



Understanding the difficulties of leadership in the context of social entrepreneurship

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ABSTRACT

Female leadership is a new perspective on leadership, as they seek to bring their intrinsic characteristics to the organizational environment. This research aims to verify the difficulties of female leadership, based on the theoretical assumptions that women face in the context of social entrepreneurship. The research is descriptive with a qualitative approach and field research strategy. The data was collected through interviews with representatives of two Brazilian companies based in the state of Ceará. The results reveal that the discrimination faced by women when they are in strategic positions is a recurring fact in the job market, even more so as they are part of a patriarchal society, particularly in Brazil. It is concluded that women still find themselves in an unfavorable environment, which is unaware of their potential, as well as the ability to overcome already exhausted business and organizational models.

Keywords: Leadership, Female leadership, Social entrepreneurship

INTRODUCTION

Female leadership in the 21st century differs from the leadership of past centuries not only in the behavioral aspect but also in the sense of intellectual recognition and the search for acceptance of their competence to assume senior positions in organizations. As a result, the challenges faced by women within organizations have been increasing since their remarkable beginnings in the insertion of female labor into the job market in the context of the Industrial Revolution.

In the past, demands were for better working conditions, as conditions were unhealthy, which led to frequent protests. With this, the woman made leadership her vehicle, aiming to effectively demonstrate her ability to assume high positions. Female leadership is a topic that has aroused interest among researchers, as it is necessary to understand why the percentage of women in top leadership positions is low (Coelho, 2015).

Thus, the constant search for women to fill spaces within companies has not yet been successfully achieved, since, according to research carried out by Grant Thornton (2019), one of the largest global audit, tax, consultancy, transaction, and financial services companies, women occupy only 25% of leadership positions within Brazilian companies. The higher the position/position, the lower the presence. When it comes to high-level functions, only 15% of companies are headed by an executive, that is, 85% of high-level positions are still headed by executives. However, despite these inequalities, there are advances, as, according to the same research, the percentage of businesses with at least one female participation in leadership positions reached a total of 93% in 2019 and in the previous year only 63%. This survey was carried out with 4,500 enterprises around the world. Thus, although there is an exponential increase in female

participation in new businesses, there is still some reservation regarding the participation of women in the corporate environment, still attributing the role of women as mere support and not as protagonists.

Women's search for solutions to social challenges and crises has led them to find solutions through entrepreneurship, which is one of the most discussed topics in academic and business circles in recent years. For Dornelas (2014), entrepreneurship can be defined as the act of making dreams come true, transforming ideas into opportunities, and acting to achieve objectives, generating value for society. Entrepreneurship as a career option has generated a vast field of study, being one of the lines of research that stands out in the social sciences. Social entrepreneurship combines a passion for a social mission with the image of discipline, innovation, and determination based on the exercise of citizenship (Backes & Erdmann, 2009).

In Brazil, the proportion of early-stage entrepreneurs who created their businesses through opportunity in 2018 (55.6%) was lower than that identified in the group of men (67.7%), thus demonstrating that the number of initial entrepreneurs through opportunity in the male group exceeds that found in females in most years (GEM, 2018).

Given this scenario, this work proposes to understand the difficulties faced by female leadership, more specifically, leadership within the scope of social entrepreneurship, thus addressing their style, characteristics, and direction of command. From this context, this work is guided by the following research question: What are the difficulties of female leadership that women face in the context of social entrepreneurship? The general objective is to identify the difficulties of female leadership in the context of social entrepreneurship. The specific objectives include: i) understanding how the idea of starting a business within the scope of social entrepreneurship emerged for female entrepreneurs; ii) understand the critical success factors in female leadership from the perspective of the respondents; and iii) verify the difficulties in the entrepreneurial process from the entrepreneurs' perspective.

From an academic point of view, the theme studied provides support for the advancement of the field of studies on female leadership and its characteristics regarding the path of influence in the academic environment. For society, it is expected to provide more specific knowledge about female leadership in the social sphere, that is, to raise awareness about the role of women in the context of entrepreneurship, demystifying mistaken thoughts about female leadership capacity.

This study is divided into five parts: introduction, where the rationale and objectives are presented. The theoretical framework, in which the literature will be deepened. The methodology, which will expose the way in which the work was developed. The analysis and discussion of the results, at which point it will be assessed whether the assumptions made during the work are consistent with the reality of the topic studied and finally the conclusion.

