

## Changeboard

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Bath Consultancy Group

# Closing the female talent gap 05/10/2009

Sue Pritchard and Laura Heath from Bath Consultancy Group both presented at a recent Opportunity Now event. After 30 years of discussion, organisations must move forward on closing the female talent gap. There needs to be a new approach to working with women leaders

## Back in the news again

Women's participation in leadership positions is back in the news again. On the one hand, Gordon Brown is losing women from his Cabinet amidst allegations that Westminster still behaves like a gentleman's club. On the other hand, Stuart Rose's recent interview in the Observer argues that women have never had it so good. So what does the evidence say? Well, it's a mixed and complex picture. Without a doubt, persistent and determined actions to improve women's participation have seen some success although the position of women 'at the top of the shop' is still woefully behind male colleagues. It is over 30 years since the introduction of the Sex Discrimination Act and the statistics are revealing.

Looking at the FTSE 100:

- 1 10.5% of CEOs are women
- 2 14% of Directors are women
- 3 33% of Managers are women

The Public Sector looks a little better. Women make up:

- 1 45% are CEOs of Third Sector organisations
- 2 28% CEOs in the NHS
- 3 25% top tier Civil Service
- 4 17% Local Authority CEOs

## Approaches of the last decades

These still somewhat disappointing statistics suggest we need to critically appraise approaches of the last decades, so that we can learn from their successes and shortfalls, and bring a fresh perspective on what we might do next.

During the 80s and 90s particularly, fear of the 'demographic time bomb' prompted renewed efforts to recruit and retain women (including what was then Opportunity 2000). Initiatives tended to focus on the business imperative of ensuring a stable supply of trained and competent staff and

sought to minimise the 'wastage' of women leaving employment after childbirth.

Essentially, there have been - broadly - two sorts of approaches taken by organisations to tackle the problem:

- 1 'Procedural', where organisations have looked at the policies and procedures that affect women and their participation in work and have made improvement and changes - improved maternity provision, flexitime, childcare, the right to return, part time working and so on.
- 2 'Personal', where attention has been focussed on developing the personal skills and competence of women for the workplace, typically featuring elements such as assertiveness training, personal power and influence, communication skills and presentation skills.

## **What is now needed**

As useful and important as these approaches were, and they did indeed increase options and choices for many women, the fact remains that the glass ceiling remains intact in almost all sectors. In fact, the annual Cranfield Report declares a fall in the number of women executives for the first time since the advent of the Sex Discrimination Act.

Our recent work, with women aspiring to and already occupying leadership positions in both the public and private sectors, is revealing. The challenges they identify are much the same for women today as they were 20 years ago. Women talk about the difficulties they face in combining motherhood or other caring responsibilities with a demanding career - and how tricky it can be to talk about this; they reveal some of the 'unreconstructed' views they face about women in the workplace; they highlight the organisational norms and behaviours which still feel excluding; and they cite the absence of a variety of female role models.

So why is that 30 years of initiatives designed to improve women's participation in the workforce have had only partial success?

## **Today's conundrum**

The conundrum now is that - in spite of all the work done - women themselves do not always feel more enabled to progress to leadership positions. Motherhood can be a critical point in time. In spite of all the preparation - the books, the programmes and support groups - women can still feel unprepared for the unique and often surprising feelings that come with their own experience of motherhood. And now we have what's being called the 'sandwich' generation: no sooner have our children gained some independence than our parents need more support and care - which needs more thought about how to balance broader caring responsibilities and career aspirations.

But it is not always about this - significantly, women who are not necessarily balancing parenting and work responsibilities also talk about the difficulties in breaking through into the top ranks.

## **The three-pronged approach**

We believe that organisations that are aiming to make a transformational shift in women's experience of their organisation must take a three-pronged approach:

1. Scrutinising and improving policies
2. Developing leadership capability
3. Transforming organisational culture

Some organisations have made great strides in developing family friendly policies to allow people more flexible working arrangements.

What has struck us, however, is that organisations can be very inconsistent in actually publicising and promoting the opportunities.

