

Conference Review

Women and Leadership: Closing the Gender Gap

Conference held September 2011, Oxford Brookes University, UK

Claudia Filsinger, Learning & Development Consultant, Oxford, UK

Sally Worth, Head of Organization Development, University of Leicester, UK

Contact email: claudia@claudiafilsinger.com

Key Words: Women, leadership, gender diversity, equality, executive coaching.

Introduction

Oxford Brookes University in collaboration with the Centre for Diversity Policy Research and Practice at Oxford Brookes University held their inaugural conference in September 2011 in Oxford. The context for the conference was provided by recent White Papers published by the UK government on the lack of gender equality in leadership positions and the introduction of quotas in several EU countries.

This conference review has three objectives:

- To summarise the authors' notes on both the research presented and the debates that took place
- To draw conclusions for the coaching profession
- To identify areas for further research

The key debates centred on the case for gender balance in leadership positions, legislative and voluntary measures, and the progress in individual industries and sectors. The conference content will be of interest to anybody coaching female and male executives, or for anybody concerned with developing female talent. More information on the conference programme, presentation slides and speaker biographies is available at <http://www.brookes.ac.uk/about/events/women/presentations>.

Day 1

The first morning of the conference focused on the recommendations of the Lord Davies' report 'Women on Boards' (Department for Business Innovations and Skills, 2011) and the different approaches taken outside the UK designed to close the gender gap. After a welcome and introduction to the conference from the Vice-Chancellor, Professor Janet Beer and the Chancellor, Shami Chakrabarti, a video message from the EU Vice-President, Viviane Reding, was played that explained the position and mandate of the EU: Equality is a human right and the EU sets the framework with policies and laws. The under-representation of women in decision-making positions in Europe is an issue; 60% of graduates in developed countries are female, but only 1 in 10 board members of

The current issue and full text archive of this journal is available at
<http://www.business.brookes.ac.uk/research/areas/coachingandmentoring/>

[International Journal of Evidence Based Coaching and Mentoring](#)

Vol. 10, No. 2, August 2012

Page 111

publicly listed companies are women. The issue is about fairness but it is also a business issue as there is a co-relation of company performance and governance and the representation of women.

Several Western European EU countries have introduced quotas. The EU promoted a voluntary measure, the '[Women at the board](#)' pledge. It encourages organisations to pledge publicly that they will actively recruit qualified women to replace outgoing male board members to reach the target of 30% female board members by 2015 and 40% by 2020. Viviane Reding announced that progress based on these voluntary and self-regulated measures will be reviewed in spring 2012 and directives at EU level will be considered if self-regulation fails. In the meantime, the EU has published a progress report (European Commission, 2012) that found insufficient progress towards gender-balanced boards in all Member States. The EU will now explore policy options, which could include legislative ones, and a decision on possible measures is expected in late 2012.

Professor Susan Vinnicombe, OBE, Director of the International Centre for Women Leaders at Cranfield School of Management spoke next about *Increasing the number of women on FTSE 100 Boards: Initiative for Change*. Representation of women in higher education, intake into professions and at middle management is fine in the UK, but women are under-represented at the top leadership levels. One key question to consider in the debate is whether the cause is the lack of women or the dominance of men. Women make up 12.5% of FTSE 100 boards. The media has picked up the topic and progress is being made that can make change happen. Opportunities for women for non-executive director positions have increased. However, a plateau has been reached. The percentage of female appointments needs to increase substantially. Susan Vinnicombe proposed that the lack of qualified women for top positions is a myth and that the talent pipeline is healthy. Chairmen and CEOs' behaviours have an influence on appointing women while the size of a board has little influence. Once women are appointed to executive committees they can then usually continue to being appointed to the Board. The UK tries to emulate the change model used in Australia by working with other stakeholders, e.g. investors and recruiters. UK chairmen are generally opposed to quotas.

