

Breaking the boardroom barriers



Rhea Duttagupta, founder and MD of CorporateDNA Consulting presents the case for women needing 'to be themselves' and shedding the male cloak to advance up the corporate ladder with more grace and less compromise

Narratives and anecdotes of women not making headway into senior management, leadership roles and board positions appear repeatedly in journals, newspapers and magazines – even in 2009. And for the handful that do make it, the word 'compromise' seems to appear often. The proportion of female directors in the top UK companies has increased from 6.9 per cent in 1999 to 11.7 per cent 2008. The 2008 Female FTSE index is a reminder that we have come a long way, but have much further to go. Britain needs women in the boardroom not just because it's an egalitarian 'nice to have' but because female representation on management boards drives a firm to higher profits compared to all male management boards (McKinsey 2008: 'Women Matter' Survey).

The few women that do make it to the top will relate to having done it the 'male way' in embracing the 'superwoman' syndrome and role, modelling other senior women who 'proved their worth' in the past.

Having observed and coached numerous women from different nationalities, industry sectors and geographies, the firm truth is women do not have to adopt male traits to prove they are worth it. So why does a woman still hold on to the 'male code' as a safety net and an unfailing prescription of how to get to the top?

This is because leadership cannot be studied apart from followership and if you consider the psychology of aspiring followers, they will mirror already established female leaders. It is a fact that many of the older senior women who have

made it have done so by consciously or subconsciously cloning male traits. This is particularly true of the professional services sectors of consulting, law and banking. That doesn't mean that it is right. On the contrary it is dated and unsustainable

Women's self-reports of assertiveness, dominance, and masculinity (Twenge, 1997, 2001), and the value that women place on job attributes such as freedom, challenge, leadership, prestige, and power (Konrad, Ritchie, Lieb, & Corrigan, 2000) have all become more similar to those of men. Given these changes, it is not surprising that social perceivers believe that women are becoming more masculine, particularly in gender stereotyped attributes, although they are not decreasing in feminine qualities (Diekmann & Eagly, 2000).

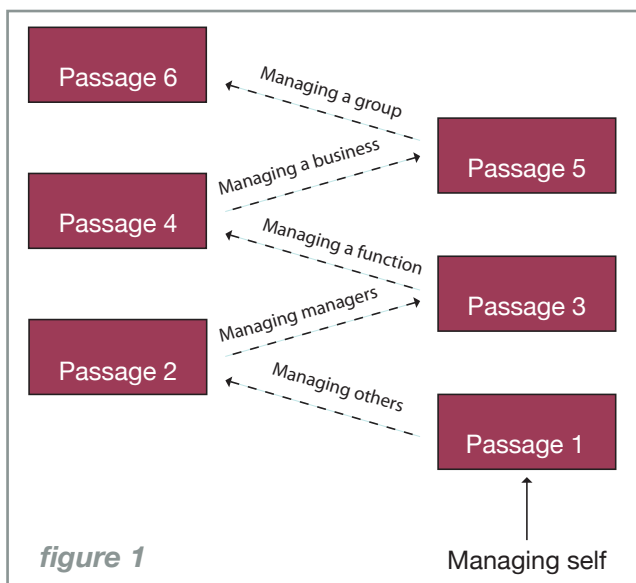
What does it say to women in a company if all the key decisions in the boardroom are taken by men? Right or wrong, we do know:

- The expectations placed by society on women are different to those of men.
- Men and women often use different processes to infer and address their issues.
- There is a political dimension to every organisation which sometimes creates competing value systems – men and women interpret it differently.
- Men and women feel at a crossroads in their careers for different reasons.
- Stereotypes do exist and perceptions can become reality unless they are challenged.

Five steps to consider

Assessment of needs

Assess what women want for each one is at a different stage driven by different needs and ambitions. There are



'passages to a leadership scale and each passage represents different challenges and transitions. This is based on 'The Leadership Pipeline' by Ram Charan (see Figure).

Understanding of resistance

For those who want it, find out what is holding them back from going for it. For those who say they don't want it understand why not. When women are asked to name the most significant factors holding them back from advancement, in most cases they will include:

- exclusions from networks of communication;
- male stereotyping and preconceptions of women;
- work/life balance and feeling 'at one' at work;
- visibility, ie speaking up confidently and being heard;
- strategic acumen and visioning abilities;
- effective time management;
- managing politics at work;
- managing the boss;
- managing perceptions;
- managing your image;
- lobbying and pre-selling your ideas;
- working smart, not just hard.

