



What Value do Senior Women Leaders and their Organisations get from Coaching?

Praesta Partners is a premier firm of business coaches. We coach senior leaders including CEOs, main board directors, management team members and other key senior executives. Praesta clients comprise several hundred organisations in the private, public and voluntary sectors, including FTSE 100 and 250 companies, government departments, private equity owned businesses, leading professional services firms and all areas of financial services.

All Praesta coaches have had senior level business careers – many were Board members, CEOs, partners or managing directors of major organisations in their first careers. We are a diverse group of male and female coaches. Thorough training, continual professional development and regular supervision are integral to maintaining our high standards. Praesta coaches carry out one-to-one coaching and are leaders in working with executive women. We also provide group coaching, for example, for groups of high potential women, as well as team coaching, team workshops and board effectiveness reviews.

Praesta insights pull together ideas and experience about topical leadership issues in an accessible and digestible way. We work closely with leaders in different spheres on thought leadership. This publication has been researched and written by Praesta coaches, Hilary Douglas, Janet Rubin and Louise Sheppard.

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Introduction

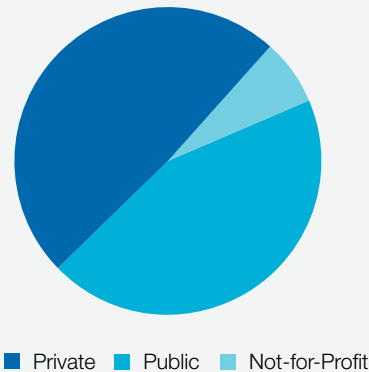
The proportion of men and women in the workplace are roughly equal and yet women continue to be vastly under-represented particularly at senior levels. A recent report identified that only about one in five senior leaders is a woman, and one in 25 is a woman of colourⁱ. Many organisations strive to improve their gender equality because there is a strong business case to do so: having more senior women executives enables better decision making and a more balanced approach to risk. A recent McKinsey study of 1000 companies in 12 countries found a correlation between diversity at the executive level and both profitability and value creationⁱⁱ.

It is important to ask what value senior women and their organisations can gain from coaching. Research has shown that coaching has had a significantly positive impact on women who take on senior roles. To add to the body of evidence, we share our findings on the impact of coaching on individuals and their organisations.

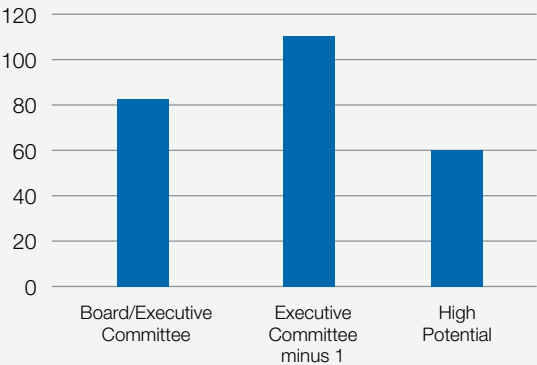
At Praesta UK, we are proud to coach over 250 of the UK's most senior leaders at Board, Executive and high potential levels each year. Around half of these leaders are senior women. This Insight is based on a survey we conducted of the 267 senior women whom we have coached over the past two years. These women come from across the sectors and the breakdown of the seniority of the women and sectors in which they work is shown below.

Our confidential coaching provides key insights into the issues that women are facing at senior levels and on what is holding them back. We conducted a similar survey five years ago and we have compared the findings and commented on how the situation has shifted. We provide recommendations for what organisations and women now need to do to overcome these blocks in order to have more diverse and effective senior leadership teams.

Sectors



Organisational Level



This booklet is divided into sections:

- **What are the triggers for coaching and what issues do women bring?**
- **Are these issues different from those brought by men?**
- **What is the impact of the coaching for the women and organisations?**
- **How do women and their organisations help and hinder the success of the coaching?**
- **How is the landscape changing and what can be done to ensure more rapid change in the number of women applying for top roles in organisations?**

What are the triggers for coaching and what issues do women bring?

