

Women on top: why mentor and coach women leaders?

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Women leaders need to be mentored and coached for two main reasons.

Firstly, it is a question of performance and adaptation to organisational culture. Being a leader requires the same professional skills for both men and women. Being recognised and valued as an effective leader implies a solid professional training and is related to a professional career path, a high position, managerial responsibilities and expertise. Leadership is a universal concept and should neither be understood nor perceived as a male prerogative utilised by male managers who want to put themselves forward for the top positions and hold on to them as long as possible! Leading is attractive; it is synonymous with power and status. Men rarely want to share power and the governance of organisations with women. Even amongst men, competitiveness can be difficult. Organisational in-house culture is often close to Darwinian Theory: the struggle for positions has replaced the struggle for life.

The second main reason for coaching and mentoring women is that they have to face double competitiveness: natural competitiveness in the workplace and competitiveness linked to their gender. The concepts of glass ceilings, sticky floors and leaky pipelines can be explained by the existence of this double barrier. Women are trapped in this metaphorical language: they cannot break through the glass ceiling and reach top positions, which is why they are said to be stuck to the floor of organisations. Glass walls can also keep them from moving to the side. Women are visible in the areas of HR, communication, marketing and law, but are seldom present in high-stake business, technical or managerial positions. Very few women are members of boards of directors.

The leaky pipeline phenomenon describes how women drop out or fail to advance further at key stages of their career. This could be due to a number of factors: organisational barriers; the difficulty of managing the dual career; a lack of self-confidence and strategic

networks, and a reluctance to seize opportunities and take risks.

Women want professional recognition and a professional identity, however, they are all too often viewed according to a biological and stereotyped gender identity. This is a huge issue, as women cannot behave as if they were not women. Male and female gender identities make up humankind and not acknowledging one's gender identity is effectively denying that you are part of humankind. This is impossible! The only way to escape from this paradox is to consider oneself, first and foremost, as an individual in the professional arena.

Men tend to an abstract, positive and rewarding universality whilst women are considered as biological individuals without a positive or a universal dimension. Double competitiveness is a combination of general competitiveness and this definition of the two biological genders of humankind that during human Western history has resulted in unequal and asymmetric social genders.

Mentoring and coaching potential female leaders boosts

women's careers within organisations because it allows women to go beyond double competitiveness by raising men's awareness of women working in leading positions. When female leaders and future leaders – women in middle management or in the talent pipeline – are mentored by men through peer mentoring programmes, men are keener to consider women as positive contributors. Women are valued in the workplace, and organisations can make the most of female talent. Reverse mentoring – women mentoring men leaders – and collective mentoring in mixed groups of both men and women can bring about positive change and better performance within organisations.

Through individual coaching women are more able to be aware of double competitiveness and be in a position to work on how to gain leading roles. Organisations are more balanced and efficient when they succeed in creating an ecology based on diversity of all talents. ■

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