

Women in leadership – a different story

Maggi Evans asks whether stepping off the traditional career ladder can be a positive and proactive step

High-profile debate is currently raging on how to create a better gender balance in our boardrooms. Sheryl Sandberg of Facebook has published a bestselling book urging women to 'lean in' to their careers. European Justice Commissioner Viviane Reding has proposed a gender quota for all EU boards of 40 per cent by 2020. Yet others suggest it's time for men to learn from women and to claim a greater balance for themselves... But is there an altogether different story to be told to help understand women's careers and make the most of untapped female talent?

The issue of women in leadership is grabbing headlines – women have fought to achieve workplace equality and to overcome institutionalised sexism and big progress has been made, but there's still more to do. A symbolic 'holy grail' of the cause seems to be gender balance around boardroom tables. Rather than eternal life, this holy grail promises enhanced business performance (McKinsey *Women Matter* research see tinyurl.com/8pcufsv), better corporate governance and improved decision making (Terjesen et al., 2009). Politicians, businesses, recruiters, researchers, educators and women are all trying to understand their role in successfully completing the quest: what can they do to help women to be as successful as men in their careers? Meanwhile the sense of urgency has no doubt increased as businesses recognise that they are facing a crisis in talent with many stating that this will be one of the key challenges over the next decade (Kwan et al., 2012).

The generally presented storyline for low levels of women leaders includes ongoing prejudice, negative stereotypes, challenges of balancing career and family, and lack of appropriate network. But for an important group of professional women there's perhaps a different storyline, one that turns the current solutions on their head. A story that could lead to a new approach to attracting and retaining talent, a fundamental re-evaluation of the nature of work... Could it be that many professional women don't want the type of success epitomised by a seat on the board? Could these women be at the forefront of

creating a new approach to work? Could it be time for more men to feel the same career liberation that many women feel? Certainly this is an alternative hypothesis worth exploring.

What seems to be going on?

Looking through the research and the public debate, it's difficult to see what's going on. The issues are tough to examine – there's a tendency to justify our own decisions, it's hard to separate our choices from our socialised response, and it's far from clear how gender impacts on our capability and performance at work. Some (e.g. Gurian, 2008) use brain science to claim there are significant gender differences and that biologically men and women think differently. Others highlight the pervasive impact of stereotypes that affect how men and women are viewed in the workplace – women seen as displaying more supportive/rewarding behaviours, men seen as better at problem solving, delegating, influencing upwards (Prime et al., 2009). Yet Eagly (Cookson, 2010) states that although there are some

question

Do organisational and social barriers hold women back in their careers, or is there something else going on?

resources

Cranfield International Centre for Women Leaders:
www.som.cranfield.ac.uk/som/ccdwbl
Oliver James, *Affluenza* (Vermilion)



Women have fought to achieve workplace equality and to overcome institutionalised sexism

references

- Alexander Mann Solutions (2009) *Understanding emerging talent*. London: Author. Available at tinyurl.com/no7ucrd
- Allworth, J. (2013, 8 April). It's not women who should lean in; it's men who should step back (Blog post). Retrieved from <http://blogs.hbr.org/2013/04/its-not-women-who-should-lean/>
- Anderson, D., Vinnicombe, S. & Singh, V. (2010). Women partners leaving the firm: Choice, what choice? *Gender in Management: An International Journal*, 25(3), 170-183.
- Aumann, K., Gaklinsky, E. & Matos, K. (2011). *The new male mystique*. New York: Families and Work Institute.
- Barsh, J. & Yee, L. (2011, September). Changing companies' minds about women. *McKinsey Quarterly*. Available at www.mckinsey.com/insights/organization/changing_companies_minds_about_women
- Belkin, L. (2003, 26 October). The opt-out revolution. *New York Times Magazine*.
- Cookson, J. (2010). *Big Think interview with Alice Eagly*. Available at <http://bigthink.com/videos/big-think-interview-with-alice-eagly>
- Davies, M. (2011). *Women on boards*. Available at tinyurl.com/o8ns4rm
- Dhawan, E. (2012). *Busting Gen Y and gender myths: And why your company should care*. Available at http://ericadhawan.com/wp-content/uploads/2012/10/Generation_Y_final.pdf
- Furnham, A. (2011, 6 March). So do you really think men are natural leaders? *The Sunday Times*.
- Gurian, M. (with Annis, B.) (2008). *Leadership and the sexes: Using gender science to create success in*

relatively small differences (women more collaborative, participative, democratic; men more top-down, autocratic, directive), the distributions are overlapping and it is therefore misleading to talk of gender-based approaches to leadership. Furthermore, much of the research and opinion seems to centre around the very successful 15–20 per cent of highly educated women, who actually have more in common with elite men than with other women, a skewed sample that could be giving us a distorted view (Wolf, 2013).