THEORETICAL BACKGROUND

Leadership

According to Maximiano (2017), a leader is an individual who leads a group or organization and influences, guides, or directs the behavior of those they lead. Therefore, leadership influences followers to achieve objectives through actions required by the business strategy (Robbins et al., 2010). Leadership is fundamental in all human organizations (e.g., companies), departments, and other management functions - planning, organizing, directing, and controlling (Chiavenato, 2007).

Leadership today is considerably different from the past. Sapiro and Chiavenato (2009) distinguish between traditional and strategic leadership (Table 1). To summarise, strategic leadership is open to change, and flexible, where the leader seeks to maintain a closer relationship with people and gain their trust.

Table 1. Traditional and strategic leadership

Traditional leadership characteristics	Strategic leadership quality
Conformity	Critical and innovative spirit
Authoritarianism	Assimilator, learner, choreographer
Heroic - center of attention	Shares power and attention
Delegator and hierarchical	Driver and leverage
Specialization in traditional areas	Expertise in several areas
Extensive knowledge of the industry	Experience in many industries
Long-term tenure	Portfolio of various skills
High control and command	Empowerment and sponsor
Domestic and internalized orientation	Global and systemic perspectives
Creates consensus when necessary	Creates coalitions and fosters collaboration
Intimate knowledge of the organization	Intimate knowledge of the client
Attention on competitors	Knowledge of competitors
Isolated, separate, indifferent	Accessible, close, supportive

Source: Sapiro and Chiavenato (2009)

There are three leadership types: autocratic, liberal (*laissez-faire*), and democratic.

Autocratic leadership

In this leadership type, the leader plays a rigid and imposing role, deciding and setting guidelines without the group's participation and determining techniques and behaviors for carrying out tasks (Chiavenato, 2005, 2007). These leaders rarely accept suggestions and make decisions on everything, controlling everything.

Liberal leadership (*laissez-faire*)

In liberal leadership, the leader is flexible (*laissez-faire*), giving the team members freedom to make team or individual decisions with minimal involvement from the leader. The leader, therefore, encourages guidelines to be debated and decided on as a group. However, this attitude can have some negative aspects without a guiding leader, as tasks and goals develop occasionally, generating instability, production below expectations, individualism, and disrespect for the leader and other members (Chiavenato, 2005, 2007).

Democratic leadership

In this leadership style, the leader acts as a guide, counselor, and participator, making interpersonal relationships cordial and harmonious without detracting from the work objectives. The leader seeks to be a joint member of the team (Chiavenato, 2005, 2007).

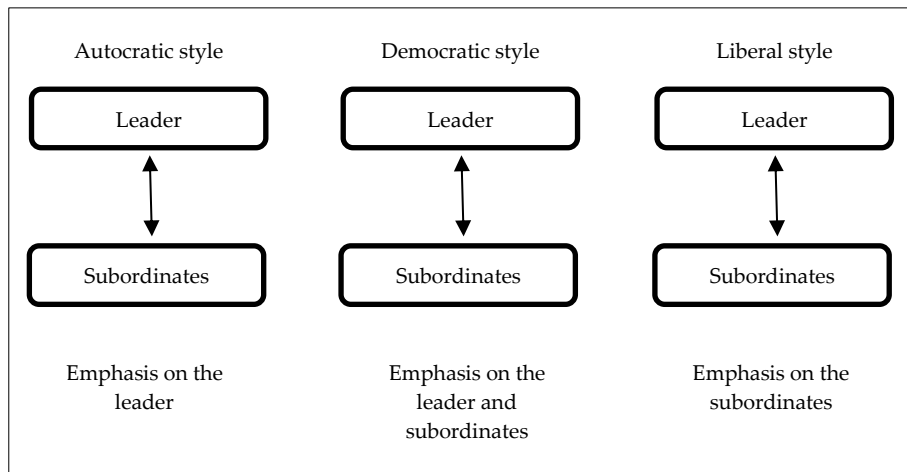


Figure 1. The different emphases of the three leadership styles

Source: Chiavenato (2007)

The female gender, according to Buchsbaum and Buchsbaum (2012), tends to adhere to the democratic model, encouraging team cooperation, sharing information, stimulating the self-worth of those they lead, seeking to lead through inclusion, and using their charisma and interpersonal skills to influence others (Eagly & Johannesen-Schmidt, 2001) found that the female gender exceeds the male gender on various transformational leadership scales, as female leaders can motivate their followers more, cultivate a sense of respect and pride, demonstrate optimism for future goals, and seek to meet the individual needs of each follower. Male leaders, on the other hand, outperform women when it comes to transactional and laissez-faire leadership.

