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# Mentoring and the gender agenda

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# Mentoring and the gender agenda

In my next book, called *The Talent Wave*, I ask the question: “If succession planning and talent management work, how come the top of organisations rarely represents the diversity at lower levels?” After several decades of equal opportunities legislation and initiatives, there has been improvement, but far too little. But diversity is itself diverse – not all disadvantaged groups are equal. While success has been limited, women have achieved more progress in terms of equality at work than have other groups. One of the impacts of this relative success is that gender is increasingly seen as the lever for improvements in diversity and inclusion generally; another is that talented women are becoming increasingly confident in their own ability and in keeping gender equality on the management agenda.

The first of these impacts we see in examples, such as Proctor & Gamble, whose reverse mentoring programme for women led to major improvements in approaches to diversity across the board. The second we can see in the expansion of the idea of quotas for female directors of publicly quoted companies. From small beginnings a few years ago in Norway, legislation has already been passed in the Netherlands and Spain, while other countries, including the UK, have opted for voluntary quotas. In part, this expansion has been driven by the fact that none of the predicted negative consequences of a rapid infusion of female talent onto Boards, to achieve parity, have been realised. While the jury is still out, it appears that the legislative approach is producing better results than the voluntary. The UK’s Davies report recommended that public companies achieve a minimum of 25% female directors this year. In practice, the proportion of women on the boards of the FT250 has risen only marginally and other quoted companies, which have achieved 25% appear to be treating the recommendations as a tick box exercise, with few having plans to improve the ratio further.

In theory, non-executive director roles are ideal for the lifestyle choices of professional women, because they offer flexibility compatible with parenting. However, one of the main barriers to accessing board roles is a requirement – applied by both existing Boards and the headhunters they employ – that candidates already have extensive executive director experience. There is an increasingly strong argument for reversing this sequence i.e. using non-executive roles as opportunities for senior women managers to acquire the Boardroom experience that will make them suitable for executive director positions.



## What is the reality of gender diversity in management and leadership?

This renewed emphasis on the gender agenda has led to a spate of recent studies that explore the issue. Among the conclusions of this research are that:

- At every stage of the leadership pipeline, men are roughly twice as likely to be promoted as are women
- The problem isn't confined to business – for example, although there is little difference in volume and quality of academic publications by men and women, women are much less likely to become professors
- Women retain their ambition levels just as much as men. According to McKinsey studies, 98% of men aged 24-34 and 92% of women of the same age want to move up. In early to middle management, 83% of women still aspire to greater responsibility<sup>i</sup>
- Leadership competency frameworks and the instruments used to evaluate leadership qualities “may be biased toward what men believed to be effective leadership dimensions many years ago” (Vanderbroek, 2010<sup>ii</sup>)
- Formal succession planning processes and the ways in which organizations select who should lead high profile projects both perpetuate gender bias<sup>iii</sup>
- Men and women do bring different styles and personality traits to leadership. When male executives describe themselves, says a Hudson Report, “they tend to attribute manly ‘typically’ masculine characteristics to themselves, while ignoring the more ‘typically’ feminine aspects... They are less caring and focus less on details [which are] comparatively stringer areas of strengths of women.”<sup>iv</sup>

## Why the gender agenda is so important

In addition to the obvious issues of fairness, rectifying gender imbalance in management and leadership has major benefits for organisations. Among these benefits are:

- The need for increased creativity at the top. Homogeneity reduces creativity; diversity increases it
- Women make good leaders. Indeed, an analysis of INSEAD alumni found that on nine out of ten leadership dimensions, women on average performed better than men (The exception was envisioning)<sup>v</sup>
- Leadership talent is in increasingly short supply as baby boomers retire. A gender bias of any kind means that organizations have to either import talent or settle for promoting less capable leaders – neither of these solutions is tenable long-term



## What should be on the HR and top management agendas?

- What kind of role model are we providing? Is having lots of women in HR and few in line management such a good advert?
- What kind of “brand” do C-suite women carry in this organisation? Does that brand align with a male culture or with a gender diverse culture?
- Do we need to overhaul our leadership competences and our performance appraisal processes to remove gender bias?
- Does the leadership genuinely care about leveraging diversity, or is it simply ticking the boxes?
- How can we identify and deal with the subtle, systemic barriers that prevent female advancement?
- What messages do our decisions about people send to women in our organisation?
- How can we ensure that there are sufficient talented, ambitious women at each level of leadership, so that we create increased pressure from below?

This last issue is among the most significant. Without successive waves of talented, ambitious women, the whole edifice of female advancement crumbles. There is already some evidence that increasing the number of female directors leaves a vacuum at senior executive level, because companies have paid insufficient attention to ensuring that there are sufficient female leaders waiting to move up.

