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Not So Lonely at the Top? The Multiple Commitments of Emerging Leaders

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The Multiple Commitments of Emerging Leaders

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Abstract

Leaders are simultaneously committed to attaining their leadership goals and to developing and maintaining relationships with friends and family (i.e., interpersonal goals). In this study, we examine the commitments of emerging leaders in the public and private sectors. We hypothesize that (a) both men and women will be more strongly committed to leadership than interpersonal goals, (b) women will be more strongly committed to interpersonal goals than men, and (c) the stronger participants' commitment to one goal, the weaker their commitment to the other will be. A survey of business school and public administration school students challenged conventional wisdom. A majority of participants expressed greater commitment to interpersonal than leadership goals and, overall, men's commitment to interpersonal goals was similar to women's. Finally, there was no evidence of a perceived tradeoff between goals: most groups in our sample exhibited a strong positive correlation between commitments to interpersonal and leadership goals. We discuss implications for multiple commitments research, the experience of leadership, and possible differences between today's emerging leaders and their predecessors.

Key Words: Interpersonal Goals, Leadership, Multiple Commitments

Not So Lonely at the Top?
The Multiple Commitments of Emerging Leaders

Leadership is the other side of the coin of loneliness...
Ferdinand Edralin Marcos, Sept. 14, 1966

As this quote exemplifies, leadership is often viewed as a lonely endeavor. Leaders are frequently perceived as standing “alone” at the top of the hierarchy. Drive and sustained commitment have been linked to the attainment of leadership positions (McClelland & Boyatzis, 1982). Some of the best known public and private sector leaders have described the years of intense work, perseverance, and sacrifice that led to their success. However, according to one perspective, traveling the path to career success and leadership positions often comes at the expense of developing rewarding relationships with friends and family (e.g., Hewlett, 2002).

Leaders are simultaneously committed to developing and maintaining leadership roles in their professional endeavors (leadership goals) and to developing and maintaining relationships with their friends and family (interpersonal goals). To date, however, there has been little direct empirical study of how commitment to leadership goals and commitment to interpersonal goals intersect for leaders, and whether certain characteristics, such as the leader’s gender or the sector in which he or she operates, affect the nature of the interaction. In this study, we explore the extent to which emerging leaders—individuals who have demonstrated past leadership and whose likely ascendance into formal leadership roles has been recognized by others—either adopt an integrative approach to professional success (i.e., are committed to pursuing multiple goals) or subscribe to common notions of leadership coming at the expense of other pursuits. This research augments current work on multiple role commitments. It adds a unique perspective by considering the attitudes and perspectives of those poised to become leaders in private

industry or public service, rather than assessing the commitment patterns, goals, and behaviors of those who have already attained their positions of leadership.

Multiple Commitments and Careers

Because of the lack of direct research on commitment to leadership and career goals, we review the broader literature on multiple commitments as they relate to careers. We then consider the particular case of leadership and interpersonal goals.

Lay people and researchers often cast commitments to multiple foci as a zero-sum game; commitment to one will undermine commitment to another. Much of the research on multiple role commitments conducted in the domain of work-life balance, for example, investigated the tradeoffs that working adults must make when simultaneously pursuing work-related ambitions and relationship goals (Greenhaus & Beutell, 1985). Following a scarcity hypothesis, researchers in this domain have focused on the distribution of limited time, cognitive, and physical resources across work and family commitments (Frone, Russell, & Cooper, 1992; Gutek, Searle, & Klepa, 1991; Small & Riley, 1990). Increased conflict translates to more stress for the employee (Judge & Colquitt, 2004; Kahn, Wolfe, Quinn, Snoek, & Rosenthal, 1964). The intensity of this conflict has been attributed to the strength of employees' commitment to multiple goals. Thus, the more salient one's work role (Noor, 2004) and the more family responsibilities one has at home (Wiersma & Van den Berg, 1991), the greater the experienced conflict.