Despite seemingly few differences in leadership approach, the experience of senior women in the workplace can be significantly different to that of men. The Davies Report (2011) highlighted a number of differences, including inconsistency in development opportunities, ways of being mentored or sponsored and a lack of transparency in selection criteria that was often detrimental to women. These differences certainly go some of the way to explaining the low levels of female leaders and a female talent pipeline that is recognised as too small.

Career differences

Women's career progression is also different from that for men – their career structure is far flatter, with men progressing further than a woman with equivalent educational qualifications. Tom Schuller (2012) refers to this as the Paula Principle: women working below their level of competence through a combination of discrimination, lack of childcare, low confidence, small network and different choices. There have been a number of attempts to develop a career theory for women, but these have so far failed to capture the complex nature of social, historical, personal, economic and structural issues (Patton & McMahon, 2006). Indeed, the speed of social change makes it difficult for theoretical models to move beyond description into prediction.

To fill this theoretical void, metaphor has helped us to gain some insight. There

was previously talk of the 'glass ceiling', and the 'glass elevator', and this theme has continued with concern surrounding the 'glass cliff' (women have been found to be overrepresented in risky leadership positions: see Ryan and Haslam, 2005). Eagly (Cookson, 2010) adopts the metaphor of a career 'labyrinth' for women to navigate, with particular challenges mid-career that can be difficult to overcome (and organisations tend not to be good at helping women after a significant career break).

A further career difference is that many women seem to view their career differently to men. For example, the Institute of Leadership and Management (2011) reported that women have lower ambition and expectations than men, they are less likely to want to become a manager and more cautious in their approach to their career, resulting in fewer applications to progress/broaden their experience (and therefore not as suitable for promotion). The future role in the home is also a concern for women in the next generation – in a report on Generation Y (Alexander Mann Solutions, 2009), there was little difference between male and female in terms of their aspirations (work and life), but the women showed far greater concern for the challenges of managing a family alongside dual careers. It is difficult to separate out the cause and effect of these different aspirations and the lower attainment levels of women, but these issues add further important insights into why there are fewer women at the top.

Unsurprisingly, the biggest differences between men and women seem to emerge in the roles they typically take outside work, within the home. Despite our years of equal opportunities, women still take on the majority of childcare and domestic responsibility, making it difficult for professional women to take on the role of the 'ideal worker', who is able fully and

willingly to give their time to their job with no conflicting demands (Anderson et al., 2010). Those who do try to juggle the demands of a professional career and home (and for many, children too), can feel huge role conflict and believe that they have a polarised choice of either home or work. These structural differences further reduce the numbers of women ready to sit round the board table.

Can women 'have it all'?

Recognising it can be difficult to juggle work and family, should we accept defeat, or should we crusade to 'have it all'? Sheryl Sandberg (2013) argues against women accepting a difference in career trajectory, calling instead for women to actively 'lean in' to their careers from the beginning and to fight to be at the top. However, some previous proponents of this approach have now changed their point of view, to the great consternation of their 'sisters'.

Anne-Marie Slaughter (2012), a Princeton professor, reached different conclusions following a stint in the Obama administration alongside Hillary Clinton. Having previously felt it was possible to 'have it all', she recognised that in many roles, particularly when you have little control over your schedule, this is not possible. Further, she challenges that the message of 'have it all' could be detrimental to women, making them feel guilty if they don't achieve the perfect career and family. This change in sentiment can be difficult for previous generations to accept; as Furnham (2011) points out, thoughts on gender differences have had 'strong pendulum swings'. Women born in the 1950s and 60s felt they could have it all and needed to wave the flag for the next generation to convince them to take on the mantle and take advantage of the hard-won opportunities. However, women of the younger generation don't seem so convinced, they aren't willing to make

"...many women seem to view their career differently to men"

business. San Francisco: Jossey-Bass.

Institute of Leadership & Management (2011). *Ambition and gender at work*. London: Author.

James, O. (2007). *Affluenza*. London: Vermilion.

Kwan, A., Schwarz, J. & Liakopoulos, A. (2012). *Talent Edge 2020: Redrafting talent strategies for the uneven recovery*. Westlake, TX: Deloitte

University Press.

