

Women and the Workplace

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The benefits of gender diversity put to the test

Dina Medland looks beyond generalisations to assess the real differences a greater female presence can make in business

Sweeping generalisations are among the great dangers to be avoided when discussing the appointment of more women at senior levels in business. Broad statements – no matter how intuitive – about “what women bring” are potentially damaging both to the cause itself and to its desired effect, which is better leadership. But the value of existing statistics is also open to question, and as the debate continues, those who contribute to it are becoming braver in the questions they ask in their research and are getting clearer answers. A recent survey* by RSA, the executive search firm, looked at the UK life sciences industry and found that “women bring empathy and intuition to leadership” with nearly two-thirds of respondents (62 per cent) thinking that women contribute differently in the boardroom, compared to their male colleagues. The gender difference was viewed by most respondents in “an overwhelmingly positive light”. The RSA report says: “Three quarters rated women higher than men for intuition and possessing greater awareness of the motivations and concerns of other people. “A similar proportion saw women as more empathetic, with a better insight into how decisions play out in the wider organisation.” When it

came to communications and effective collaboration, “over half felt that women were better”. When it came to other skills, “there was little difference between the sexes” says the survey. But not everyone agrees that simply being a woman means possessing characteristics that are a positive factor in business leadership. Lynda Gratton, professor of management practice and director of the Centre for Women in Business at London Business School, says: “There is no substantive difference between men and women at work. Some people are highly caring and intuitive and others are not. I am very cautious about claims on gender differences.” However, she cites interesting research recently carried out on gender differences in areas such as trading in the financial services industry, which features in *The hour between dog and wolf: risk-taking, gut feelings and the biology of boom and bust* by John Coates. The book is currently on the shortlist for the FT/Goldman Sachs Business Book of The Year award. “If you look at (gender differences) from a testosterone perspective, this clearly influences trading – and as the book demonstrates, female traders don’t go to extremes,” says Dr Gratton. Other research by Herminia Ibarra, professor of leadership and learning at Insead business school, suggests men and women network differently – men are more likely to network upwards, whereas women try to network with other women. However, as there are fewer senior women, it becomes a self-fulfilling prophecy to stay within one’s own “place”. Ines Wichert, a chartered psycholo-



Life choices: looking for causality between ‘what women bring’ and better leadership teams might be a perilous approach

Alamy


gist and the author of *Where have all the senior women gone?* published last year by Palgrave Macmillan, has since joined Kenexa’s High Performance Institute, where she continues researching the advancement of women leaders worldwide. She says there is still a “lack of causality” in the research on whether having women in itself makes for better teams: “Women bring an edge in Two of the traits where women out-scored men to the highest degree have long been thought of as male strengths periods of turbulence or in periods of bad governance,” is as far as she is willing to go on the evidence on offer. There is much stronger evidence on functional diversity and diversity of experience playing a positive role in building better leadership teams, she adds. Dr Wichert stresses, however, that the “values” women often bring with them can be “particularly important”. At London Business School, Dr Grat-

ton echoes this sentiment, saying that “it is different life experiences we want and a woman brings a different perspective”. In a personal dimension, she adds: “For me, it isn’t about being a woman, it’s more about being a mother – that role has made a difference to my thinking.” Recent research by Dr Wichert surveying 2,500 professional women and men from the UK, US, Japan, China and Brazil found that being a parent had a positive impact on career progression. For mothers, “women who get help with housework and childcare outside of work hours report a higher number of promotions than women who report having to shoulder the majority of this additional burden outside of work”. Looking at country differences among women, the study also found that women in Brazil and China “actively look for more critical job assignments and as a result receive and expect more promotions than women in the UK, US and Japan”. As well as benefiting from “a more supportive workplace culture”, these women in Brazil and China “also rated themselves more highly on their own job performance, reputation and visibility”, says the KHPI research.