Much of the discussion of multiple commitments and careers, particularly with regard to work and family commitments, has focused on sex differences. Women have historically shouldered a larger portion of family responsibilities even when they also have demanding work roles. Thus, work-life conflict is an especially acute experience for women (Blau, Ferber, & Winkler, 1998; Powell & Mainiero, 1992).

Several recent studies demonstrate the complexity of managing work and family commitments for men and women. Data collected by Tenbrunsel and colleagues, for example, indicated that, while male employees seemed to be trading off involvement in their family for involvement in work, and vice versa, women's involvement with family was constant (Tenbrunsel, Brett, Maoz, Stroh, & Reilly, 1995). Rothbard and Edwards (2003) conducted a study of university employees showing that time investment in the family came at the expense of time invested at work for women, but not for men. However, both men's and women's involvement in work came at the expense of time with the family. Finally, Martins and colleagues showed that the effects of work-family conflict on career satisfaction of men and women are different for different age groups. While conflict between the two commitments was negatively correlated with career satisfaction for women in all age groups, it only correlated negatively for men in the oldest age group (Martins, Eddleston, & Veiga, 2002).

These studies did not explicitly focus on *commitment* to the domains of work and family, but rather on involvement, investment, and conflict. To the extent that investments of time and energy reflect commitment to these roles, however, there are implications for the current research. These findings suggest that simultaneous commitments to work and family engender conflict, but that men seem to experience more flexibility than women in focusing on one role over another.

The Benefits of Multiple Commitments

In contrast to the traditional focus on competing commitments, there is an emerging school of thought that multiple goal commitments do not necessarily conflict with one another. One can be committed to his or her career while simultaneously pursuing "life" or non-work goals. Ruderman and colleagues (Ruderman, Ohlott, Panzer, & King, 2002) recently conducted a

study of women managers' commitments to a variety of roles. Results of a survey indicated that the more strongly these women indicated having multiple life-role commitments, the more positive were their reports of personal well-being (e.g., life satisfaction, self-esteem) and professional skills. While measures of work commitment were collected, work scores were not considered to be part of the multiple commitments of women in the study, which focused on personal commitments. Instead, the authors controlled for work commitment to determine the relationship between multiple life-role commitments on psychological well-being.

Other research has examined the ramifications of having multiple work-related commitments, but has not considered the simultaneous pursuit of relationship or life-role commitments. Baugh and Roberts (1994, reported in Meyer & Allen, 1997) found that the concurrent commitment to both an organization and a career was a desirable mix. Their study revealed a marginally significant interaction between organizational commitment and professional commitment on overall job performance. The highest performers were those workers who had a strong commitment to both their organization and their engineering profession. The lowest performers were those workers with a weak commitment to their organization but a strong commitment to their profession.

Similarly, researchers of unions have examined workers' simultaneous commitment to their unions and their organizations (e.g., Walker & Lawler, 1979). Few of these studies support the common zero-sum characterization of multiple commitments. In fact, most have reported positive correlations (Gordon & Ladd, 1990; Wallace, 1993).

Together, these studies suggest that the commonly held belief that multiple commitments are incompatible in the domain of work is not always true. There are instances when focusing on multiple goals can have beneficial impact on one's work experiences.

Leaders' Commitments

Despite the growing body of literature on multiple commitments, we know little about leadership goals—the commitment to being a leader in one's professional endeavors—as a distinct and meaningful commitment on the part of emerging business leaders and public servants, and whether such commitments are viewed by leaders as incompatible with their other life commitments. The classical view of adult development, as illustrated in Levinson's (1977) seminal work, corroborates the view that leadership and “life” commitments are frequently conflicting. Levinson found that these commitments were difficult for his cohort of successful men to attain in equal measure. His research sample noted the challenges they face forging interpersonal connections at the same time that they are achieving career success.

Nevertheless, one stream of recent work, while not explicitly investigating concurrent commitments between leadership and interpersonal goals, has illustrated the importance of one aspect of relationships—attachment styles—to leaders' satisfaction and effectiveness. The general findings show that leaders who have a secure attachment style—who, on the whole, trust and form close relationships with others—display more effective leadership styles than those who form less secure attachments (see for example Johnston, 2000; Manning, 2001; Popper, Mayselless, & Castelnovo, 2000; Sumer & Knight, 2001; Toepfer, 1996; Vasquez, Durik, & Hyde, 2002).