## How mentoring can help

Mentoring can help in a number of ways. Some of the most powerful impacts we have seen in organisations include the following:

- Linking senior male executives with rising female talent helps develop an awareness of their capabilities. It also provides a safe environment, where women can challenge stereotypical thinking and implicit bias, and where male leaders can allow themselves to address how they unconsciously contribute to maintaining gender inequality. The more individual leaders, who experience increased awareness and a change of mindset, the easier it becomes to address the systemic barriers in an organisation
- Where mentoring is designed to catch women at key transition points in their careers, it gives them greater self-confidence in their competence and potential
- Mentoring addresses how people evolve their leadership style – effective mentoring gives women permission to be themselves and develop their own, authentic style of leadership, rather than adopt more macho styles that they see at higher levels
- Mentoring helps women build career-enhancing networks – an essential part of career self-management. In theory, women should be better on average at networking than men, because they have superior relationship building skills. In practice, they are often less willing either to create a strong network presence or to exploit their networks. Again, mentoring can help them address this issue and play to their strengths



- The better publicised the mentoring programme, the easier it is to keep gender issues on the agenda. This can be a two-edged sword, of course, because it puts female mentees under greater public scrutiny than might be the case for male colleagues
- However, there are concerns that simply having a gender-based mentoring programme may mask the true extent of inequality. For example, Melinda Richardson of Horizons Unlimited in Australia points out in a 2011 paper<sup>vi</sup> that: “While on the face of it, mentoring has been effective, some have questioned whether the model is just replicating the ‘old boys’ network’ responsible for exclusion on our top boards – i.e. we have now created a network of women, most of whom were already on other Boards, who are actively being sponsored into new appointments through the mentoring scheme.”
- Another concern is that women who do make it to the executive suite may not be motivated to mentor more junior colleagues. It’s as if, having arrived, they have pulled up the ladder. One explanation that has been advanced for this is that, in order to rise to their current level, they have had to adopt male leadership values, which include being less caring of others. This also makes them less effective as role models for other women. Says the Hudson Report: “C-level women might enjoy more respect in the workplace if they developed their more typically female traits.”

## What’s still needed?

Although there is quite a substantial literature on gender-based mentoring, there are still many gaps in our knowledge and understanding. Some of the areas, where research would be beneficial, include:

- Do women have different needs from mentoring than men?
- Do they need different styles of mentor/ mentoring?
- Do male and female mentors bring different qualities and perspectives to mentoring relationships?
- Is the best mentor for an ambitious woman a man or another woman?  
Or is gender irrelevant?
- How do the design and underlying assumptions of corporate mentoring programmes need to change to recognise and incorporate the gender agenda?
- What’s the value of gender specific mentoring programmes? (In some cases, these have been welcomed by participants, in others rejected as reinforcing the gender ghetto. What are the contextual, programme design or other differences that underlie these conflicting responses?)
- How can we prepare female mentees to get the most out of the relationship?  
How does this differ from male mentees?
- How do we ensure that leadership competency frameworks are not gender biased?
- How do we make leaders (of both genders!) genuinely care about the gender agenda?
- In what ways can we mentor the system, that is, use mentoring to change the attitudes of the organisation and the key stakeholders within it?



Answering these questions will help us design more effective gender-related mentoring programmes. That, in turn, should lead to even greater impact on gender inequality amongst managers and leaders.

## About Professor David Clutterbuck

David Clutterbuck is practice leader at Clutterbuck Associates and visiting professor in the coaching and mentoring faculties of both Oxford Brookes and Sheffield Hallam Universities. He began researching and writing on the topic of gender diversity and mentoring in the mid-1980s. He has recently completed with Kirsten Poulsen and Fran Kochan, a new book in this area *The Diversity Mentoring Casebook*, to be published in 2012.

<sup>i</sup>Barsh, J & Yee, L (2011) Changing companies' minds about women Mckinseyquarterly.com (Sept).

<sup>ii</sup>Vanderbroek, P (2010) The traps that keep women from reaching the top and how to avoid them *Journal of Management Development* 29(9) pp 764-770.

<sup>iii</sup>Warren, AK (2009) Cascading gender biases, compounding effects, Catalyst occasional paper.

<sup>iv</sup>Van Keer, e, Bogaert, J & Trbovic, N (undated) Could the right man for the job be a woman? Hudson occasional paper.

<sup>v</sup>Ibarra, H & Obodaru, O (2009) Women and the vision thing *Harvard Business Review* pp 62-70 (Jan).

<sup>vi</sup>Richardson, M (2011) Mentoring women in Australia: Key trends, 2011 Horizons Unlimited occasional paper.