Female leadership

According to Article 23 of the Charter of Fundamental Rights of the European Union, "Equality between women and men must be ensured in all areas, including employment, work and pay." (Charter of Fundamental Rights of the European Union, 2016).

In today's society, despite significant improvements over the years, cases of inequality and discrimination have proliferated (Torres et al., 2018). There are still many cases of discrimination, prejudice, and difficulties in reconciling family and work, and there are many barriers to women reaching leadership positions. As a result, women need to constantly prove that they can take on leadership roles (Amorim, 2009; Hryniewicz & Vianna, 2018).

The female gender possesses several skills, and one of them is the ease with which the female leadership style and the act of entrepreneurship intersect, being recognized for their technical and management skills (Schlickmann & Pizzarro, 2013; Vignochi et al., 2019). The female leader has some features that distinguish her from the male leader, namely collaboration, relationships, and talent cultivation. Male leaders, on the other hand, are more focused on individualism, competitiveness, and aggression, and there is a lack of female characteristics: relational skills, emotional intelligence, sensitivity when looking after talents, listening skills, collaboration, and partnership in the search for a more humanized organization (Mandelli, 2015). Motivated by these feminine characteristics, the female gender more easily understands the needs of their teams, can easily solve several things at once, and seeks better results daily together with those they lead (Martins, 2014).

Although the number of women in senior management positions is increasing, there are still limitations to female progression at an organizational level, as the male gender still finds it difficult to be led by the female gender, conveying some discomfort and questioning the role and capacity of female leadership (Haile et al., 2016; Oliveira, 2017).

Entrepreneurship

For Bucha (2011), entrepreneurship is the creating process of something with new value. Barreto (1998) states that entrepreneurship is about creating something out of nothing. Baggio and Baggio (2014) add that entrepreneurship is the satisfaction of carrying out a personal and / or organisational project with synergy and innovation.

An entrepreneur is an individual who is financially aware of the business, creates a business takes on responsibilities

and risks, and innovates in their field (Chiavenato, 2005). An entrepreneur must have the following characteristics - be visionary, know how to make decisions, be an individual who makes a difference, can make the most of opportunities, be a leader and team builder, well connected (networking), take risks, create value for society, are dedicated, optimistic and passionate about what they do (Dornellas, 2014).

For Cuervo et al. (2007), entrepreneurship makes it possible to identify and exploit new business opportunities, create, or revitalize companies, develop and grow economies through innovation, and create jobs.

Social entrepreneurship

Within entrepreneurship, there is what is known as social entrepreneurship. This type of entrepreneurship consists of designing new businesses aimed at solving socio-environmental problems, e.g., poverty, disease, illiteracy, environmental extermination, and lack of respect for human rights (Bornstein & Davis, 2010; Cardoso, 2016). Thus, being a social entrepreneur seeks to solve society's problems through a profitable enterprise (Cardoso, 2016). Dees (2001) adds that this type of entrepreneur has a social mission.

A successful social entrepreneur has certain qualities that characterise him or her, such as a willingness to make amends, the ability to share the credit, the ability to break free from current norms and overcome disciplinary barriers, working discreetly, and having a strong concept of ethics (Bornstein, 2007).

Female entrepreneurship

The existing situation of gender inequality also includes the entrepreneurial world, with a gender gap in entrepreneurship (Switten, 2013). However, despite gender inequalities, women are slowly conquering their space effectively (Amorim & Batista, 2012).

According to Sinha (2013), female entrepreneurship consists of the activity of a woman or group of women starting, organizing, and managing businesses. Therefore, female entrepreneurship is the involvement of women in decision-making and business management (Hapsari & Soeditioningrum, 2018). According to Takahashi et al. (2006), the best female entrepreneurs are between 35 and 50 years old, married, mothers, with a high level of education who invest little in social capital and choose to create small businesses.

