

Equality still scarce at the top



Much has been made of the so-called 'war for talent' being fought by British companies competing for the most able recruits. The fact that for decades many of those same companies have overlooked the fuller contributions that could be made by half of the working population – especially in appointments to the most senior roles – has tended to be omitted from discussion. Jenny Daisley, chief executive of the Springboard Consultancy,* analyses the current state of equality in UK boardrooms, and what women who break through the glass ceiling need to do to stay at that level.

To the dispassionate observer, it is curious indeed that even in the 21st century, after powerful legislation in support of equal opportunities, women in corporate Britain who make it to the top echelons are a rarity. More often than not, senior women are still viewed as a minority group. This has nothing to do with talent. It is rather that the prizes of power and privilege as typically enjoyed by male, middle-aged, white, able-bodied heterosexual managers are usually passed to others who just happen to fit precisely the same mould. The status quo endures, and the glass ceiling is a direct result.

The strength of the barrier is founded on gender stereotyping, which casts the majority of women in lower-skilled roles and with family commitments. The result is a self-perpetuating lack of female senior executive role models or mentors. Furthermore, many organisations function in such a way that membership of informal networks is a cultural imperative; few women are permitted to join these male preserves. So while equality legislation initially seemed to offer the way to move gender issues aside, tangible progress towards true equality in the boardroom, the shopfloor and most levels in between has been the exception, not the rule. Women in full-time employment still earn on average 20% less than their male counterparts, while among part-timers the gap is no less than 40% (see *IDS Diversity at Work* No. 6). Government efforts to narrow the gaps have been disappointing, and even among our biggest companies, women fill less than one in ten of the chairs around boardroom tables.

The findings of a recent study by Exeter University presented at last September's annual meeting of the British Association for the Advancement of Science hold little comfort, either. Women who do finally break through the glass ceiling are, the study argues, likely to receive the 'poisoned chalice.' Token appointments to women in such circumstances perch them on a 'glass cliff' from where they are far more likely to slip than succeed. The research also found that companies making such appointments may do so as a last resort or to signify change for its own sake – hardly a vote of confidence in those involved.

From the US comes rather more encouraging news¹ that companies with more women in senior management outperform the rest. Among 350 top corporations, those with the most women in their senior teams recorded a 34% higher return to shareholders. Here in Britain, there are of course notable instances of good practice and a growing number of major companies show refreshing commitment to making changes for the better. For example, both HSBC and BT have made great strides with positive action programmes for women and minority ethnic groups to foster higher career trajectories.

It is good to see that many other organisations are also trying to lower their equality barriers. The Royal College of Surgeons has decided to allow trainees to be fast-tracked into consultant roles in seven years, half the time required previously, in order to encourage more young women to stay the course. Of 5,000 consultant surgeons in this country, fewer than 7% are women: there remains some scope for re-balancing the mix.

The Equal Opportunities Commission says: 'Productivity in Britain is suffering because women's skills are not being used to the full.'² Nowhere is that more true than in the boardroom. Other campaigning organisations such as Opportunity Now continue to help

* The Springboard Consultancy, one of the UK's leading training consultancies, specialises in personal development programmes at all levels, for women (and men). www.springboardconsultancy.com

¹ *The Bottom Line: Connecting Corporate Performance and Gender Diversity* – www.catalystwomen.org

² *Britain's competitive edge – women, unlocking the potential* – www.eoc.org.uk

to bring about overdue change by acting as a catalyst and getting more to happen for women within member organisations. Ultimately, though, legislation and resulting company policy can do little more than create a framework outside which penalties lie. Just as important is the helpful environment that legislation creates in its wake. Once the climate for equality starts to become less hostile, real progress can be achieved at local and individual level, with benefits accruing in equal measure to the individual and the employer. Suddenly there can be access to a new pool of talent and a fresh set of perspectives and ideas. The warmer climate is the starting point from which personal development can begin to make a hugely significant difference, by drawing out ‘people potential’.

I and my consultancy team have been involved for more years than I care to remember with helping individuals to see their true worth and remove self-imposed limitations and perceptions. As a result, we’ve had countless testimonials – tens of thousands of them – such as the reaction to a recent development programme we ran with Julie Spence, since promoted to deputy chief constable with Cambridgeshire Police: ‘It took me down avenues I had intellectualised before but didn’t have the skills or tools to maximise the benefits to me personally.’ Thus personal development becomes an enabler in its own right for the achievement of equality at, or very close to, the top.

By demonstrating to an individual that she (or he) is perfectly capable of achieving levels of seniority that hitherto would have been unthinkable, and by providing a new skillset based on personal growth, much can be achieved. New skills might include harnessing intuition and creativity, and realistic self-assessment, possibly supplemented by the kind of visualisation techniques that are widely adopted at the top levels in sport.

Laura Tyson, head of the London Business School and author of a report³ for the DTI on making corporate Britain more inclusive, has recommended the recruitment of more non-executive directors from the ranks of women and minority groups. ‘For effective decision making, a board needs good talent,’ she says, ‘and in any organisation making complex decisions, the board should bring different perspectives.’

If the glass cliff is no more than a passing phenomenon, and if the glass ceiling does show signs of being broken more frequently, the real challenge will shift to one that has so far been little addressed: how do women high-fliers who finally make it to CEO or board member manage to stay at that level, where by definition the stresses and strains are greater?

One of the solutions is learning to manage stress better, something that we at Springboard spend no little time in advocating and coaching, and we commonly observe real change. Part of that for many women will mean resolving work-life balance issues – it can be done. Another part of the formula for lasting success is self-efficacy – the individual’s belief that by undertaking a particular behaviour, a specific desired result will follow. If your mindset allows you to think that actions you take have a direct bearing on the outcome and quality of your life, you gain control, proactively directing your own actions rather than passively taking events on board as they occur.

Personal control leads to higher levels of achievement and effectiveness, where people construct scenarios in which they visualise and experience the enjoyment of future success. It is the opposite of dwelling on how things go wrong. By applying such thinking, many women – and men – have realised potential that previously remained latent. The recently promoted head of BBC Children in Need, Sally Deighan, is one of many examples: ‘Personal development has helped me to think more clearly, reduce stress and positively manage my workload.’

Looking to the future, I believe that for equality of opportunity to become the norm, more legislation is unavoidable, not least to stop the trend towards the polarisation of what is seen as women’s work, with lower pay to match.

Root and branch change in equality practice isn’t going to come easily, and will need the concerted action of many enlightened organisations. But come it undoubtedly will, not least because lasting success – personal and corporate – will flow to those who get it right.

³ *The Tyson Report on the Recruitment and Development of Non-Executive Directors* – www.london.edu/tysonreport/