

The key to unlocking women's route to the top

A lack of exposure is inhibiting the rise of talented females throughout the corporate world. Could sponsorship be the answer?

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We've heard the soundbites – gender pay equality is 170 years away; only 4.4% of S&P 500 CEOs are women; only 14% of Irish companies have either a female CEO or Head of Operations (and this ratio is diminishing). Meanwhile, an international report by Citi showed that closing the gender gap in labour market participation could add 12% to OECD gross domestic product (GDP).

And yet there are many men (and some women) who believe gender equality in the workplace is a zero-sum game. For example, if women are to win, men must lose. Men often feel disengaged from the inequality problem too because issues relating to gender do not concern them. Further, when men do generally get involved, it is to 'fix' the problem by encouraging women to behave in the same way that men do in the workplace.

With such a high socio-cultural mountain to climb, it is no wonder that progress has been painfully slow towards gender equality at work. Furthermore, the traditional talent programmes (most commonly packaged as 'mentoring') have not delivered the necessary results in terms of the recognition, professional development and career progression of women.

Why is this, and what can be done to correct it?

A mentor can empower a person to see a possible future and believe it can be obtained, but many mentoring programmes fail because the discussion surrounding such empowerment doesn't generally apply in real life. As E.M. Forster put it, "spoon feeding in the long run teaches us nothing except the shape of the spoon".

Mentoring is restrictive as it involves talking to just one individual and, more often than not, expectations are not met regarding mentee belief and mentee exposure.

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Exposure is the recipe, sponsorship provides the ingredients

Studies have shown that there are three principle levers to career success and their weighting is not as you might expect.

One's professional performance (i.e. how you do your job) is important. However, in modern businesses with sophisticated talent attraction techniques, it accounts for just 10%. After all, your company expects you to be excellent – that is why you were hired in the first place.

More important is your professional image (i.e. how you present yourself in the workplace). Being assured, trustworthy and open to change is central to your success and this impacts just under one-third of your success.

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Historically, men have been expert at cultivating their exposure levels through informal and male-stereotypical networking environments. Conventionally, women have less flexibility (and perhaps desire) to embrace these traditions. They also remain more risk-aware of their abilities, whereas men are generally openly confident about their suitability for a new opportunity.

In terms of exposure, sponsorship is more involved than mentoring

regarding both the sponsor and sponsoree – both are accountable for the process and its outcomes.

The best programmes last for at least 12 months, include job-shadowing, resilience-coaching and are supported by clear metrics. Sponsorship takes mentoring beyond the tandem partnership and into the boardroom and/or management meetings. Sponsors talk to and about their sponsees and therefore increase their corporate exposure and can provide feedback on unseen opportunities for growth. Sponsors also benefit from the learning opportunity that comes with an intense, frank and extensive personal and professional interaction.

Sponsorship's immediate and impressive impact

The impact of sponsorship can be immediate and impressive. A recent series of sponsorship programmes within a Euro Stoxx 50 firm doubled the ratio of women at the top layer of management in just two years and demonstrated that an overwhelming majority of senior female promotions were directly linked to participation in such programmes.

Sponsorship is not about talking to me; it is talking about me. It is the key to unlocking the main obstacle to women's career success – a lack of exposure.



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