

# WOMEN AS LEADERS OF ORGANISING RUNNING EVENTS TEAMS

KOBIETY W ROLI LIDERÓW ZESPOŁÓW ORGANIZUJĄCYCH IMPREZY BIEGOWE

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## ABSTRACT

Running is one of the most popular methods of spending time in active form in the world. The vast majority of managers who organise runs are former or actual runners. It is interesting to note that more men are leaders of teams which organise running events, while women as leaders are very rare. The main purpose of the research was to find the influence of sex of leader on the style of leadership, decision process and atmosphere in team. The author of this article conducted quality research using individual deep interview method. Data were collected from 23 individual deep interviews with managers of big running events organised in Poland, and 14 with the members of their teams. Currently, effective leaders should have competences different than what were prevalent 20–30 years ago. More important is, for example, emotional intelligence, empathy and interpersonal skills. Organisations operating in the amateur sport market have to build networking with many partners from the public and business sector, so leaders should concentrate on cooperating with stakeholders representing different expectations. Competences that women possess over men are required. Unlike other industries, in the running market there are very few women as leaders. Several reasons abound for this, some of which include economic and sociological grounds.

**Key words:** Leadership, sport events, running, woman leader

## ABSTRAKT

Bieganie na całym świecie jest jedną z najbardziej popularnych form spędzania czasu wolnego. Na rynku imprez biegowych menedżerowie zajmujący się organizacją imprez biegowych to aktualni lub byli biegacze. Zastanawiające jest to, że większość tych menedżerów to mężczyźni, a rzadko kiedy to kobiety. Organizatorzy amatorskich imprez sportowych muszą budować relacje z wieloma partnerami zarówno z sektora publicznego jak i z biznesu dlatego jako liderzy powinni koncentrować się na współpracy z interesariuszami zgłaszającymi różnicowane oczekiwania. Aktualnie liderzy zespołów organizacyjnych powinni legitymować się innymi kompetencjami niż 20–30 lat wcześniej. Szczególnie pożądane są takie cechy jak: wysoka inteligencja emocjonalna, empatia oraz umiejętności budowania relacji międzyludzkich. To cechy, które zwykle w większym stopniu legitymują się kobiety, niż mężczyźni. Głównym celem artykułu jest identyfikacja czynników przesądających o tym, że wśród liderów zespołów organizujących imprezy biegowe jest tak mało kobiet. Ponadto starano się ustalić wpływ płci lidera na styl jego przywództwa, procesy decyzyjne oraz atmosferę w zespole. Autor artykułu przeprowadził badania jakościowe wykorzystując metodę indywidualnych wywiadów pogłębionych, które odbył z 23 menedżerami dużych imprez biegowych organizowanych w Polsce, a także 14 wywiadów z członkami różnych zespołów organizacyjnych. Wśród głównych czynników determinujących mały udział kobiet w liderowaniu zespołom organizacyjnym znalazły się przede wszystkim: inne priorytety życiowe, np. macierzyństwo, konieczność pracy w dni wolne od pracy, praca sięgająca czasami kilkanaście godzin na dobę, wysoki wysiłek emocjonalny, stres związany z rozwiązywaniem nagłych spraw spornych, niższa skłonność do rywalizacji, a także niestabilność emocjonalna.

**Słowa kluczowe:** Przywództwo, kobiety-liderki, wydarzenia sportowe, bieganie

JEL: M5, M12

## Introduction

Running is one of the most popular leisure activities worldwide. Suffice it to say that it is estimated that around 50 million people run regularly in Europe. Statistics collected from various countries show that 25%–30% participants in running events are women. Poland has a population of 37.8 million, of which above 4 million are amateur runners, and every year over 3,000 running events are organised. According to statistical data from many countries, including Poland, 25%–30% of participants in mass running events are women (maratonympolskie.pl, 2020; Profil polskiego biegacza, 2018).

At the same time, a large majority of directors of these events are persons who used to practice the sport or are still active runners. As they are found to be primarily men, it seems rather puzzling why no women perform these functions. This article aims to answer the question of why

mass running events are not managed by women and also how their presence could affect the market for running events. To find the answers to these questions, 37 individual in-depth interviews with managers and members of teams organising running events in Poland were conducted. The qualitative research was supported with the analyses of selected running events in Poland and nine other European countries.

## **Problems of Leadership in an Organisation**

For many organisations the 21st century is a time of deep changes in the environment, which makes it necessary for them to modify their activities so as to adjust to these changes. One of the indicators of the new approach to organisations is the greater emphasis placed on leadership. The question of leadership is not a new area of interest for researchers of organisational behaviour, as it was analysed as early as in the first half of the 20th century (Day et al, 2021). However, over the past two decades it has been subject to abundant research, due to the key role of the leader in the strategic management of an organisation. It needs to be pointed out that management is not the same as leadership, which means that managers and leaders perform different functions in an organisation. Managers focus on management, which primarily comprises analysing the situation and taking decisions related to allocation of the possessed resources in a way that allows for achieving the set objectives. As for leaders, their main concern is creating the vision for the development of the organisation, as well as bringing people together around this vision and motivating them to fulfil it (Maxwell, 2019).