Whilst public sector organisations are often more systematic in this, we noticed that at the 'top of the shop' there was a certain unwillingness to reveal the extent to which people took up flexible arrangements. This means that women researching the organisation tend to only see the archetypal leadership model - long hours, taking work home, emails from home in the middle of the night, few part time or job share arrangements. So the result is that flexible working is seen to be available up to middle tiers at best and not feasible for the most senior positions. What women leaders (and indeed men) negotiate for themselves becomes private, personalised, and therefore invisible.

Having policies is one thing: enabling them to be used and to be seen to be used throughout the organisation is the next step.

## **Developing leadership capability**

Whilst generic leadership development applies across the sexes, we believe there is a case for specific leadership development for women. Although some commentators have said that we need to move on from women-only development ("We did that in the 70s and 80s!") still we find that when women meet to learn together they are often able to discuss and deal with those issues they would otherwise feel vulnerable discussing amongst men. And while there have been great strides in improving the position of women, young women who grew up in a generation who never thought that they themselves would face problems, are often surprised and shocked to discover those issues can still arise.

This is particularly true in relation to their experiences as mothers or carers - such responsibility still sits largely on women's shoulders and even when women have more equitable shared responsibilities with their partners, they still appreciate sharing the dilemmas and challenges of combining motherhood with their career.

In a previous article for Changeboard we have looked at our Authority Presence and Impact model to assess how women can make the most impact in an organisation.

## **Transforming Culture**

However, initiatives that focus on personal effectiveness and internal policies and procedures only partially tackle today's problems. What's more, they subtly problematise women themselves by focussing on the

individuals' issues, taking for granted the organisation norms and culture that sustain inequalities across the organisation and the wider system. Important research by Prof Judi Marshall (Women Managers Moving On, 1995; Living lives of change, 2000) points to increasing numbers of women who actively choose to step out of 'Big Organisation' life, so that they can avoid or step away from limiting organisation cultures, preferring instead to run their own small businesses or freelance. And interestingly, research into Generation Y indicates that this is becoming the norm for both sexes.

The most progressive organisations, therefore, recognise that it is their culture that influences the experience of women. What's more, reviewing and reflecting on this reveals important lessons about the organisation's ability to handle diversity and differentiation in all aspects of its business.

## Unhelpful cultures

Two particular examples of the 'unhelpful' cultures, which women cite are:

- 1 the 'gentleman's club' culture (often found in professional services firms, the top civil service and local authorities) where decisions appear to be taken by a mysterious elite behind closed doors according to secret rules;
- 2 the 'entrepreneurial' culture (often found in start up organisations, IT firms, creative businesses and highly competitive sales organisations), where very long hours and a 'work hard/play hard' attitude revolves round office life.

But why does this matter? Nowadays, clients and customers expect personal relationships, differentiated products designed to meet their particular needs, tailored services that recognise their specific circumstances. Successful organisations will be those who can respond to this. The way organisations handle difference and diversity within, becomes a clear indicator of how capable they are of genuinely working differently with their clients and customers. It is not enough to 'talk the talk' of personalised service and tailored products if staff simply don't experience this on the inside - and therefore struggle to convey this through their relationships with their customers, clients and each other.

## Strategy, leadership and culture

In the last 20 years, Bath Consultancy Group has become well known for our practice in focussing on the integration of Strategy, Leadership AND Culture in our organisation change and leadership development work, transferring and building capability throughout our client organisations. We have developed a number of tools and approaches which enable organisations

- 1 to enhance their **strategizing capability**
- 2 to **develop the leadership** practices needed
- 3 to understand and **shift the organisation culture** to deliver on the strategic intentions.

## **So what next...?**

Adding in the cultural perspective places women's development programmes in quite a different light. It becomes the business of the whole organisation - a lens to understand the whole organisation dynamics - and not just about those individuals who are directly affected. When organisation leaders reflect on and evaluate women's experiences, it provides important insights into how well an organisation 'does difference' in all aspects of its work - through recruitment, retention, promotion, development and - critically - the extent to which it can meet the higher ambitions of its customers and clients through authentic relationships and differentiated, truly client-centered products and services.

Taken together, these three aspects to an approach for women's (and organisation) development - personal leadership effectiveness; improving policies; and transforming culture - builds on the good work done in the last decades with a new 'whole system' framework to meet the continuing challenges of the new century.

<http://www.changeboard.com/resources/article/2724/closing-the-female-talent-gap/>