The Present Study

The current study adopts a unique perspective on multiple commitments. Rather than focusing on the commitment patterns of current leaders, which undoubtedly reflect years of making tradeoffs, balancing behaviors, and resolving conflicts between competing priorities, we are interested in the strength of emerging leaders' commitments as they embark on their

professional careers. This perspective allows us to make predictions about the nature of emerging leaders' commitments despite the conflicting findings of the multiple commitments literature, some of which demonstrate the incompatibility of work and non-work goals while others reveal the complementary nature of these goals.

We hypothesize that, despite emerging research evidence that employees can simultaneously commit to multiple goals without detriment to their careers or psychological well-being, popular associations between leadership and sacrifice will cause emerging leaders to express an inverse relationship between their leadership and interpersonal goals. That is, the stronger their commitment to leadership, the weaker their commitment to interpersonal goals, and vice versa.

Hypothesis 1: The more committed participants are to one goal (leadership or interpersonal), the less committed they will be to the other.

This hypothesis is supported by some recent work by Catalyst. In two studies, managerial women in financial services firms (2001) and law firms (2001a) were asked to identify barriers that prevented women in their firms from attaining senior leadership positions at the same rate as men. Majorities of respondents in both studies indicated that commitment to personal and family responsibilities inhibited women from ascending to senior leadership ranks. These findings demonstrate that there is a prevalent perception (whether or not it is accurate) that life commitments and leadership commitments operate in opposition. We therefore anticipated a similar reckoning, by emerging leaders, of the "cost" of leadership.

We make two comparisons in this study. The first is between men and women. As reviewed above, there is a wealth of literature examining men's and women's distinct experiences balancing work and family responsibilities. Although we acknowledge that "work"

commitments are different from “leadership” commitments, we suspect that the general belief about the incompatibility between family and non-family domains will generalize. In other words, we expect that the strength of the negative correlation between women’s commitment to relationship and leadership goals will be stronger than men’s. Moreover, we expect to find that while both men and women will report a stronger commitment to leadership than interpersonal goals, women will be more committed to interpersonal goals than men will be.

Hypothesis 2: Women participants will exhibit a stronger negative correlation between their goal commitments than will men participants.

Hypothesis 3: Participants will report a stronger commitment to leadership than interpersonal goals.

Hypothesis 4: Women participants will report a stronger commitment to interpersonal goals than will men participants.

We also compare emerging leaders in the private and public sectors. There is no formal research comparing the nature of leadership responsibilities in these two realms, but conventional wisdom suggests that being committed to both goals will be more difficult for those pursuing leadership in the private sector. As business has become increasingly global, the hours of work have expanded from the traditional “9 to 5.” In contrast, the hours of work in the government and nonprofit worlds are commonly characterized as time-bounded. Public sector employees are commonly stereotyped as more bureaucratic and less hard-working than their counterparts in the private sector. Public sector work may not exact the same level of sacrifice of interpersonal goal commitments that private sector work does. Or perhaps that is only the common perception. But whether it is fact or perception, one would expect to find a stronger

negative relationship between commitment to leadership and interpersonal goals for emerging leaders in the private sector than for those in the public sector.

Hypothesis 4: Public administration students will exhibit a weaker negative relationship between their interpersonal and leadership goal commitments than will business school students.

We tested our assertions about the multiple commitments of emerging leaders by surveying a representative sample of students pursuing either a Master of Business Administration (MBA) or a Master of Public Administration (MPA).

