

Women in Leadership: Time to Intervene?

Dilys Robinson, Ben Hicks

Despite long-standing anti-discrimination legislation in the US, UK and across Europe, women still remain under-represented at senior level in most organisations. During these uncertain times, many organisations are restructuring, and senior leadership teams are being forced to make important decisions about the future direction of their organisation. The evidence suggests it is important to have a diverse senior management team that is truly representative of employees' and customers' interests. This would mean that not only women, but other under-represented minority groups, should be encouraged and supported to aspire to a position of leadership. The stereotype of white, middle-class, middle-aged men holding the most senior positions is pervasive, very often with justification.

Recently, several organisations that realise the importance of a diverse senior team, and are attempting to address inequality at this level, have asked IES to investigate what is going on: what are the barriers stopping women from getting to the top, are HR systems and processes inadvertently discriminatory, and what actions should organisations take? Although the majority of this client work has explored the career paths of women and the obstacles and enablers they have encountered, many of the findings can be applied across all under-represented employee groups. This short piece summarises the key themes emerging from IES's client work.

Work life balance

In a report for a management institute, we interviewed a number of women in positions of leadership across the globe about barriers they faced throughout their careers. The salient personal barrier that all 12 interviewed women discussed was that of maintaining a healthy work-life balance. The women talked in great depth about the conflict they had to overcome when balancing

their career progression alongside their family duties, and about the need to constantly monitor and manage this delicate equilibrium. While this is an obstacle that all senior managers must face, it was more challenging for career women due to the added belief that they should also be primarily responsible for managing family life and childcare. This issue was further exacerbated for women in countries where there was an ingrained cultural stereotype of the female looking after the family.

Other client work yielded similar findings. During a study for a UK energy company, two thirds of the senior women we surveyed agreed that their career had affected their private life, compared to less than a quarter of the men.

'It is a business imperative. As we go forward the talent gap will get bigger, we will need to attract and retain across all groups in society. We will need to appeal to Generation Y and to men and women as they age and start to have to care for elders.'

Cisco

In another study looking at how coaching can help to encourage women into senior positions, many of the women we interviewed spoke of the sacrifices they were forced to make either in terms of their career or their family life, due to the negative attitudes of society or their organisation. Even in Sweden, famed for its progressive childcare policies and provisions, women described the negative opinions they encountered if they returned to work too early after giving birth. In other countries, women with children had been given a 'Hobson's choice' option by their organisation, to return to work on a part-time basis or not at all; this had limited their subsequent chances of promotion.

Flexible working

The majority of women involved in IES's client work emphasised that they have benefited from flexible working arrangements. These have allowed them to manage the conflicting demands of their career alongside their family responsibilities. However, flexible working can be a double-edged sword. In a report examining flexible working for a consultancy client, many interviewees felt that senior managers were more likely to identify with, and therefore promote, employees who outwardly displayed similar working characteristics to themselves. They were more likely to regard employees who often stayed late in the office, and were more visible to them, as harder workers and so more eligible for promotion. Therefore, those working flexible hours or working from home (in the majority of cases women) were less likely to be seen around the office and so could be viewed as not so dedicated to the job.

Female characteristics

Many women in senior positions spoke to us about having had to assert themselves at work, especially in male-dominated industries, in order to progress. However, they commented that assertive behaviour is sometimes viewed unfavourably and seen as aggression when demonstrated by women, which places them in something of a 'double bind': if they are unassertive they do not gain any development, but if they are assertive then they are perceived negatively, which hampers their progression to the top. In one study, the majority of women said they understood the need to adopt more masculine characteristics on occasions, but were keen to stress that women should not lose their femininity. Women, they felt, need to work in cohesion with men at the top levels of the organisation to combine both feminine qualities with male qualities for the most beneficial decisions to be made. Recent work within the NHS has tried to maximise the benefits of such 'female qualities' to the organisation, by training Nurse Executives (both female and male) to make more impact at Board level in order to give greater prominence to quality of care and patient safety.

Development opportunities

Many of the women we interviewed acknowledged that senior managers needed to be aware of cultural

differences, particularly when working within global organisations, as they are frequently in contact with people from different countries. While many senior women were fortunate enough to have gained employment abroad and so were accustomed to other cultures, this is not always the case. Other research from IES has shown that women are less likely than men to be offered the types of development opportunities abroad that are viewed as necessary to support progression into higher levels of management and board positions. Where development opportunities have happened, they have often either been sought out or created by the women themselves.

Organisational culture and discrimination

There were some cases of direct discrimination reported against women at senior levels, particularly in male-dominated industries. However, more difficult to tackle were the covert assumptions made by male colleagues which, enhanced by organisational culture, often damaged women's career progression. Discriminatory views within organisations (such as the assumption that senior male executives would have a wife to support their lifestyle), in addition to discriminatory attitudes of

'We recognise that there is a huge talent pool out there and if we are not in a position to offer such effective policies and practices then we will not hold onto those employees. But if we can help balance career opportunities and growth with effective policies in practice our employees and our business will benefit hugely.'