In its UK survey, RSA found that the biggest hurdle among the barriers to delivering more “balanced” boards was “different life choices for women” (71 per cent) followed by dominant male boardroom culture (54 per cent). But when the question was changed, asking respondents to rate which barrier was most important, the “dominant male boardroom culture” overtook different life choices as first choice. It seems clear that looking for “causality” between “what women bring” and better leadership teams might be a perilous approach, as it involves jumping into existing vicious circles of behaviour influenced by issues as far-ranging as self-esteem, opportunities, and society’s expectations. Answers, of course, also depend on the questions asked. Jack Zenger and Joseph Folkman carried out a global survey of 7,280 leaders last year across a range of organisations. Writing in Harvard Business Review in March they found the majority of leaders (64 per cent) are still men, and the higher you go the more men you find. According to Mr Zenger and Mr Folkman: “Most stereotypes would have us believe that female leaders excel at “nurturing” competencies such as developing others and build-

ing relationships, and many might put exhibiting integrity and engaging in self-development in that category as well. And in all four cases our data concurred – women did score higher than men. “But the women’s advantages were not at all confined to what are traditionally seen as women’s strengths. In fact, at every level, more women were rated by their peers, their bosses, their direct reports, and their other associates as better overall leaders than their male counterparts – and the higher the level, the wider that gap grows.” They go on to say: “Specifically, at all levels, women are rated higher in fully 12 of the 16 competencies that go into outstanding leadership. And two of the traits where women out-scored men to the highest degree – taking initiative and driving for results – have long been thought of as particularly male strengths.” Or to put it another way, the women who “make it” perhaps do so because they are far better than the men. It might mean the focus should be less on “what women bring” and more on getting them into leadership roles in the first place.

* www.thersagroup.com/women/




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Partnerships learn to expect the unexpected

Mentoring
Elaine Moore asks two pairs of mentors and mentees what they gain from working together

Company chairmen are under pressure to increase the number of women on their boards and some have taken action by agreeing to help successful senior women to reach the highest posts.

The FTSE 100 Cross-Company Mentoring Programme is one important forum that facilitates this process. It began as a round table of chairmen from the UK's largest companies promising to commit time to mentor senior women to improve diversity at the highest levels of business.

There are now 56 chairmen – as well as other business leaders – involved in the programme, from companies including Rolls-Royce, Shell, Centrica and Barclays and so far, 94 women have benefited from their experience and advice.

Every partnership is hand-picked by the scheme's founder, Peninah Thomson, who is now setting up a new scheme to help women at an earlier stage in their career, which will be launched at the Bank of England on November 20.

The FT spoke to four participants of the programme – two pairs of mentors and mentees – to go behind closed doors and find out what the conversations between them are really like.

Sir Stuart Rose, former chairman and chief executive of Marks and Spencer, acted as a mentor to Emma Fitzgerald in 2009.

Leadership is a lonely thing. So I say to people now that it's important to build up an infrastructure around you that's not just your family and friends. You need people to tell you that the emperor has no clothes on, or to slap you on the back and say: "I know how you feel." I saw the FTSE cross-company mentoring programme as a logical extension of that.

I had some mentoring in the past internally, but the problem is that no matter how independent it is meant to be, you are always slightly fearful about how open to be. I have to say I was always a little bit reserved and that's what is great about this scheme – it works across different companies.

The first time Emma and I met we

sat down and I said: "This is how it will work: you look at me and I'll look at you and if you want to continue you can tell me and I'll do the same – and if not then I won't be offended."

It's Chatham House rules. She should be able to talk to me about anything and I should be able to give examples from my own history.

Emma is a self-starter and she would have got on a board without me, let's be clear about that. All I did was smooth the edges and give her a boost on the way

I'm one of the few people of my generation who had a woman boss twice in my life and I thoroughly enjoyed it. When I left M&S the board was 40 per cent women. It's sad to have to set targets but the fact of the matter is that it needs to be done to accelerate and get us to where we need to be.