Method

Participants

This study was conducted with students from a top-ranked business school and a top-ranked public administration school at a major United States university. Emerging private sector leaders (business school MBA candidates, $n=138$) and public sector leaders (public administration school MPA candidates, $n=73$) were surveyed. For several reasons, students from these programs provided an excellent sample with which to test our hypotheses. They were enrolled in a highly competitive, nationally ranked institution. Historical data show that 97% of the alumni of this MBA program enter the private sector and 80% of the graduating MPA students enter the public sector. The students were selected to attend these programs in large part because of their demonstrated leadership experiences and their potential to attain positions of leadership and influence.

Of the 138 MBA students who completed our survey, 70% were male and 30% female,¹ 55% were U.S. citizens, and their average age was 27 years old. Of the 73 MPA student participants, one 49% were male and 51% female, 83% were U.S. citizens, and the average age was 28 years old.

Students were solicited for participation in a high-traffic common area of each school. A table was set up and staffed by a researcher, who asked students to fill out a short survey. As an incentive, all participants were entered into a raffle for a gift certificate for a local restaurant.

Measures

Independent Variables: As discussed above, there were two independent variables in this study: participant gender and sector of interest (public or private sector). Information about gender was obtained through an open-ended question on the survey asking participants to indicate their gender. As described in detail above, emerging private sector leaders were recruited from the business school and emerging public sector leaders from the school of public administration at the same university.

Dependent Measures: Surveys, administered as part of a larger study on leadership, included two questions important to this research. Participants were asked to use a seven-point scale, anchored with 1=extremely uncommitted and 7=extremely committed, to rate “How committed are you to achieving each of the following?”: “interpersonal goals (i.e., your relations with friends and family),” and “personal leadership goals.” In addition, several demographic questions were asked, such as gender, age, and country of citizenship.

Results

Means, standard deviations, and cell sizes are presented in Table 1.

¹ The disproportionately high representation of men in this study is typical of many business school student populations.

Relative Commitment to Interpersonal and Leadership Goals

In our first analysis, we examined the relative commitment to interpersonal and leadership goals by conducting a series of paired-sample t-tests. Contrary to our hypotheses, participants tended to report stronger commitment to interpersonal goals than to leadership goals. In the private sector, both men and women expressed stronger commitment to achieving their interpersonal goals: for male MBAs, $t(95) = 3.55, p < .01$, and for female MBAs, $t(41) = 3.77, p < .01$. However, among the public sector participants, only the women indicated stronger commitment to interpersonal goals, $t(36) = 3.71, p < .01$; for the men, there was no significant difference between commitment to interpersonal goals and to leadership goals, $t(35) = 1.45$.

INSERT TABLE 1 ABOUT HERE

Commitment to Interpersonal Goals

A 2 x 2 univariate ANOVA was conducted to determine whether commitment to interpersonal goals varied by gender and/or sector. Because of the differences between the two samples in country of citizenship (there was a smaller proportion of U.S. citizens in the MBA sample), this variable was entered as a covariate.

Results revealed a significant main effect for gender, $F(1,204) = 6.34, p < .05, \eta^2 = .03$, and an interaction between gender and sector, $F(1,204) = 4.34, p < .05, \eta^2 = .02$. To clarify these effects, LSD post-hoc tests were conducted on the estimated marginal means. Results revealed partial support for our hypothesis that women would be more strongly committed to interpersonal goals than men. While there was little difference between men's and women's commitment to interpersonal goals in the private sector, women preparing to enter the public sector expressed significantly greater commitment to interpersonal goals than did their male

colleagues. In fact, public sector men were significantly less likely than participants from any other group to express commitment to achieving interpersonal goals. Figure 1 illustrates this interaction using the estimated marginal means.

INSERT FIGURE 1 ABOUT HERE

Commitment to Leadership Goals

Again, a 2 x 2 ANOVA was conducted. Results revealed a significant main effect for sector, $F(1,205) = 5.81, p < .05, \eta^2 = .03$, such that emerging leaders in the public sector expressed less commitment to their personal leadership goals than emerging leaders in private sector. Figure 2 illustrates this main effect using the estimated marginal means.