The female gender has some distinctive characteristics that are beneficial for entrepreneurship, e.g., confident, innovative, and creative; capable of economic independence; able to combine professional, family, and social life (flexibility); proactive personality; affective; aptitude for negotiation; humble and responsible; good-humored; a great listener to understand the needs of others and organized (Hisrich et al., 2016; Ramadani et al., 2015; Singh & Agrawal, 2010). However, female entrepreneurship faces several obstacles, including a lack of capital to invest, access to credit facilities, lack of resources provided by society, and distrust of suppliers, customers, and financial institutions about their solvency capacity (Marlow & Patton, 2005; Pais, 2015; Srhoj et al., 2022).

METHODOLOGICAL APPROACH

The nature of this research is qualitative, as it seeks to understand how and why things happen in a certain way (Cooper & Schindler, 2016). In general terms, the qualitative nature allows the carrying out of improved studies with the most varied themes, in addition, it offers greater freedom in choosing relevant themes for the researcher, as other methods tend to limit (Yin, 2016).

To answer the question: "What are the female leadership difficulties that women face in the context of social entrepreneurship?" and meet the proposed objectives of identifying difficulties of female leadership in the context of social entrepreneurship, semi-structured interviews were carried out with three representatives of the two companies to understand their respective perceptions regarding changes in market scenarios with regard to female leadership in social entrepreneurship, as well as possible management difficulties.

Thus, the interviews were carried out in October 2020, respectively with the three directors of the companies, here called X and Y. To develop the reading of the interview responses, a purposeful analysis of the interview content was carried out, since according to what Bardin (2016), describes a type of content analysis with an inferential objective, that is, it works with the meaning of statements. The interviews, lasting approximately 1 hour/1 hour and 30 minutes, were audio recorded, with prior authorization, and transcribed in full.

RESULTS ANALYSIS AND DISCUSSION

For this research, participants with entrepreneurial backgrounds in companies X and Y were chosen for convenience and were readily available for interview. Company X is in the family farming sector, with a focus on sustainability. It is based in Fortaleza and aims for a new market model, where it seeks to integrate more people into the production process, generating shared value for each link in the chain to win people's trust. The interviewee (X1) from company X is female, has an academic degree in Political Science and Pedagogy, and has extensive experience in social work, as she has always worked in NGOs since she felt the need to do things that had a positive impact on people.

Company Y works with healthy food and has a positive impact on the entire chain. It is also based in Fortaleza and aims to be the harvest of a story planted in the backyards of countless farmers who, together with their families, nurture the belief in a healthier life while respecting nature. The two interviewees (Y1 and Y2) are the founding leaders of the company, female, and graduated in law.

Content analysis of the interviews

Career path

Interviewee X1 (EX1) mentions that *"I started working very early, at the age of 13, in NGOs and social projects"* because *"I always believed that the most obvious way to lift people out of poverty was to work in the third sector"*. After years of working for third parties, in 2016, entrepreneur EX1 began to understand what an impact business, a social business, really is, which is why she resigned and founded the start-up together with her sister, because of her belief in positively transforming the way people relate to the world. According to interviewee EX1, *"company X was born to give new meaning to sustainable food, with the aim of bringing healthy food to people's tables at a fair price"*. According to the literature, a social business occurs when social objectives are evident and when profits are reinvested in the community and/or business, as discussed in the literature (Bull & Ridley-Duff, 2019).

The interviewees from company Y (EY1 and EY2) worked in the market as lawyers but realized that they needed to start a new cycle in their lives. This gave rise to the desire to undertake social causes, something that made sense, that would somehow bring positive changes to people's lives and that nature would be rewarded for everything it offers them, and also because they are great admirers of gastronomy, as interviewee EY2 says: *"we love to eat, we always have, our friendship comes from that, so we united our passion with the desire to undertake."* As Cardoso (2015) confirms, the act of social entrepreneurship is nothing more than the creation of new businesses that seek out market structures to solve social and environmental problems.

Female leadership in society

Interviewee EX1 understands that although women face challenges imposed by society, there are challenges in any female/male leadership that are inherent to the act of leading, as she reports:

"In any leadership there are challenges, whether you're in a traditional business or a social impact business, there has always been sexism, there are questions such as whether being a mother will be able to take care of the house, child, husband and entrepreneur, who would stay with the child when they need to work, for example? However, when a man wants to become an entrepreneur, no one questions him about his home and children. On the contrary, they think it's cool and even say it will be a success. It's never seen that for a man to become an entrepreneur, his wife also takes part, supporting him, looking after the children and taking control of domestic life" (EX1 speech fragment).