Numerous scientific studies on leadership have been published, describing a variety of theories of leadership styles and typical behaviour of an organisation's leader. The most remarkable theories are transactional leadership theory, transformational leadership theory, serving leadership theory and charismatic leadership theory.

Changes in the macro environment, which is evolving towards the 4.0 economy, the network of relations, as well as the integration of people and resources are the reasons why modern organisations see their chance for development in cooperation rather than competition. Entities which

develop their competences on the basis of extensive relations with the environment gain competitive advantage over those that try to use their resources independently. In a situation where cooperation has become a major determinant of development, the role of a leader is also changing. Their role is no longer limited to the vision and the interior of the organisation, but they must also be able to seize the opportunities arising in the environment and encourage their employees to do the same.

## **A Woman As a Leader**

The role of women in the management of organisations and their role as leaders have been under discussion for a long time by both scientists and practitioners (Kulkarni and Mishra, 2021; Lantara, 2015; Burke & Cillins, 2001; Chandler, 2011). There have been articles presenting research results proving the existence of a correlation between gender and the predisposition for leadership (Vecchio, 2002; Mohr & Wolfram, 2008). Despite the lack of conclusiveness in the assessment of women's predisposition for leadership, as well as the long existing stereotypes of the serving role of women in the society, researchers have managed to identify several qualities more often displayed by female leaders than their male counterparts.

For instance, female leaders are more sensitive than males, which positively impacts on building interpersonal relationships in a team, taking risks and assessment of situations (Lisowska, 2009, p. 77). According to Fisher (2003), women are characterised by contextual thinking, which means that they perceive problems in the much broader perspective than men do. This can be referred to as network thinking. As a result, in decision making they take into account a bigger number of variants and are capable of proposing more optional solutions (Kessler, 2014).

According to some others, female leaders far more frequently share their knowledge with their employees than male leaders do (Brol & Kosior, 2004). This is a particularly valuable quality, especially in light of the recent research findings, according to which one of the key features of a 21st century leader is a constant concern for their employees' development.

Young (2012) made an interesting observation that women make better leaders than men do, as they are more decisive and can more easily win

people's trust. Women are more cooperative, whereas men tend to be more competitive, which speaks in favour of women in the times of network-based economy. Women are more empathetic, sensitive and more easily understand other people's point of view. Their strong intuition allows them to take decisions based on incomplete information. On the other hand, their risk aversion might be a barrier to the assertiveness normally expected of a leader (Women and leadership, 2013).

In view of all these arguments, it is hardly surprising that women's share in leadership roles has been systematically growing in today's world (Chan, 2011). Their qualities predispose them to rise to the challenges that face leaders of organising and project teams, which function in correlation with other entities and require building interpersonal relations and winning partners' trust. However, the proportion of women among leaders differs in relation to a country or a sector. For example, the country with the most number of women in managerial positions in both the public and business sectors is the Philippines (57.1%), followed by Panama (43.6%), the US (42.3%), New Zealand (39.6%), Germany (38.2%), Canada (37%), France (37.9%) and Poland (36.3%). Among the researched countries, the lowest proportion of female leaders is found in Ethiopia (15.7%), Egypt (10.8%) and Japan (9.2%) (Kupczyk, 2009b). According to Toh and Leonardelli (2013), the share of women in the leading positions largely depends on the type of dominating culture of a nation. The analysis of the representation of women in managerial positions in various parts of the world allows for the conclusion that the best situations can be observed in Northern America, Western Europe and in the Pacific region. The biggest diversity appears in Asia (Philippines 57% vs. Japan 9%).

The number of women in managerial positions also depends on the sector in question. The highest number of female managers work in the tourism industry (Kupczyk, 2009a), as well as in such sectors as the hotel and food industries, finance, insurance and retail trade.

As for the sports sector, it is dominated by men. In as many as 96.5% of the studied cases, organising of project teams was led by men. There are very few women in the role of presidents of sports clubs, or head coaches. The Women's National Basketball Association (WNBA) in the United States is an exception, in which women account for 33% of the owners of this organisation and represent 36% of the team coaches there. Nearly a third of the WNBA clubs

are led by women. What is more, 57% of the managerial positions are also held by women (Young, 2012). Nevertheless, there are disciplines of sports with a very low percentage of female managers. One of such disciplines is running events. Although running is a sport for everyone and it is practiced by both genders, running events are organised predominantly by men. The next part of the article will aim to answer the question of why women are not leaders of teams organising mass running events.

## Research Method

The first step in the process of seeking the answer to this question was the analysis of the composition of teams organising the biggest running events. The study was conducted in 2018/2019 in Poland, a country where 4,000 running events are organised annually and nearly 25% of the 36 million Poles declare to practice running on a regular basis. Women account for 25% of the runners. The following events were taken into account: 6 biggest marathons, which aspire to being international events, 12 biggest half-marathons (their size was measured by the number of participants) as well as 50 shorter distance races. It turned out that only in the case of a few regional races over a distance shorter than the half-marathon, women led the organising teams.

