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THE EVOLUTION OF WOMEN INTO
THE BOARDROOM AND SENIOR LEADERSHIP ROLES

Article by Helen Pitcher

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The headlines currently grabbing attention in the sphere of Women in Leadership is a real concern in relation to 'how do we get more women on to Boards.' This in turn creates a lively debate between the effectiveness of quota's (compliance) and targets (evolutionary) for achieving this goal.

This increased focus on the topic is clearly underpinned by the well-researched benefits of women's participation in the Board process; namely dealing more effectively with risk, better able to address the concerns of customers, employees, shareholders, and communities, a focus on long-term priorities, with women directors more likely to be in tune with women's needs than men when developing successful products and services.

This reflects a commercial world where Boardrooms are having to put more energy and attention into the real

world issues of 'consumerism', 'environmental impact' and 'ethical cultures' which are the daily fodder for media headlines, with potentially massive impacts on an organisations reputation and for which Boards have a clear role in setting the tone and sensitivity across the whole organisation.

However, as important as this immediate debate is, a more fundamental question is answered if we define achievement of Women In Leadership equality as a successful longer term 'sea change' in the levels of women on Executive Management Committees and in Senior Leadership roles. This 'sea change' will provide the sustainable 'supply' of women to Boardrooms as the seed corn for a selection process based on merit thus avoiding the debilitating effect of a 'tokenism' label.

This is the real prize, a fundamental change in the flow of women into senior leadership roles and onto the Board.

How will this be achieved?

This is much more of a longer term vision of Women in Business and Organisational life; to quote a Board Director of a well-known UK Bank “gender will not be an issue in 15 years’ time”. While 15 years seems a long time, it is recognition of the fundamental shifts which are taking place today. The strategic choice is about how we provide accelerated support and facilitation of these trends which will make the 15 year journey a well ordered march, as opposed to a last minute rush in through the back door. This longer term view enables us to recognise these changes and provide practical and sustainable support to this acceleration and achievement.

So how will this evolution come about?

It will happen through a combination of current and future changes related to; the structural pressure for change, developments in organisational ‘technology’ and changes in attitudes of and support for women themselves as drivers and generators of business results.

On the structural context, in the UK and globally there is an increasingly dynamic and vocal constituency of advocates and adjudicators, who are ensuring that the aims of ‘Women on the Board’, are kept in the headlights and are not forgotten or swept under the carpet. This includes; a proliferation of league tables and women friendly organisational ratings, for example the Annual Cranfield University League table of Women on FSTE companies. Politicians and Governmental Leaders being on the lookout for dramatic sound bites. Professional organisational groups such as the ‘Women in Leadership’ and the ‘2% Club’ in the UK (some Companies such as HSBC are broadening these networks to include both men and women). To an increasing Governance approach focusing on the composition, effectiveness, diversity and behaviour of the Board as fundamental good governance. All these pressures will create an irresistible drive for progress and development. Working in Boardrooms and with senior executive teams, the reality is the mental switch has been thrown in all but the most dinosaur laden companies. In one recent conversation, the blood drained from a UK Board Chairman’s face as we discussed the prospect of his profile as the only Chairman of a large company without a female on the Board.

On the ‘organisational technology’ front, developments are making flexible management a reality and increasingly playing into the capability of women to be adaptive and multitasking in their approach to senior roles. No longer are leadership roles pinned to a static desk, having lots of face to face meetings and a secretary popping into the office to go through the ‘in-tray’ The new world is about the ability to connect virtually and instantaneously

to your team and customers, wherever they may be. Personal mobile ‘Face Time’ apps will be universal in 15 years’ time as the generation flow makes it as ubiquitous as the ‘modern’ mobile phone, yes, there were times when you could only make international calls from your desk!

Similarly, networking and connecting, though LinkedIn et al, is becoming the norm with the individual’s ‘surroundasound’ of virtual and mobile technologies. To quote one Senior female executive, “my team is global and virtual’, my customers’ expectations are for constant response across time zones, and the concept of sitting in an office from 8.00 to 7.00 when I need to respond at 11.00 in the evening or on a Sunday when many of my clients are at work, is the reality of my business life”. While this sounds demanding, with a bit of creativity and a ‘virtual secretary’, it provides much more flexibility to deliver business results and outcomes outside the traditional ‘norms’.