We asked what prompted the coaching; what issues women bring to coaching; and what issues emerge during the process - and compared these to the type and frequency of issues brought by our male clients.

The triggers for coaching

Coaching support was triggered by a number of factors. The most common reason was the transition into a new, bigger leadership role, for example, stepping into a first board position. Women wanted support with career progression; handling significant organisational change; managing challenging work relationships; and working on issues raised at their performance review. In a number of cases, coaching was provided to help an executive whose personal issues were having an impact on their work. Some organisations provided coaching for specific groups of executives, for example, individual coaching for all board members and group coaching for high potential women.

The eight most common issues for our female coachees are:

1. Operating at a more strategic level
2. Influencing effectively
3. Networking and raising personal profile
4. Delivering through others
5. Developing self-confidence
6. Managing behavioural issues in self and others
7. Planning and managing a career path
8. Managing work life integration and maximising personal resilience.

The issues are each described below and, while they are listed separately, they are often interrelated in practice.

Operating at a more strategic level

Most new arrivals to a more senior team experience a period of adjustment. They recognise the need to see the bigger corporate picture, develop a new set of relationships, both internally and externally, and to contribute on a wider basis. It is not always clear to them, however, how they make the transition. Asking for help can feel like a sign of weakness. They want to use coaching to:

- understand what success in their role looks like for the organisation as a whole, and for each of their colleagues and key stakeholders
- share their concerns about stepping into the new role and identify where they should focus and how they can add value
- plan their first few months so as to maximise their impact
- find out where and how corporate decisions get made
- explore any concerns about “organisational politics” and learn strategies for building effective alliances based on mutual interest
- identify strategies for ensuring that their voice is heard at the table.

How coaching can help

“A newly-promoted Director was the only woman on the executive team. Her coach worked with her on gaining the respect of her colleagues whilst remaining true to herself. They mapped out the broader context of the business, and explored what success looked like for each of her fellow executives. She then concentrated on where she could make most corporate impact, and rapidly became an influential player.”

Influencing effectively

Influencing skills are key to being heard. This can be particularly challenging for women in a culture dominated by male assumptions and behaviours, as illustrated by a famous Punch cartoon featuring one woman sitting at the Board table with a group of men. The chairman says, “That’s

an interesting point, Miss Trigg. Perhaps one of the men here would like to make it.” During coaching, women want to discuss how they can make an impact, whilst bringing their own authentic voice and style. They want to:

- display presence and gravitas, so that others take them seriously
- step into their authority and be more assertive
- assess when it is important to make a strong impression and when it is appropriate to hold back so that they don’t come across as too earnest
- take some calculated risks and lead with courage
- recognise and manage group dynamics
- understand the culture of the organisation, “how things are done around here”, and find an authentic way to have impact.

How coaching can help

We encourage female coachees in this situation to think about how they utilise their authority, presence and impact in the room. How do they want to be perceived? Do they take time to establish their authority in an appropriate way? How do they connect to others and create rapport – what message does their body language and speech convey? What impact do they wish to create? How do they shift their own and others’ thinking and behaviour to move things forward? We support coachees to rehearse key conversations in a safe space and provide constructive feedback.

Networking and raising personal profile

Some female coachees eschew networking, saying that they feel uneasy bothering people unless they have a concrete reason to do so. They are uncomfortable raising their profile by sharing what they do and their achievements in the organisation, feeling that their work should speak for itself and there is no need to 'brag'. However, not networking can leave women feeling isolated. They witness effective networkers succeed, particularly during times of organisational change, and so they want to discuss:

- what personal and business benefits could come from networking?
- who should I be trying to meet, and in what contexts?
- what do I want others to know about me, and how do I get that across in a way that feels authentic?
- how do I fit this into my life with my other commitments and not come across as stand-offish?

How coaching can help

"The coachee saw the importance of networking to increase her ideas and learn what other colleagues outside of her function and in her industry were doing. She was reassured that networking needn't be time intensive, and some networking can be done digitally."

