impact of those experiences in developing specific behaviours that may shape their leadership capabilities. More research on this topic in other contexts and with a larger sample, e.g. quantitative studies, should be conducted. For instance, it would be interesting to explore the capabilities and specific behaviours for male leaders in the same context of the Australian state-level public health system, as such studies might offer insights into the same or different capabilities for male leaders who are leading in a female dominated workplace.

Conclusion

Considering women bring a particular strength in social intelligence capabilities to the executive table, this research presents a comprehensive overview of what social intelligence competencies are important to women practicing leadership, along with 12 specific behaviours. It is important to note that this study is not an investigation of how women can become senior leaders. Rather, it highlights the important capabilities and behaviours that executive women (who are already senior leaders) enact in their senior leadership role.

Women are making progress in forging successful leadership careers. Notwithstanding this increased presence in the leadership environment, they continue to remain under-represented in the upper echelons of organisations. At an individual level, this study supports women aspiring to propel themselves into executive level positions through hearing and sharing the experiences and stories of other women who have gone before them.

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