Manyika, J., Lund, S., Auguste, B. & Ramaswamy, S. (2012). *Help wanted: The future of work in advanced economies*. McKinsey Global Institute

National Equality Panel (2010). *An anatomy of economic inequality in the UK*. London: Government Equalities Office/ LSE Centre for Analysis of Social Exclusion.

Patton, W. & McMahon, M (2006). The systems theory framework of career development and counseling: Connecting theory and practice. *International Journal for the Advancement of Counselling*, 28(2), 153–166.

Prime, J.L., Carter, N.M. & Welbourne, T.M. (2009). Women 'take care,' men 'take charge': Managers' stereotypic perceptions of women and men leaders. *The Psychologist-Manager Journal*, 12, 25–49.

Ryan, M.K. & Haslam, S.A. (2005). The glass cliff: Evidence that women that women are over-represented in precarious leadership positions. *British Journal of Management*, 16, 81–90.

Sandberg, S. (2013). *Lean in: Women, work, and the will to lead*. London: WH Allen

Schuller, T. (2012). The Paula Principle

the family sacrifices they've seen other women make in order to get to the top (Slaughter, 2012). They want honest and open conversation with their employer and partner, they see that it's difficult to manage dual careers, particularly when there are children. This doesn't have to mean traditional roles, but that is still primarily the case (National Equality Panel, 2010). Perhaps more couples need to have the open conversation, helping them to plan the relationship between home, work and aspirations for them individually and collectively.

A parallel story?

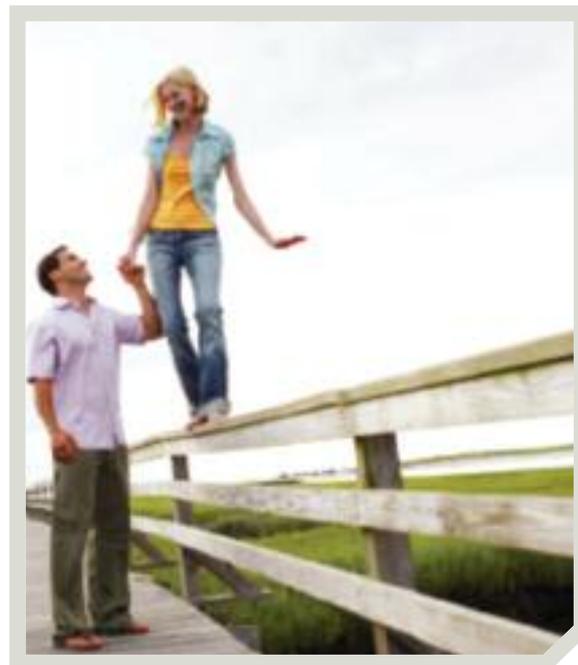
So, we've seen there are small differences in leadership style, there are differences in treatment of senior women, differences in career trajectories and family roles. Are these the reasons why there are so few women at senior levels? Are women, in one way or another, victims of the system? Yes, this can be the case, but I think there's also a different discourse going on...

One consequence of family roles is that many women have a natural pause in their career, a time to reflect and consider what they really want – and this could be at the crux of this parallel story. At this stage, the lucky ones who have some financial freedom, or can see an alternative source of income, can 'opt out' of corporate life (Belkin, 2003). They may leave partly because they aren't interested in the top roles due to the politics and the lack of work satisfaction, but it can also be a very positive 'opt in' to pursue satisfaction in other parts of their lives (Barsh & Yee, 2011), expressing liberation, the freedom to make a different contribution to society and their family through home-making, through social contribution, and many through setting up their own business, often prompted by a desire to balance work and family commitments (Train2000, n.d.). Is this not a sensible response to some of the negatives of senior roles – the long hours, the travel, the competitiveness, the politics, the pressure? Why should

women define success in terms of their career status?

The idea of a new trend, a new relationship to work, echoes some of the thinking of Oliver James in his book *Affluenza* (2007). Through his lens of 'selfish capitalism', women who opt out have perhaps found their antidote to the virus – a way to lead a fulfilling, satisfying and integrated life, combining work and home activities in a positive way. After all, as James points out, female emancipation shouldn't be about blindly following an existing male paradigm of success. Perhaps men who are fighting the virus see this and are also challenging their gender stereotypes? Perhaps this new view will gain further momentum if we start to focus more clearly on well-being, and less on the traditional rhetoric of career success.