Delivering through others

"How will I make the time?" is an ever-recurring question. Coachees can find it

hard to let go of the expertise and attention to detail that they identify as the key to their early success. Their first instinct can be to work even harder than before, but that may be unsustainable. They want to:

- share their sense of being overwhelmed, understand how 'busyness' can be an avoidance tactic and that doing what they've always done could now derail them
- clarify their priorities in the new role and how they can improve their time management
- recognise when they are being over-protective of their direct reports and what they have to delegate or stop doing
- be discriminating about when perfectionism is essential, and when the 80:20 rule applies
- learn how to deploy their expertise differently, for example, by recruiting high calibre people for their teams, taking a more strategic view and becoming a thought leader about what needs to change
- increase their ability to empower and develop high performing teams.

How coaching can help

"A client saw her perfectionism as an asset that had fast tracked her to the executive team. She was now finding it difficult to manage all the conflicting demands at work, and to meet her expectations of herself as a mother of young children. Coaching helped her to stand back, to review what really mattered to her, to identify where she could most add value and how she could trust her team and develop their careers."

Developing self-confidence

Self-confidence is a major issue for many women, and one that coachees acknowledge from the start of the coaching. This is particularly true if they set very high standards for themselves, or if they have a need for validation from others. Coachees want to develop their narrative as a leader and use coaching to:

- articulate and value their strengths
- discuss how they feel like a fraud, identify the limiting beliefs they hold about themselves, explore where they come from and learn how to manage their internal dialogue
- reduce the level of anxiety that they experience and feel that they have a right to be at the table
- increase their self-belief and be less dependent on the approval of others.

How coaching can help

"A new female leader lacked self-confidence and was hard on herself about her performance. The coach encouraged her to seek feedback from clients and key internal stakeholders and challenged her perception of herself. The coachee then recognised the positive impact that she was having on company sales, reframed how she saw herself and became proud of her achievements."

Managing behavioural issues in self and others

Some women come with issues about their own or others' behaviour. They may:

- have received feedback that they are perceived to have a "big personality" that others find overwhelming, be seen as too aggressive when they stand up for themselves or have been told that they are "too emotional"
- avoid conflict, and risk being seen as weak
- have problems with the leadership style of their boss
- find the behaviour of some colleagues unacceptable.

How coaching can help

"Sometimes I hold up the mirror to my coachee and ask her whether she is seeing everything through the lens of 'this is happening because I am a woman.' I might challenge her to probe what is really going on and what an external observer might see."

Planning and managing a career path

It is not unusual to hear a female coachee say her career has “just happened” and she now wants to review where it is taking her. Coaching can be about:

- identifying next career steps and how to prepare for them
- exploring perceived career stagnation and choices
- thinking about the longer term and what the coachee really wants out of life.

How coaching can help

“The coachee was a successful partner in a professional services firm who had another ten years to go until retirement. Whilst she was enjoying her current role, she was finding that senior colleagues kept hinting that she may want to take on other roles in the firm and she was afraid of taking on too much or going down the ‘wrong path’. The coach and coachee explored when she wanted to retire and what global and functional roles she was interested in both inside and outside of her organisation. The coachee gained a clear sense of what she wanted to achieve and what skills she needed to acquire to support her on her career path.”

Managing work life integration and maximising personal resilience

Many coachees are in the middle of the generation sandwich, with dependent children and frail parents to care for. Some have other relationship or health issues that are having an impact on their resilience at work. They need a safe space to:

- learn how to manage anxiety and regain their energy and motivation
- protect their health and manage their well-being
- explore their personal circumstances and reflect upon some key life decisions
- assess what they can reasonably expect of their team and colleagues
- consider when and how to ask for help.

How coaching can help

“The coachee had just returned from maternity leave and found herself under pressure to apply for promotion to Managing Director. She was unsure of whether this was what she wanted and used her coaching to explore what was causing her to feel anxious about going for it, what her personal aspirations were and how she could best resource herself.”