Dr Emma Fitzgerald, vice president, Shell Global Retail Network (mentee)

My involvement with the FTSE 100 mentoring programme was entirely serendipitous. I was invited to a dinner hosted by Manchester Business School in 2009 where Peninah was the after-dinner speaker and I approached her and asked what I would have to do to be a part of it.

She said that I would need my chairman to nominate me. As it turned out, the Shell chairman was already a mentor in the programme so that proved to be easy. I went on the waiting list and after four months I was told that I had been paired with someone and that it was Stuart.

It was a bit intimidating going to meet this very visible business person and not be sure if we would be able to make a connection, but the first time we met we shared a bit about our experiences and what was important to us.

I worked with Stuart from 2009 to 2011, and we continue to meet informally now. What I like about him is that I always come away from meeting him feeling energised. I was impressed with how open he was, too. That was unexpected.

Our meetings were typically quarterly or every two months and they would last an hour. All he asked is that I drop him an email before we met to give him a sense of what I wanted to talk about, but no topic was off limits

Soon after I started working with him I was making the transition in my executive role and I was also talking to companies about non-executive roles. He was genuinely open in help-



Sir Stuart Rose and Emma Fitzgerald (top): no topic off-limits; Kevin Sneader and Sarah Breeden: confidence and steeliness

ing me to think about what I would bring to a company.

[Ms Fitzgerald is now a non-executive director at engineering group Cookson].

Kevin Sneader, managing director of McKinsey & Co UK and Ireland, mentors Sarah Breeden

I am keen to see business lead when it comes to giving women the opportunity to break the glass ceiling. I think it persists here more than in the US

where I used to live and I was struck by the lack of women executives when I came back here two years ago.

It so happened that I then came across Peninah, who explained the programme and I decided it was an effective way to do something positive.

My expectation was that it would be all about what I could do for the mentee but it has turned out to be more of a two-way programme. It's very interesting – when you sit down and offer

advice to someone else it makes you think about yourself.

It's also put me in touch with a different part of the business world and what it's like to work in an institution like the Bank of England.

In my first meeting with Sarah we thought we would talk about serious professional things but we ended up talking about our families and what we get out of business and life. It was a very social chat, which was unexpected. I was impressed by Sarah –

she has high ambitions but she isn't naïve and she's thoughtful.

I ask her questions that force her to think of the answers. I don't pretend to understand the Bank but I can talk about the experiences I had along the way and we can see if things are different or similar.

Sarah and I have met every few months for the past two years and I hope that we will keep meeting; I get a lot out of it. I would also carry on with the mentoring scheme in a heartbeat. I have 11-year-old and 13-year-old daughters and I think there is a shortage of role models at the moment, but it's changing slowly.

Sarah Breeden, head of the Prudential Regulation Authority transition team, Bank of England (mentee)

I wanted to take part in the mentoring programme because I was terribly aware that you can get to a senior management level by being good at your job and having some energy and self-confidence, but at executive level you have to do a bit more.

The first conversation I had with Kevin was mainly about what I wanted to get out of the mentoring relationship. I had absolutely no idea what to expect, but found that Kevin was a thoroughly down to earth Scot with a sense of humour and we clicked really well. Peninah is very thoughtful in how she matches people.

The great value of the cross-company scheme is that it is a safe environment. If you put up a charade and say that everything is brilliant then you won't get back the feedback and counsel you need. What Kevin does is give me the confidence and steeliness to push for what I want in my career path, and act as a mirror to remind me of what I said.

One of the first things we talked about was how to operate at a senior level and, as he put it, understand the rules of the game. He advised me to go ask some people at the Bank what was different about operating at that level and I thought that was such a brilliant, simple idea.

In fact, one of the things that Kevin has helped me to do is to utilise the help that exists in the Bank.

We now meet every couple of months for an hour or so, and I usually go to his offices in Mayfair. The mentoring lasts for two or so years but my sense is that people keep in touch with their mentors. The formal relationship may end but I hope that we will still email and meet in the future.



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