Interviewee EX1 mentions that from time to time she is sneakily asked questions like *"how do you manage to keep a balance between home, husband, children and technical qualifications? As if women were just a summary of household chores"*. Authors Hryniewicz and Vianna (2018) point out that discrimination, prejudice and the difficulty of balancing family and work are present in women's daily lives, so it is essential that this issue is increasingly debated so that women's technical and behavioral skills are put to the test less and less daily. On this subject, interviewees EY1 and EY2 point out that they are always put to the test because they are women and even more so because they are young women, according to EY1:

"There is a big impact due to the fact that they are women, even more so because they are young. Of course, there are those people who praise them and are surprised that they are two young women, with no training in the area, but who have sought to professionalize themselves and learn more about the area, seeking more and more knowledge, to run the business, however, there are intrinsic prejudices that shine through with certain humiliating sexist comments, even from other women, such as 'Are you going to leave the beauty salon and get down to work?' 'Are you going to get up early and actually give up your life as a dandy?' In response, we say that we have always worked since we were very young, and even worked in our field of study, in this case law, for a while, but we wanted to become entrepreneurs and so we did. We're always asked who owns the establishment? They never think that it could just be the two of us in charge" (Fragment of EY1's speech).

It is a great challenge for these women to manage their businesses in an activity perceived as 'masculine', and it becomes even more difficult when they start up at an early age, i.e. they are too young and lack expertise in the sector in which they operate (Alperstedt et al., 2014). Stereotypes lead women to constantly prove that they are behaviorally and technically capable of deserving a leadership position, which generates pressure, anxiety and stress (Santos et al., 2018).

Creation of the company and choice of name

For the third category extracted from the interviews, interviewee EX1 mentions that *"the idea for the creation came from my need to have a vehicle that really had an impact and changed people's lives, I needed something that made me feel like I was helping people to change their world"*. As for the choice of name, EX1 says that it was an idea that came to her:

"It came about as an insight, since I thought that before changing the world of others, we first change our own world, and bringing this to the farmer, he needs to change his world in order to then change those of others, always thinking that the proposal is always from the inside out, it's always a reflection from the inside out" (EX1 speech fragment).

Thus, there has always been a concern to ensure that the name induces consumers to the meaning and weight of the work in the fruit and vegetable segment. Interviewee EY2 said: *"the fact that we are not satisfied with the act of advocating [...] our concern with food [...] the concern with healthy eating for our children"*. Regarding the choice of name, they point out that specialist professionals were hired, as EY1 mentions:

"The name was chosen by hiring a marketing agency, we wanted a very clean and objective name, we were in doubt about part of the name, because it was a foreign word, however, to break paradigms we opted for this name and I'm glad it's been working out". (Fragment of EY1's speech).

The proposal is to provide a safe, relaxed, and welcoming environment. Above all, the aim is for consumers to be able to take pesticide-free food to their tables, secure in the knowledge that there is always a path to good, completely healthy food.

Relationship with farmers/leaders

Regarding the relationship with farmers, interviewee EX1 talks about how close she tries to be to the farmers, since they are responsible for bringing food to her customers' tables, as she says:

"It's a relationship of mutual respect and one that always seeks to understand their simplicity and that they need to be trained to perfect their way of planting. Many people think that farmers won't be able to understand, but they are increasingly surprised by their abilities and willingness to learn. An example of this was when they started training with an online part, while many people questioned whether they would be able to do it, and I always said that they would be able to do it, and to our happiness they did" (Fragment of EX1's speech).

The interviewees, EY1 and EY2, try to respect, get to know and accompany the farmers, but when it comes to work issues, they try to deal directly with the person directly responsible, as they say: *"Our contact is made with the commercial side of the family farming groups [...] the contact is more directed towards the area that deals with organizing and supplying, we deal with the cooperatives responsible [...]"*.