Are these issues different from those brought by men?

Every coachee is unique and we do not want to stereotype. There is as much diversity amongst the senior women we coach as there is amongst the senior men. In fact, we found that the issues that senior women bring to coaching are similar to those brought by men. However, we

noticed that some issues are experienced more intensely and occur more frequently in our engagement with women. In particular, we would highlight:

- feeling that they are not being heard in meetings and wanting to increase their presence, gravitas and impact
- navigating a male-dominated culture when there are few female role models
- engaging actively with organisational politics
- recognising their self-confidence issues
- trying too hard to please and therefore not being assertive enough and being reluctant to take risks
- exhibiting perfectionism and finding it hard to delegate and to let go of the detail
- being reluctant to make time for networking and socialising
- feeling pulled in all directions at work and at home.

Whilst many women still bear more responsibility for the household tasks and caring responsibilities and are more concerned about the impact of their work on their dependents, we are witnessing some changes here as younger male leaders are now bringing more work life integration issues to coaching.

What is the impact of the coaching for the women and the organisation?

There were many benefits from the coaching for the individual coachees and the organisations that employed them. The main benefits are described below and those for the coachee are illustrated in the word cloud. A word cloud is a visual representation of text data from the research, generated by a computer.

Individual Impact

Coaches reported that their coachees had:

- Achieved promotion - many gained promotions, including some to Board level positions.
- Integrated successfully – transitioning into a new job was a common trigger for many women to embark on coaching and they reported having made smooth, successful starts in their new roles.
- Renewed self-confidence – female coachees raised issues relating to self-confidence early in the coaching relationship and they experienced increased self-confidence and self-belief and recognised their strengths.



- Enhanced well-being – many felt more emotionally resilient at work, less stressed and more able to let go of previous negative experiences. They also pointed to having established better boundaries in their work and home lives.
- Clarity about the role and their leadership style – having a better understanding of the leadership role, a clearer understanding of who they are and how they lead and being able to articulate this to others.
- Stronger impact – coachees received feedback that they were communicating in a more assertive, concise and clear manner. They considered that they had improved relationships with line managers and peers through adopting a more flexible range of influencing styles and for some this included working more effectively in multi-cultural environments.
- Increased strategic focus – many referred to focusing on delivering through their teams, delegating more and pushing back where needed. They developed their strategic skills, concentrating on where they could best add value.
- Built alliances – by developing their political savvy and networking skills during the coaching, coachees were able to build effective alliances and perform more effectively in their roles.

Organisational impact

The Praesta approach is to align closely the individual's and organisation's coaching objectives. The main outcomes of the coaching for the senior women's organisations were:

- Improved board decision-making and dynamics - organisations provided feedback that coachees were getting their voices heard at board level, were contributing on a wider, more effective basis and bringing different perspectives which strengthened board decision making and enabled the board to work more effectively together.
- Improved organisational culture – the impact of senior leaders demonstrating a wider range of influencing skills, being more politically savvy, using a coaching style and doing more networking contributed to a more collaborative culture.
- Increased retention - coachees remained in the organisations when they might otherwise have left and also made broader career moves, for example, moving internationally.
- Enhanced results – organisations became more customer-centric, improved their systems and increased their bottom line results.

How do women and organisations help and hinder the success of the coaching?

Whilst coaching brings many benefits to individuals and organisations, the success of the coaching can be helped and hindered by a number of factors and these are shown in the table on next page.

Coachee	Organisations
Helped	Helped
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Identifying clear goals for the coaching • Making time for coaching • Being willing to be vulnerable and open to feedback • Being courageous and willing to experiment with behaviours 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Support from key stakeholders, e.g. line manager, sponsors and HR • Boss having had coaching • Interest in wider development and budget for coaching • Having a good gender balance in the organisation
Hindered	Hindered
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Low self-esteem; feeling like a victim • Not prioritising coaching • Time constraints, e.g. due to family commitments • Lack of understanding or faith in the process 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Lack of support from boss • Organisational chaos; changing reporting lines and relationships • Lack of budget for development • Rigid cultures that reject new, different recruits

How is the landscape changing and what can be done to ensure more rapid change in the number of women applying for top roles in organisations?