INSERT FIGURE 2 ABOUT HERE

Relationships Between Commitment to Interpersonal and Leadership Goals

We computed a series of partial correlations to provide more insight into how multiple commitments are related to each other. We were especially interested in uncovering disparate relationships between men and women, and/or between public and private sector emerging leaders.

We computed correlations between leadership and interpersonal commitment separately for men and women in each sector, controlling for citizenship. Our overall results revealed a picture quite different from that which we expected. As can be seen in Table 2, there was an overall tendency for participants' goal commitments to be positively related to each other, not inversely related as we hypothesized. Interestingly, the only group for whom the correlation between their interpersonal and leadership goals was not significant was public sector women.

Their correlation was significantly lower than those demonstrated by all of the other groups in the study. Even so, this relationship was not significantly negative, indicating no evidence for a perceived tradeoff even amongst public sector women between interpersonal and leadership goal commitments.

INSERT TABLE 2 ABOUT HERE

Discussion

While the role of “leader” has traditionally been seen as requiring significant interpersonal and relationship sacrifices, this study suggests that our cohort of emerging leaders does not hold these traditional views. Overall, students in both the MBA and the MPA programs expressed strong commitment to both leadership and interpersonal goals; on a seven-point measurement scale, the averages for all groups on goal commitment only ranged between a low of 5.56 and a high of 6.53. The surprising finding lies not with their commitment to the leadership goal—these were individuals selected in part for their demonstrated commitment to leadership—but in their commitment to interpersonal goals. These are individuals who declare themselves unwilling to make interpersonal sacrifices on their path to career success. With the exception of public sector men, all participant groups demonstrated a significantly stronger commitment to interpersonal goals than to leadership goals. Thus, relationships with friends and family are held to be at least as important as attaining leadership goals, if not more so.

The lack of perceived sacrifice is further demonstrated through the positive correlations uncovered between commitments to interpersonal and leadership goals among the men and women MBA participants, as well as men MPA participants. In stark contrast to the notion of a “tradeoff,” the more strongly committed they were to one goal, the more strongly committed

they were to the other. These positive correlations suggest not only that emerging leaders do not perceive a tradeoff, but also that there may be a perceived synergy between the two goals that allows for mutual reinforcement of goal attainment. The one group for whom this relationship was not significantly and positively correlated – MPA women – also did not exhibit responses consistent with the tradeoff perspective.

There are several possible explanations for these surprising findings. The first is simply that emerging leaders view the characterization of leadership as requiring sacrifices in time spent with friends and family as myth, not reality. Extending this explanation to account for the strong positive correlations between interpersonal and leadership commitments, it is possible that emerging leaders expect beneficial spillover from each of their two commitments. Thus, devoting time and resources to pursuing leadership endeavors may be viewed as enriching interpersonal relationships, and vice versa. This contrasts with the traditional spillover research, which focuses on the negative spillover of work demands into time spent with family, and the negative effects of family obligations on work experiences (Greenhaus & Beutell, 1985), but is consistent with findings reported by Ruderman et al. (2002) showing that managerial women who are strongly committed to multiple life commitments demonstrate higher levels of psychological well-being than those who are not.

Second, it is possible that students who are strongly committed to becoming leaders in their sector are mindful of the sacrifices that are in store for them, have identified their interpersonal goals, and have developed a plan and the commitment to seeing the goals realized. In this way, the common notion of leadership as a lonely path may inspire individuals motivated from the outset of their careers to becoming leaders to create room for other important life goals and remain committed to achieving them.

Third, we may surmise that our data do not entirely discount the possibility of a tradeoff between leadership and interpersonal *activities*. That is, those individuals who are strongly committed to becoming leaders in their sector may have interpersonal goals that are less ambitious than those who are less motivated to become leaders. Perhaps they anticipate spending less time with family and friends. However, because of the tradeoff in time spent in the interpersonal domain, the actual *commitment* to achieving this goal is higher. These emerging leaders may be less willing to make *further* sacrifices of their interpersonal goals because they have already sacrificed them to some extent in advance. Unfortunately we were unable to collect data on these individuals' goals, so this hypothesis remains to be tested by future research.

