

Women in Leadership

Setting the agenda for current and future leaders

Face facts, women have different development needs at work

Why we should face up to our differences and cater to them to secure gender equality in the workplace

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Not all employees will swim in the same direction, training should cater for all Photograph: Reinhard Dirscherl/Corbis

The UK is about to make large financial firms reveal not only their management diversity policy but also the specifics of their recruitment plan to bring gender balance to the boardroom.

It's a small step in the right direction. However, more enlightened companies should also be thinking about how they discover and nurture talented women in their organisations. One thing is clear, and this is where the discomfort arises: women have different development needs.

In a male-dominated workplace culture, all of the social signals, the strictures of presenteeism, even advertising and press commentary, serve to reinforce a belief amongst women that if they choose to have a family then they must forego any hope of reaching the top, as if it's a binary decision.

Indeed, most men regard women who return to their posts following maternity leave as if they have been given some sort of undeserved dispensation, as if they'd stepped out of the queue and have been unfairly let back in. Do we appreciate what a stupid way of looking at talented women this is?

In the absence of a properly constructed support culture, capable women often succumb to the pressures of an inflexible workplace and intolerant male colleagues, which leads to a drain on the talent pool as they veer off into the (typically more flexible) SME sector or start their own businesses.

Stoked by the smug "tut tuts" and shaking heads after a call from the nursery, women must already overcome an enormous amount of conflict for wanting to pursue their careers as well as motherhood.

This is how a government spokesman hilariously explained why women don't seem to grab on to senior business roles the way men do. (He was telling HR Magazine why he thought quotas were a bad idea.): "Evidence suggests women often have a lack of confidence or a lower perception of their own skills and they sometimes find it difficult to gain the necessary skills and experience to operate at board level."

Now I wonder why that is?

Why shouldn't women want to continue their careers? Women are every bit as capable as men, at every stage of their lives – and if it comes to it, those motivated by their careers are just as prepared to do a sixty-hour week, albeit maybe not in the old office-hours time frame that suits people who don't have to choose between parenting and a career.

Yet it need not be like this. There are two areas that enlightened companies should focus on. The first is a quick win: start nurturing individual, talented women, right now.

Traditional training-based development programmes aimed at mixed management audiences don't tackle deeply male-biased cultures or bolster the confidence of talented women who want to rise through the ranks and have a family. These programmes are products of the dominant culture, after all.

Once an organisation has identified the women they want to develop, a specifically designed programme that incorporates individualised executive coaching is required.

This can help talented women to articulate what they have to offer, and to throw off defeating guilt and negative messages.

This isn't a "leg-up", as many men see it, it's an appropriately modern response to development. Stereotypes about senior women and motherhood are almost laughably hackneyed.

What's more, we've seen it work. What's at stake here isn't about political correctness. It's about talent. Limiting your precious talent pool to 50% of the population is bad for your business.

Can organisations make this a reality? Yes, but not in an ad-hoc way. Developing an inquiry-led coaching culture that includes talented women across the business has been shown to drive productivity and engagement across the business and make alternative working practices more acceptable.

Come on UK plc, it's time to man up and do it right.

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