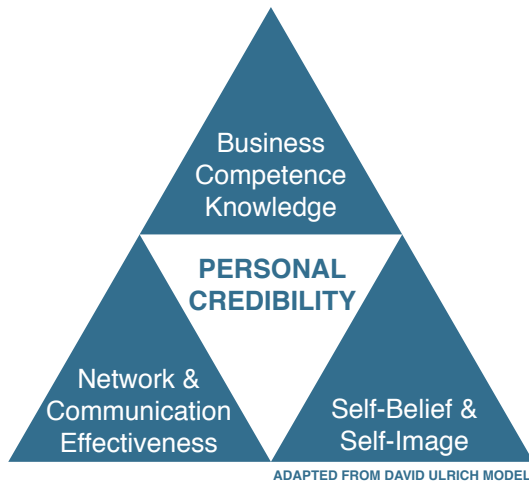
Finally, Women’s attitudes and the cognisance of what is needed to achieve a senior career are changing. The recognition of effective career planning, allied to specific capability development and focus on the right kinds of experience, are moving women from a ‘see what turns up approach’ to a more definite ‘how do I chart my way through this maze’. This in turn is creating a more focused support and development approach to the needs of women within the organisational environment. Included in this change is an increasing ‘balancing’ of women’s career with their partners and the deliberate mapping of ‘lightning raids’ into client facing and P&L roles to gain the required ‘credibility’ on their CV. One senior woman coaching client took on a role as MD of a divisional subsidiary managing a group of engineers and had successfully achieved a targeted series of outcomes before the blink of an eye. She now sits on a major FTSE PLC Board.

Additionally, women are becoming increasingly confident as more ‘balanced’ role models emerge and their support and capability development becomes more relevant and impactful.

So how do organisations and individuals make this happen?

As a specific coaching and development need for women the model of Personal Influence and Credibility has a special resonance. This model provides a basis for the design and development of Women’s capability to achieve the desired senior leadership roles. This includes; Business Competence and Knowledge; Effective Communication & Networking, and Self-Belief & Self Image

INFLUENCE & CREDIBILITY
3 Core Elements



Business Competence and Knowledge: The development of Business Competence and Knowledge, requires a clear plan and review of areas of competence and needs. This includes a balance of front line business experience and staff roles to facilitate the path to the senior levels of the organisation. In addition to designing this landscape of experience the development and demonstration of strategic analytical thinking is an important detail of the designer approach. Of particular importance is the financial expertise of women as they prepare for the most senior roles. Outside a functional finance role which has become a 'traditional' route for women to reach the top of an organisation, there needs to be a greater engagement of women with financial expertise in whatever role they are undertaking, this goes beyond P&L management and in to key aspects of Financial Accounting and Corporate Finance, as they earn a right to speak beyond the narrow confines of a functional role.

Effective Networking and Communication: These areas offer both an advantage and a blocker to women's development into senior leadership roles. Women are recognised as demonstrating unique advantage in positions such as Finance and Human Resource management, which particularly require skills such as detail control and communication. Hence their rising dominance in these functional areas especially in growth economies, in China for example, women enjoy a significant edge in occupying the position of Director of Human Resources (81%) and CFO (61%). This effectiveness in verbal and non-verbal communication also carries weight in the Boardroom, where the ability to probe with assertive but non aggressive questioning is a prime skill. However, this very focus on the detail of the job often mitigates against a broader view of the world, and a reluctance to network at a strategic level with specific career goals in mind. This contrast is thrown

into sharp relief with the distinctively different approach to Sponsorship and Mentoring taken by Men and Women, with studies showing women being less inclined to seek sponsorship and lobby for promotion and advancement and consequently receiving less direct sponsorship into new roles. Women also are more reluctant to 'sponsor' other women, fearing that if the individual fails it will damage their own personal reputation and standing!

Self-Belief and Self-Image: Finally for women confidence, belief and self-view is a critical element in their development into senior leadership roles. Whether through the weight of historical stereotyping or a 'naturally' less aggressive outlook, it often adds up to a reluctance from women to grab the prize on offer, unless there is a high degree of certainty of success. This is however changing, as more balanced and flexible female role models emerge with more specifically designed support processes which recognise women's particular requirements. As women raise their strategic career planning to develop a more specific profile with a more dynamic external view of networking and focus on image and impact, this often self-inflicted stereotype of 'hanging back to be asked', is fading. This is of particular importance as the structural tides change and women prepare themselves to take on these prizes and not be left floundering in what might have been, or being siloed into a 'token' presence on the Board.

Does the role of Governance have any role to play in this developing shift?

With diversity and behaviour firmly on the Board Governance agenda the suggestion is yes. However, if we are to move this beyond a mere compliance driven exercise, the Board Review which seeks to support a Board's journey from 'Good to Great' can play a significant role. The Board Review should go beyond assuring that the Board is balanced and into the development of Women throughout the organisation. This is a clear role for the Board in its responsibility to ensure the strategic succession and development of the organisation's Executive Team, which by implication provides a focus for ensuring the flow of women to the senior roles in the organisation.

There will almost certainly be blockers and chaos along this 15 year road. While no means a given, I am confident we will be looking back in 15 years' time at the era which developed and enfranchised women into the senior leadership cadre as the 'norm' and subsequently onto Board roles on merit. Thus achieving the all important goal of Diversity - which arguably could be seen as counting the numbers - and inclusion which is a behavioural and attitudinal shift resulting in better Board participation and decision making.