Characteristics that help a woman exercise leadership

Interviewee EX1, emphasizes that: "they usually point to resilience, however, for me, one of the characteristics that helps the most is focus". Interviewee EY2 said that:

"A lot of patience, resilience to adapt to new realities, especially in this pandemic that they had to adapt to quickly with a physical store with only seven months of incorporation, they had no way of doing prior strategic planning, so flexibility has been essential for the current moment, aiming to take the business forward to grow and, of course, with good humor, which is essential to deal with challenges" (Fragment of EY2's speech).

At the end of their speeches, the interviewees (EX1, EY1 and EY2) reported that the search for respect and the right to it occurred little by little, as they went along with their characteristics, which contributes to the understanding that women need to continually prove their ability to manage their business to conquer their space as entrepreneurs (Cramer et. al, 2012).

Resistance to hiring a woman to lead organizations.

In the resistance category, interviewee EX1 mentions that: *"she believes that there is first a fear of the woman saying that she will stay at home with her child who has become ill [...], which will prevent her from going to work"*. For the interviewee, *"we live in a system of structural machismo, since they still haven't understood that when a woman is determined to do something, there is nothing that can take her away from that focus"*.

There is still a lot to be done for companies to change their prejudices towards women, especially when they think that women are limited by the fact that they are daughters, wives, and mothers. It must be realized that there is an intrinsic capacity in women when they want to plan and carry out an action, as can be seen in the words of interviewee EY1, who says:

"There is a mislabeling of women because they don't know the strength that women have within themselves, they are afraid to say: 'Women make decisions based on emotion'. It's good that women make decisions based on emotion, because that makes the choice more humane, they don't just take the technical side into account, they make the decision looking for the common good, not just their own, not just to make a profit on their own, but to ensure that the profit is shared with everyone and that it is the consequence of their work. In this way, companies need to reflect that women have a natural talent and that we are already in the 21st century and we need significant changes" (Fragment of EY1's speech).

CONCLUSION

The general aim of this research was to identify the difficulties of female leadership in the field of social entrepreneurship. Given this, the analysis of the interviews sought to meet some specific objectives. Regarding the first specific objective, it was found that the processes are similar for the three businesswomen, all of whom work in organizations and have always felt a desire to be able to undertake something that would bring people a sense of well-being and purchase products with the certainty that they could rely on inspection and safety.

Another aspect identified, which corresponds to the second specific objective, is that society still needs to develop in terms of discrimination against women in the job market, given that even with the country's development and in the middle of the 21st century, discrimination against women in certain professions is notable. Although there are various laws and internal policies in some companies in favor of women, more still needs to be done to raise awareness and acceptance in society. It was also found that the critical factor is nothing more than resistance to women stemming from a patriarchal society where the custom of success stories is based on the male figure. Regarding the third specific objective, we initially looked at the fact that the three businesswomen had to quit their jobs to start a business if they were sure it would work. Of course, the fact of being a woman and wanting to start a business is already a big challenge, given that women are still taught to be led and to be supporting players in the history of founding a startup.

Given these considerations, it can be concluded that the discrimination faced by women when they are in strategic positions is a recurring fact in the job market, even more so as they are part of a patriarchal society, particularly in Brazil, where they suffer from prejudices validated by male codes, as they search for advancement at work, always having to prove their professional competence more often and more intensely, which stems from historical, psychological and social roots. To create a competitive advantage and gain due recognition, women still have a long way to go to become

effective managers and entrepreneurs, even though they are better qualified than men, this is not reflected in their salaries or the positions they occupy.

Thus, this research is not intended to exhaust the subject in question, but rather to generate new knowledge to contribute, raise awareness, and encourage new studies on the object of research, since it is still little studied and given the attention, it deserves.

Limitations

To achieve the objectives presented, some limitations arose that deserve to be highlighted. During the research phase, it was a challenge to find studies that specifically addressed the topic of female leadership in the context of social entrepreneurship, as there is not much significant research on the subject to use as a basis. Another limitation concerns the still small number of companies, at least in the state of Ceará, with women entrepreneurs in leadership positions, thus limiting the number of interviewees.

Research suggestions

It is therefore recommended that new studies be carried out to deepen and make female leadership increasingly talked about and explored in the various existing work segments, so that society becomes aware of the importance of not preventing women from becoming managers, leaders and entrepreneurs. To this end, it is suggested that studies be carried out with a larger number of interviewees, including entrepreneurs from other Brazilian states, so that it is possible to characterize the national scenario and present possible disparities between different markets.

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