There may also be a generational explanation for these findings. We focused on a relatively young group (mean age = 28) of men and women who are in the midst of training for leadership careers. Their views may differ from the views of those who are typically studied, namely men and women who are currently engaged in their work and simultaneously managing interpersonal commitments. Bennis and Thomas (2002) report that a commitment to balancing work and personal life is one of the most notable characteristics of younger leaders, compared to their counterparts of previous generations. This explanation of our data can best be tested through longitudinal studies, a rarity in leadership research but a design with many potential benefits for understanding leadership in general and emerging leaders and their commitments in particular.

It is important to note that our results were not uniform across all the groups we surveyed. Gender differences emerged amongst the public service emerging leaders; consistent with our original beliefs, women in that sector demonstrated more commitment to interpersonal goals than men. However, it is equally important to note the strong commitment that each group

demonstrated; both were close to the extreme point of the response scale. In addition, emerging women leaders in the public sector demonstrated no significant correlation between their goal commitments than any other group. We cannot explain why their increased commitment to leadership goals was not accompanied by an increase in commitment to interpersonal goals, as was found with the other groups. However, the fact that the relationship was not significantly negative revealed that, even for this group, the tradeoff hypothesis did not hold.

There was one difference between the sectors that emerged from our data. Emerging leaders in the public sector demonstrated less commitment to leadership goals than did those in the private sector. Again, the means were similar and positive, but the significant difference suggests that the demands of leadership in the two sectors may be different. Alternatively, the definition of leadership in public and private sectors may be differently construed, with public sector leadership perhaps more difficult to attain or envision. Future research is needed in order to shed more light on what lies behind these sector differences.

Limitations and Directions for Future Research

This study was a first step in examining goal commitments of emerging leaders. As a first study, it has several limitations that need to be acknowledged. First, we measured and studied the level of commitment to goals, but not the distinct ways in which each participant defines his or her interpersonal and leadership goals. The benefit of this approach is that we are able to directly compare across participants. A limitation of this approach is that it prevents us from understanding whether individuals with strong commitment to their leadership goals had qualitatively different goals than those with weaker commitment to their leadership goals. Future research on goal commitments should systematically measure goal content as well as commitment in order to shed more light on possible interdependencies between the two.

Adopting a qualitative research methodology in future work may provide just such insight and in-depth understanding of these issues and would complement the research and analyses reported here.

One of the strengths of our study—access to individuals who were all pursuing leadership—also presents a limitation in our understanding of multiple goal commitments. These are clearly individuals who have thought about leadership, are learning about it in coursework, and are exposed to high-profile leaders in the classroom, at seminars, and through experience. This exposure may have prompted them to be very thoughtful about interpersonal goals and how to remain committed to them in the face of challenging careers. Future research should examine a cohort of individuals whose exposure to leadership role models and course curricula is not so extreme. Perhaps the hypothesized tradeoffs would be more evident among such a cohort.

Finally, our survey methodology gave us descriptive ability, but not causal insight. We do not know whether commitment to leadership goals leads to increased commitment to interpersonal goals, or vice versa. Similarly, we cannot rule out the possibility that there is simply a “committed” personality type: whatever the goal, they will always report strong commitment to it. While this research topic does not easily lend itself to laboratory study, it would greatly benefit from longitudinal or cross-sectional research. Future research that observes changing commitment patterns over critical periods of leadership training and experience may reveal whether multiple commitments can be sustained, or whether our cohort of emerging leaders will eventually suffer from the “lonely at the top” syndrome.

Notes

(1) Underscoring the lack of data, Meyer and Allen (1997) speculate that an individual who faces this kind of conflict among commitments may choose to: (1) change the intensity of his or her emotional attachment to one of the foci; (2) reduce the level of emotional commitment to both foci, and/or (3) remain strongly emotionally committed to both, by departing from the situation that causes or aggravates the sense of conflict (Meyer & Allen, 1997). Recent empirical data on how individuals manage social identities that conflict with social contexts (Pittinsky, Shih, & Ambady, 1999) suggest that, in certain contexts, individuals facing commitment conflicts may change the valence and intensity of emotion they feel towards one or another focus.