The next step in addressing the research problem posed at the beginning of the article was the qualitative research, as only in this way is it possible to identify the reasons for the phenomenon of the lack of female leadership in teams organising running events. At the turn of 2018/2019, a series of 37 individual in-depth interviews were conducted. The research group consisted of the following respondents:

- a. Directors of running events (men)–20;
- b. Directors of running events (women)–3;
- c. Members of teams organising running events (women)–14.

The main objective of the research was to collect opinions about the causes for the fact that mass running events are organised primarily by men, although there are many women among runners.

The script of the structured interview prepared for the purpose of the research included the following questions:

- a. Do you know of any cases of a woman being a director of a running event?
- b. Why are women not (or hardly ever) directors of running events?
- c. Are women predisposed to being leaders of teams organising running events?

The collected responses of the interviewees were subject to a semantic analysis, with particular focus on the first responses, the most frequent responses, the dominating topics and the semantic context.

The research was supplemented with the analyses of running events in nine European countries (Germany, Austria, Italy, the UK, France, the Czech Republic, Hungary, Holland and Switzerland), conducted by the author of the article. They also revealed a lack of women as directors of running events, which coincides with the situation in Poland.

## Results

The obtained results were divided into two groups: one with responses to the question of why women are not leaders of running events and the other with answers to the question of whether women are predisposed to being such leaders. Additionally, the responses were marked as given by a man or a woman.

The most frequently given reason for the lack of women among directors of running events was the necessity of hard, irregular work for >8 h a day. The closer the date of an event, the harder the work gets, to the point when it must also be done during weekends. These were the opinions of both male and female leaders or members of organisation teams. Another explanation offered by both male and female respondents was the fact that women tend to concentrate primarily on family life rather than on their careers. Other respondents expressed the opinion that the reason for the scarcity of women among leaders of running events was their relatively low activity as runners, which was true until recently. Over a decade ago running was a typically male physical activity, so naturally these were men

who took on the roles of leaders of running events, the first editions of which took place 10 years, 15 years, or 20 years ago. The next place, in terms of the frequency of appearance, is occupied by the opinion that the reason is women's reluctance to conducting difficult negotiations with numerous entities, such as the police, medical services, fire services, clerks, as well as suppliers of equipment and devices needed for the organisation of an event. However, this opinion was expressed exclusively by the male respondents. Regardless of the respondent's gender, though, the usefulness of women as deputy leaders was pointed out. A number of participants referred to specific situations where a man was the leader and a woman was the deputy. Other, less frequently mentioned reasons are as follows: women lack perseverance and work with a varying intensity, which is unacceptable in the case of a leader (men's opinion); women are not competitive by nature (women's opinion); they often lack the necessary charisma (women's view); and they lack the ambition to be a leader (women's view).

All the respondents hold a very strong opinion that women could successfully perform the function of directors of running events. Among the reasons for such a belief, the most frequently mentioned was women's excellent ability to build interpersonal relations, whereas men, naturally being more competitive and task-oriented, often lack this quality. This fact was pointed out by both male and female respondents. Another frequently mentioned female quality was their high creativity in organisational activities. Moreover, there were opinions that women are better organisers than men (female respondents). Some of the female respondents also stated that women are quicker in decision-taking, which qualifies them for being good leaders. Another noteworthy belief was that in the future the number of female directors of running events will be growing and it is definitely a good prospect, as in this way the market of running events may become more attractive in terms of the organisational measures and benefits for runners.

## Limitations

The research conducted allowed for establishing a number of causes for the scarcity of women performing functions of leaders of running events. These are obviously not all the reasons and it is difficult to define which of them are of key significance and which are less important, as the frequency



of responses does not indicate it clearly. The representative group of 37 respondents might not suffice for a fully satisfying result of the research. A deeper insight into the problem requires further studies, by means of various methods, and they should not be limited to the area of running events, as women rarely perform managerial roles in the broadly understood sports, regardless of the discipline. Therefore, the phenomenon of the scarcity of female leaders in the area of sports has a broader context, which is definitely worth doing deeper research.

## Conclusions

The conducted research has shown that there are numerous premises explaining the lack of women in the position of directors of running events. First, it has to be said that organisation of a running event requires enormous determination and hard work, with varying intensity. This is the most important reason for the small number of female leaders. With the event date approaching, the tension in the organising team is growing and the leaders work up to 20 h a day. The running events normally take place on weekends, which are usually regarded as free from work. Commitment to professional matters means less time and energy devoted to the family. This fact and many others are the reasons why teams organising running events are led predominantly by men. Although women have many qualities predisposing them to being leaders, the diagnosed limitations seem to be difficult to overcome in a short time. Nevertheless, the confirmed examples of running events led by women give us hope that in the future their representation will be growing, as there are many personality traits desirable for leaders that can be more easily found in women than in men.

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