

# Steps that can help women make it to the top

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The relative paucity of women in senior executive positions – only 15 per cent of the total by current reckoning – has long been a cause of hand-wringing in European boardrooms. Recently, that concern has been accompanied by hope that an extraordinary pipeline of talented young women graduates – 50 to 60 per cent of recruits joining European businesses – will change the gender landscape of executive boards in the coming decade. But what if that pipeline has a leak?

At the Lehman Brothers Centre for Women in Business, an independent facility that is part of London Business School, we have just surveyed 61 European companies and other organisations to determine how they measure and manage gender issues. The results are disturbing. While many companies are devoting energy to priming the female talent pipeline, less effort is going towards ensuring it flows all the way to the top.

## ADVERTISEMENT

Two areas prompt immediate concern. First, there is a gap between policy rhetoric and reality. Policies such as flexible and part-time working can be crucial to women in moving up the corporate ladder. Yet while most companies have these policies, few use them. Fewer than 10 per cent of female managers adopt “flexible working”, and fewer than 20 per cent of female managers and senior executives work part-time.

The challenge here is establishing an environment in which it is seen to be legitimate to take these options. Creating a place where men and women feel able to work flexibly would do much to reduce the leaks in the pipeline of female talent, and indeed create more humane places of work for men.

The second area is the issue of leadership development for women. Most of today’s leaders acquired their business savvy through overseas postings. They honed their resilience by leading many business-critical projects, and polished their strategic acumen and widened their networks on leadership programmes at, say, Harvard, Stanford or London Business School. These experiences shaped their leadership competencies and gave them the ticket to the headhunter’s executive short list.

Here is the challenge. If the leadership pipeline were filling and not leaking, then we could assume half of people in these leadership proving grounds would be women. In fact, many companies we surveyed do not monitor

the gender proportion. Those that do say women make up only 20 per cent of the people currently in these roles. A cursory glance across the lecture theatres of senior leadership programmes in prominent business schools confirms they also have only about 20 per cent women (and some considerably fewer).

If this combination of figures reflects reality, then we can predict that the number of women at the top of corporate Europe will hardly change over the coming decade, increasing to perhaps 20 per cent by 2017. The issue is unlikely to be resolved without radical action by chief executives.

First, they can identify key leadership experience roles (overseas assignments, leading projects) in the business, and monitor uptake by women.

Next, they can ensure all senior executive posts have 50 per cent women candidates and that half of selection committee members are women.

Third, they can consider following the lead of the 27 per cent of the companies we studied that set targets for the number of women in senior executive roles, and the 22 per cent that have targets for the executive board.

What proportion of senior women would be enough to ensure the talent pipeline is pulled from the top? Having women at the top certainly makes a difference.

Our research shows the destructive “queen bee” idea to be a myth. Those organisations we studied with female chief executives – Dyslexia Action, London Stock Exchange, Sara Lee and Pearson, owner of the Financial Times – all have more women at senior levels, and a greater uptake of flexible working, job-share and networks than those led by men. These female chief executives are mentors and role models for aspiring women.

The tipping point seems to be about 30 per cent. Below that, women are a minority and liable to the stereotyping suffered by any other minority. Above that level, they create a breadth of role-model styles, can become crucial mentors and temper the overly masculine cultures that pervade many executive suites. Only those senior teams with more than 30 per cent women will, in the long term, change the gender landscape of corporate Europe.

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