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Author Note

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Table 1: Means, Standard Deviations, and Cell Sizes of Dependent Measures by Sector and Gender

	Interpersonal Goals	Leadership Goals
Private Sector		
Men	6.34 (1.04) _a n=96	6.05 (1.02) _b n=97
Women	6.39 (1.00) _a n=41	5.95 (.97) _b n=41
Public Sector		
Men	5.86 (.99) _a n=36	5.56 (1.16) _a n=36
Women	6.53 (.76) _a n=37	5.76 (1.01) _b n=37

Note: Different subscripts within a row indicate a significant difference in means, $p < .01$.

Figure 1: Commitment to Interpersonal Goals by Sector and Gender

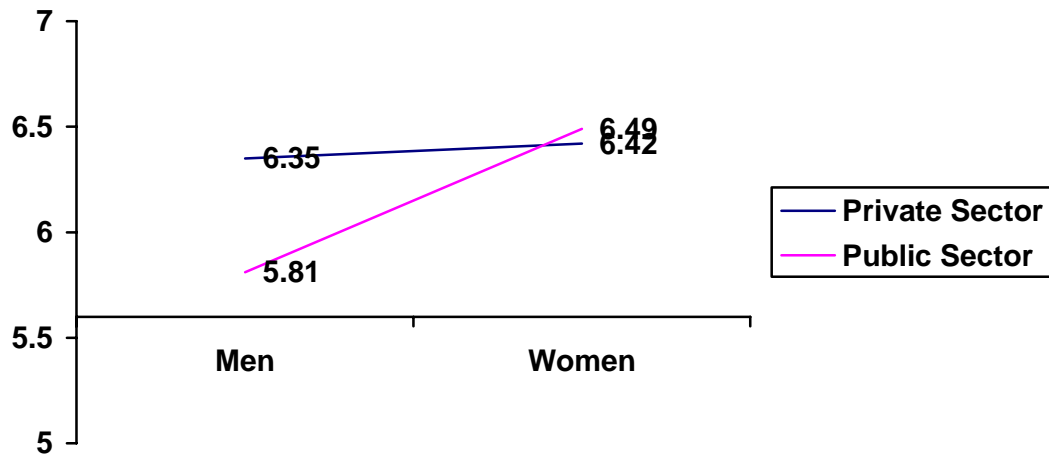


Figure 2: Commitment to Leadership Goals by Sector

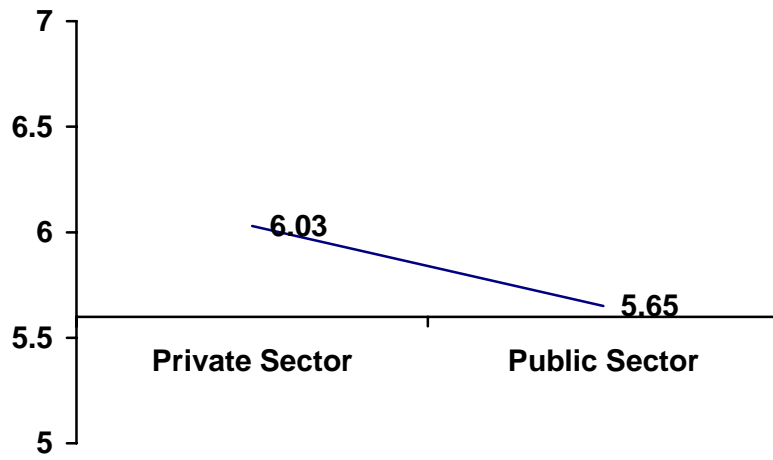


Table 2: Gender and Sector Differences in Commitment Correlations, Controlling for Citizenship

		Interpersonal Goals
Leadership Goals	Private Sector	
	Men	.66**
	Women	.70**
	Public Sector	
	Men	.44**
	Women	-.03

** $p < .01$