We conducted similar research five years ago and have noticed some changes in the landscape. In particular:

- There is more awareness and acceptance of the need for more women on boards.
- Women now have higher expectations and are more positive about their ability to progress in organisations.
- There seem to be fewer generic gender issues in organisations. However, in male dominated environments, female coachees are still suffering from a lack

of role models and experiencing some men who find working with women challenging.

Yet despite the belief that women are taking more senior roles, there has been little progress at the executive level in either the FTSE 100 or 250 companies. The Female FTSE Board Report 2018ⁱⁱⁱ points out that leadership talent does not emerge in a vacuum - significant others including coaches, organisational cultures and talent processes are vital in forming and affirming leaders.

Recommendations for organisations

To really promote gender diversity, we recommend that organisations:

1. Identify and provide coaching at the key pivotal points in women's careers and encourage women to come forward for coaching at high potential level.
2. Set coaching relationships up for success from the start by involving line managers, sponsors, mentors and other key stakeholders in the process.
3. Ensure that women receive honest feedback about their strengths and what they need to add or do differently, as recent research on performance reviews shows that women currently get less constructively critical feedback than men^{iv}.
4. Discuss promotions and target roles in terms that appeal to women's ambitions and values, which are likely to include larger purpose, impact on people's lives, growing talent and building a positive culture^v.
5. Make formal and informal flexible working more accessible, acceptable and visible.
6. Encourage women to get experience in general management roles or have P & L responsibility so that they can move beyond functional roles and are credible candidates for C.E. positions.

Recommendations for female leaders

The issues that our coachees brought to their coaching may resonate with you. Here are some ways that you might help yourself achieve your aspirations:

1. Seek feedback from key people in the organisation about your perceived strengths and areas for development and ask for data about specific behaviours so that you know what you should build on and do differently.
2. Request external coaching support, prioritise it and approach the sessions with a growth mindset. You can use the coaching issues highlighted in this booklet to identify which areas are relevant for you.
3. Articulate your own authentic leadership style that you feel comfortable with. This could include your strengths, values, style, vision and core purpose. Test this out with others to check whether this reflects who you are.
4. Manage your own career, identify what the options are and any gaps in experience, knowledge or behaviours that you need to add. State your interest in stretch roles and take risks by putting yourself forward for opportunities.
5. Network for impact, extending beyond your comfort zone of peers, identifying who are the key people whom you can help and who can help you internally and externally in line with your career goals.

What Praesta coaches offer aspirant women leaders

- 20 years experience of coaching senior women leaders across the sectors
- Group coaching for high potential women which provides the opportunity to connect with women who face similar challenges in the organisation
- Knowledge gained through coaches having held public appointments related to gender and diversity
- Introductions to other female leaders through our extensive alumni network
- On-going research on diversity issues
- Access to relevant publications

References

- i Women in the Workplace, Lean In and McKinsey & Company, 2018.
- ii Delivering through Diversity, McKinsey, 2018.
- iii The Female FTSE Board Report 2018, Susan Vinnicombe CBE, Cranfield University, Dr Elena Doldor, Queen Mary University of London and Professor Ruth Sealy, University of Exeter Business School.
- iv How Gender Bias Corrupts Performance Reviews and What to Do About it, Paola Cecchi-Dimeglio, Harvard Business Review, April 12, 2017.
- v Women CEOs Speak, Korn Ferry Institute, 2017.

Relevant publications by Praesta

Praesta Partners have published a number of Praesta Insight documents which can be downloaded from the Praesta website: www.praesta.co.uk

Some relevant ones to this publication are:

Why are there so Few Women on Executive Boards

Job-Sharing: A Model for the Future Workplace

The Resilient Team

Metro Leaders: A New Breed of Men in Business



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