Accenture

some men currently holding senior-level or board posts, meant that many highly qualified and competent women were overlooked for vacant positions. Further evidence shows that women holding board positions tend to be significantly more qualified than men of a similar position, suggesting women need to work harder to overcome discriminatory practices and cultures in order to progress.

Evidence from the studies carried out by IES also shows that if an organisation has a 'macho' culture at senior levels, the few females who do make it to this level tend to feel very uncomfortable. Women in one organisation felt that they did not fit in with the 'testosterone filled atmosphere' at senior level, then they would not remain in their position for long.

Organisational systems

Research highlights that a number of systems in place within organisations can hinder the progression of women or minority groups into more senior positions.

The first of these is the recruitment and promotion process. Research in one company demonstrated that

senior-level posts were more likely to be filled by external recruitment than internal promotion. This tends to disadvantage women or people from other minority groups, as headhunters are inclined to select candidates already in senior positions or people who fit the 'typical' profile. Not recruiting internally hinders the chances of women, but also leads to organisational disadvantage as it can lead to competent individuals feeling demotivated and undervalued and, ultimately, leaving to join other companies. In the same study, a further finding was that men had higher rates of internal promotion at senior levels than women – a 'double whammy' for women wanting to get to the top. Another point, which has already been alluded to, is that there is a tendency for senior managers to recruit 'in their own image', that is to recruit individuals who are as similar as possible to the present job incumbents. This serves to enhance an organisation's resistance to change and can make it difficult for women and other employees from minority groups to be seen as potential senior management candidates.

Alarming findings have surfaced from different studies that we have done. It appears that, when senior women are assessed, they are sometimes judged on something other than actual performance. Women in senior positions tend to receive poorer outcomes from the performance management process and as a consequence are promoted more slowly, if at all. Negative attitudes and beliefs involve stereotypes which focus on: assumptions about lack of policy- and strategy-related ability required for promotion success; assumptions about poor reliability associated with flexible working arrangements; and assumptions about women's career expectations and desire for promotion. Also worrying is that each additional contractual hour per week worked increases the odds of being in the 'above average' (for performance) group, by a factor of 1.043. This is equivalent to changing a 50 per cent probability of promotion to 49 per cent for each additional hour worked - hence full-time staff receive better average performance marks than part-time.

Research suggests that many occupations are segregated along gender lines and that organisations can create obstacles by marginalising women and other minority groups into specific roles and activities. Moving people into gender-segregated areas can have a lasting and profound effect on career progression opportunities. Senior and board level management candidates are

predominantly drawn from male dominated operational backgrounds, or from specialist areas that contain a high proportion of men (such as finance and engineering). More 'women-friendly' areas such as HR are often viewed as lacking the appropriate experience and knowledge required for the highest levels of leadership.

Some organisations have considered introducing quotas to increase the number of females and people from minority groups at senior levels. However, unless managed carefully, the working life of people selected as 'quota employees' can be quite difficult. Colleagues may be aggrieved at people apparently being promoted for reasons other than their competence, while they themselves might feel that they are token promotions to promote a positive image for the organisation and suffer from a crisis in confidence as a result.

Board level aspirations

Although the women encountered by IES during the course of these different client investigations have been universally personally driven, ambitious and motivated, a common finding is that not all senior women wish to aspire to the top level in their organisations. Those who do not have board-level aspirations usually give reasons linked to their own personal goals or their perceptions of the likely impact that the role would have upon their home life. In a study for a private sector company, while women used words such as 'energising' and 'empowering' when envisaging a position at Board level, words like 'isolation,' 'vulnerability,' and 'insecurity' were also used. Of those women wishing to aspire to Board level, a number felt that this would not be achievable without a move to another company or sector.

'We want to get the word out that this job is great for females and that you can't know how great it is until you apply.'

British Gas

'Diversity and Inclusion is crucial, it is a competitive advantage as it attracts world class talent and supports achieving excellence in performance.'

Standard Chartered

Conclusion

The organisations that commissioned IES to carry out investigations into the progression of women to senior positions did so because they believed there was a business need for diversity at senior management and Board level. However, the studies show that, even when intentions are good and apparently underpinned by best-practice HR policies, organisations often have systems, processes and cultures that inadvertently inhibit the advancement of women and people from other minority groups.

About IES

IES is widely respected for its knowledge, insight and practical support in HR, OD, L&D and people management issues. The Institute combines expertise in research with its practical application through our consultancy work. Our approach is based on:

- building, exploiting and sharing the evidence base
- independence, objectivity and rigour

- considering the whole people system, not just the individual parts
- delivering practical, sustainable business benefits
- building our clients' capabilities rather than their dependence.

Whatever your professional and HR needs, get in touch:

T: 01273 763419

E: paul.fairhurst@employment-studies.co.uk