How does this affect the men? Some interesting data and opinions seem to be emerging. For example, Aumann et al. (2011) report that men experience more work/family conflict than women, especially if they are working long hours in a demanding job. Many fathers would prefer to work less, and they feel challenged because of view of the 'ideal man': successful and committed to his career and nurturing as a partner/father/son. There seems to be a pressure for men to do it all and have it all. Many men would like to feel the same opportunity to make choices as women seem to feel. Indeed, there is some evidence that attitudes among mothers and fathers are converging (Barsh & Yee, 2011) and that across generation Y there is interest in becoming family centric rather than work centric (Dhawan, 2012). Belkin (2003) also points to this – 'sanity, balance and a new definition of success, it seems, might just be contagious'. A new revolution could be on its way with men being freed



Many men would like to feel the same opportunity to make choices as women seem to feel

to approach their careers in new ways. Echoing this, James Allworth (2013) asks whether perhaps rather than women leaning in, men should be encouraged to step back. If this is indeed a new trend, it has huge implications for organisations and how they attract and retain talent.

Broadening the conversation

Some women are lucky enough to have found a role that is right for them. Equally, some women are undoubtedly held back from the career they want through stereotypes and social norms, and this needs to be stopped. However, for others, stepping off the traditional career ladder is a very positive, conscious and proactive decision, exploring this as a positive choice might help us to further understand women's careers.

To really access untapped female talent, organisations need to wake up – balanced shortlists, training, networking and mentoring aren't going to be enough. To attract and retain the best talent for the future, organisations need to challenge the current rules of the corporate game and create a compelling story that talented women and men want to be part of.



Maggi Evans is a Chartered Psychologist, Consultant and a part-time PhD student at Loughborough University Business School maggi@mosaic-consulting.co.uk

[Blog].

www.paulaprinciple.com/about

Slaughter, A. (2012, 13 June). Why women still can't have it all. *The Atlantic*. Available at www.theatlantic.com/magazine/archive/2012/07/why-women-still-cant-have-it-all/309020/

Terjesen, S., Sealy, R. & Singh, V. (2009). Women directors on

corporate boards: A review and research agenda. *Corporate Governance: An International Review*, 17(3), 320-337.

Train2000 (n.d.). *Women's enterprise – some facts and figures*. Available at www.isbe.org.uk/facts

Wolf, A. (2013). *The XX Factor: How working women are creating a new society*. London: Profile Books.

December: Time for Planning & TIME FOR PRESENTS!

2014

Gift Code:

January 2014

8 – 9 January	Working with Substance Misuse (2 days)	London
10 January	Using CBT Supervision (For Supervisees)	London
14 – 16 January	CBT: Introductory Course (3 days)	Manchester
17 January	Motivational Interviewing & Beyond	Manchester
21 – 23 January	CBT: Introductory Course (3 days)	Birmingham
24 January	The Essential Toolkit for Running Groups	Birmingham



February 2014

4 February	Working with Panic Disorders	London
5 February	Working with Eating Disorders	London
6 February	Running CBT Groups	London
12 February	Positive Therapy	London
13 February	Motivational Interviewing & Beyond	London



March 2014

5 – 6 March	CBT: Introductory Course (3 days)	London
19 March	Interpreting Research in CBT	London
20 – 21 March	Solution Focused Brief Therapy (2 days)	London
24 – 25 March	Working with Psychosis (2 days)	London
26 March	Working with Post Traumatic Stress Disorder	London
31 March	CBT for Child & Adolescent Disorders	London



April – May 2014

29 April	Socratic Questioning Workshop	London
30 April – 1 May	BPS Approved Certificate in Clinical Supervision (2 days)	London
2 May	Case Formulations	London
6 – 8 May	CBT: Introductory Course (3 days)	London
13 – 15 May	CBT: Introductory Course (3 days)	Birmingham
20 – 22 May	CBT: Introductory Course (3 days)	Manchester
23 May	The Essential Toolkit for Running Groups	Manchester



Gift
Code
Key:



**Save 50% off
the full price** *
Use code: P53014
when book online



**Save £20 off the
current price** *
Use code: P52014
when book online



**Save £30 off the
current price** *
Use code: P53014
when book online



All the above courses
are BPS LC Approved

* Only for online bookings on the indicated courses. Subject to availability. T&C apply

Book at: www.skillsdevelopment.co.uk

From all of us at SDS: Have a wonderful festive season!