

Let's get **women** into the boardroom

Women who learn to play three games have a better chance of making it to the top.

By Dr Amanda Hamilton-Attwell ABC, APR

Women are not in boardrooms. They are in functional roles, building teams, motivating colleagues, ensuring that processes and procedures are followed. Females are the heartbeat of many organisations, yet they are totally under-represented at the boardroom table. Females get excellent performance evaluations, yet they are not considered promotable to the boardroom. They are equally qualified, yet they get less challenging projects and earn less.

It is sad to say that 30 years ago the reality of females was exactly the same as the reality of the female employees in 2015. Why did things not change? Or did they?

Organisations are more than structures aimed at producing products and services. Organisations are social systems consisting of individuals, teams, leaders and dominant coalitions. Organisations comprises ambiguous and complex rules determining influence and power of individuals, groups and coalitions. To maintain the balance in the system, these power structures must be maintained and successfully used to their benefit.

Organisational power is determined by a person's ability to sanction behaviour, and have control over information, knowledge and skills that are of value to the organisation. This will determine a person's position in the network of strategic relationships.

Women do extremely well in all these elements of power, except in the last one and that has a boomerang effect on the ones that they are good at.

The question thus is: if they were so good, why are they (still) not sitting in the boardroom?

Second generation gender bias

The reason is encapsulated in the term “second generation gender bias” (Ibarra, Ely and Kolb, 2013). Companies do not intentionally discriminate against women but, in various subtle ways, various realities in organisations are putting women at a disadvantage. The new generation of business women are suffering from gender bias, but it is more subtle than the gender bias that was

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prevalent three decades ago. First generation gender bias was open and in your face. You could see it in the rules of appointment and in organisation structures. Second generation gender bias is subtle, hidden behind principles of equal opportunities for women, making it significantly more difficult to fight. Where men were mainly responsible for first generation gender bias, women themselves are key role players in the second version that is keeping them and their sisters out of the boardroom. Unfortunately they

are more often than not, blissfully unaware of that.

Says Ibarra et al, “Second-generation bias does not require an intent to exclude; nor does it necessarily produce direct, immediate harm to any individual. Rather, it creates a context – akin to “something in the water” – in which women fail to thrive or reach their full potential.

The purpose of this article is to alert women, aspiring to be a leader in a community, in a volunteer group, in an organisation or even to sit at the boardroom table of a company, to the path that will take them there.

Know the game rules

Betty Lehan Harrigan (1989) said that women did not succeed in the corporate world because mothers did not teach their daughters certain games and especially not the game’s rules. According to her, there are three sets of game rules that women in the corporate world should know – football rules, military rules and chess rules. If a woman knows football rules, she will understand what to do to score points and how the roles of the team facilitate scoring points. If she knows military rules, she will understand the importance of “pips” and what to wear when and knowing who she must salute and who must salute her. The last set of rules deals with chess and these rules will help her to understand the power different pieces on the board and how to plan a move for her to win.

What all this boils down to is that women were not taught to understand power and politics in organisations. Furthermore most women intuitively steer away from organisation politics. Unfortunately that is what leads to power.

Be noticed

People become leaders by internalising a leadership identity and developing a sense of purpose. (Ibarra, Ely, Kolb, 2013). Thus, to be regarded as a leader, as somebody with leadership potential, a person must behave like a leader. However, is a person a leader if nobody notices, like the tree that fell in the forest? Was there a sound if nobody heard it? Behaving like a leader will impact on the person’s own self-concept as a leader and build her image as a person fit to fill a leader role. However, if a person does not get any affirmations for this role, it will eventually wither and so will the person’s perception of being a potential leader.

What is needed is that people of influence should become aware of these actions and start talking

about the way a person handled a situation – like a real leader. This will give the person confidence to step up and speak up about her ideas and express them forthrightly. Consequently she will be seen and experienced as somebody who “stepped up to the leadership challenge” – all because somebody took notice of something she did and affirmed her actions. Being in a leadership role is one thing, being regarded as a leader by powerful people in the organisation is what will eventually make you a leader.

We do it to ourselves

This brings us to the reality that women relate differently to other women than men do. Men have networks based on long-term friendships, family ties, on being part of a sport team. Women do not have the same strong networks.

This put aspiring women in a difficult position. To be noticed by a network is much easier than by an individual. Unfortunately the female network is not that strong and we do things differently. There

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are so few female leaders in organisations to spot young women with leadership potential, not to talk about the non-existence of female networks. To make it even more difficult for women with leadership potential to be noticed, is that influential females respond differently to females than the opposite sex. It was found that an influential woman does not assist females to develop in their

leadership roles to the same extent as men would. Men in positions of power tend to have a direct influence on the opportunities opened for junior men, whereas the same was not found in the case of influential women and younger women with potential.

Your appearance still defines you

Whether females like it or not, they are still judged on their appearance. Nobody will argue the importance of appearance but, in the case of women, it is more important – in many cases not for herself but for the “audience”. In a recent interview with members of Hillary Clinton’s press corps, a veteran reporter noted, “The story is never what she says, as much as we want it to be. The story is always how she looked when she said it.” Ibarra, Ely and Kolb, HBR, September 2013.

Women aspiring to leadership positions must understand the art of dressing for the occasion – not being overly concerned about it, as that in itself can be self-destructive. Women who focus too much on their appearance were also perceived to be less clear about their goals.

In conclusion

Getting to a leadership role or the boardroom is not easy for any person. The reality is that the road of females is more difficult. We can make it easier by knowing the rules and thus not investing energy on moves that will take us nowhere. Females already in positions of leadership have an added responsibility to take care of females with leadership potential, to identify them and open doors for them. Organisational leaders should be aware of the deadly effects of second generation gender bias. They should ask questions and look at differences between the reality of male and female employees. If they spot a difference, a flag should go up! ■

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