Giving choice

Give women choice on their leadership styles. Deal with dated perceptions and stop spreading and reinforcing dated half truth..

Design initiatives

From an organisational perspective, executives must build a detailed picture of the gender initiatives within the current landscape of the company that includes: the behaviour and attitudes of the leadership and the top team towards having more women; the current structure of the organisation and the way in which careers are developed. The current executive team must build and open up the leadership experience pipeline to prepare women for senior roles. This will involve, for example, ensuring access to internal and external networks as well as internal training and development. Also there is a need for immediate action in enabling and supporting women to be exposed to crucial leadership development activities (see checklist on page 26).

Taking responsibility

Women need to take responsibility as well. Derailers to be watched out for could include:

- Waiting to be recognised. Women need to go after exactly what they want.
- Not equating self-worth to membership of the 'guys' team.
- Being their own worst enemies when it comes to dealing with other women in power. Women can be prone to undermining other women when it comes to workplace interaction).
- Adopting male traits to show they are worth the leadership ladder.

Having worked with women in C-suites to career-starters, a number of areas for assistance stand out for them to get more support on (through coaching, development programmes, mentoring):

- Self awareness – maximise signature strengths and work more with natural preferences.
- Helping women to frame and reframe problems.
- Ability to read the organisation or situation so the chosen interventions are more effective.
- Thinking positively about ambition, power and impression management - gravitas.
- Emotional intelligence. The ability to identify, use , manage and channel your and other's emotions for personal growth and better relationships.
- Personal revitalisation. Work life balance in my view can be a myth as work is an integral part of a woman's life. But balancing your priorities and 'recharging your batteries' so your energy keeps flowing better is key.
- Assertiveness without aggression. learning how to be 'firm but polite' in asserting your point to inspire others as opposed to aggression which is a 'firm but impolite' way to control others.
- Handling conflict and confrontation.
- Difference between politicking and political leadership.
- Be aware of your personal brand. Includes being clear on how you are viewed by your stakeholders? Does anyone hold an old, outdated view of you?
- How would others describe you? How are you promoting yourself?
- Being able to maximise presence through impact and gravitas.
- Ability to maximise presence through empowered authority.
- Speaking with head, heart and gut. In addition to logic, using your emotion and instinct to influence others

It would be smarter to contend that the gender debate goes far beyond just the sex of the person involved and that it makes sound business sense to tap in to the feminine dimension of society which can be used by both men and

Rhea's 19 Laws for women navigating the leadership maze®

- 1) Be politically savvy
- 2) Be authentic
- 3) Team up with Men
- 4) Build your PR
- 5) Perfectionism – not necessary
- 6) Make your words count
- 7) Manage your emotions
- 8) Know what you want
- 9) Be comfortable with power
- 10) Focus on your strengths
- 11) Have courage and take risks
- 12) Embrace conflict
- 13) Think success
- 14) Different is good
- 15) Learn to say no
- 16) Adopt the 60 (ownership) /40 (delegate) rule
- 17) Lead with integrity and honesty
- 18) Make mistakes
- 19) Ask for help

women. Freud and Jung have stated that the human psyche has both a conscious and an unconscious dimension. In addition, the human psyche also has a feminine and masculine aspect to it. And men need to value feminine traits and yet be true to themselves and vice versa.

Research shows that outstanding women executives are twice as likely to use feminine styles as men. They also create stronger climates for the teams or business units they lead than the successful men and less successful women. Interestingly enough, the same research shows that those women executives who rely predominantly on masculine leadership styles create the weakest climates in their teams. The question that goes begging is why are the women in the latter group relying predominantly on masculine styles when they have the ability to tap into a broader reservoir of styles? Is it because the current business environment still does not, by and large allow women to utilise feminine characteristics?

Other research also shows that the transactional attributes are typically aligned with the masculine dimension, while the transformational attributes are aligned with the feminine dimension. Being out of touch with the feminine self, irrespective of gender, therefore decreases an individual's ability to be a highly productive self-actualising transformational leader!

We know that men are not necessarily better leaders than women, but that for women to be successful, they need to tap into the very femininity they so frequently deny in order to belong to the boys' club. The best leader has a balance between his/her feminine characteristics and knows what to utilise when and with whom. ■