Jacey Graham, Director at Brook Graham spoke also on the *Initiative for Change*. Early solutions in organisations were focused on *fixing women*, now the solutions are aimed at *fixing the organisation*. The business case for change has been understood by organisations and doesn't need to be demonstrated anymore. She confirmed the myth of a small talent pipeline. If there are only a few high performers in the pipeline, organisations should look at the rising stars. Jacey Graham presented key factors on how to build the talent pipeline and a case study with details of a reverse mentoring programme (women in the talent pipeline mentoring male CEOs/Chairmen). There is an increasing trend towards undertaking reverse mentoring, however sponsorship is regarded as more effective than mentoring and change is brought about when senior men are involved in 1:1 initiatives. She confirmed further that the attitude of the chair is significant. A critical mass of chairmen who are champions for women on boards is needed. The best champions are men who have changed their negative attitude due to the positive experience of working on boards with women. These chairmen need to be leveraged more as ambassadors as their experience of changing their mindset can help bring about change. Women who make it to the board often have multi-sector experience. FTSE 250 chairmen are also important as they provide the feeder talent pipeline for the FTSE 100.

The gender quota for chairmen is not yet in discussion. The debate is not just about male *dominated* organisations, but also about male *gendered* organisations. The appointment process to Boards is based largely on personal referral, a process that is not only discriminating to women but also to other minorities. Large changes have taken place elsewhere, e.g. sustainability and environmental issues, and the learning from these is applicable. She argued that there isn't a causal correlation of women on boards making a positive impact on financial returns and that there are

The current issue and full text archive of this journal is available at
<http://www.business.brookes.ac.uk/research/areas/coachingandmentoring/>

research gaps. The business case is broader; the major argument is about attracting, developing and retaining women, deployment of talent and about not ignoring 50% of your population. It is about sustainable leadership and she saw the social justice case and egalitarian aspect not as much in focus. There is an issue with ‘groupthink in boardrooms’ and a wider diversity discussion is needed.

Mari Teigen – Research Director at the Institute of Social Research in Oslo presented the experience of a regulated measure, *Gender Quotas for Corporate Boards in Norway*. She started by introducing the Scandinavian paradox: an egalitarian society, with high representation of women in the labour market and political decision making but low representation on boards. A 40% quota for boards was introduced in 2003 and achieved in 2009 but the law is still needed as the percentage has reached a plateau. More use of nominative committees was observed. In gender diverse boards gender specific behaviours seem to disappear. However, survey results found that men felt nothing had changed. She identified a research gap: qualitative interviews are needed in this area. Younger men appear more resistant to gender equality though there is little research available on younger men’s attitudes. This is important as younger men lost out through quotas and boards typically consist of older men and women. She proposed that networking is critical for progress. A mathematical model exists on networking whereby every new woman on a board will lead to other seats being taken by women.

Five workshops were offered during the conference and those attended by the authors are summarized as follows:

The role of head-hunters in influencing gender diversity on boards. This session was led by three recruitment agents (Sally Rowley-Williams, Sally Rowley Ltd; Deborah Loudon, Saxton Bampfylde; Fiona Vickers, Heidrick and Struggles). Quotas are widely discussed in organisations and the media and the view of the panel members was that transparency of appointments will help more than quotas. Recruitment agencies with a focus on diversity exist and often take on a talent management function for different sectors. Board vacancies are often handled by separate sections within an agency. The Davies report had an impact and boards are under pressure to appoint more women. Clients are typically conservative and go for the ‘safe choice’. More career moves from private into public sector are observed, the reverse move is difficult. Women are concentrated in the public sector and public sector clients push more for diversity. Sometimes diversity aspects are part of client brief. Research showed that using psychometrics and a thorough referencing process lead to a greater success of appointments. Interim management is a flexible route and the percentage of women is higher than men. If women consider flexible working they need to remember the recruitment agency is working for the employer, but they can advise clients to cut days if the pay is very low for the best candidate. The view on career breaks was that they are best avoided or at least women need to keep doing something for their CV. However, career breaks are an individual decision. Generic skills that are crucial for board positions are industry experience, financial skills, the ability to question risks and communication skills.

Work-life balance: still an issue? This session was led by Joanna Foster, CBE (Former Head of the Equal Opportunity Commission and of the National Work-Life Forum) with Kate Grussing (Sapphire partners) and Pam Walton (researcher and consultant on work-life balance) speaking on the subject. Pam Walton introduced the session and raised the problem of redundancy survivors having increased work-life balance (WLB) issues. EU regulations had a large and positive impact on the situation in the UK (maternity leave, paternity leave, flexible working). Equal opportunities include men and eldercare. It is important for managers to know about their team members’ personal life as it affects work-life balance. An individual approach to WLB is needed as some employees want to keep work and life separate, others integrate. There is a debate whether it is a leadership or HR issue. She

The current issue and full text archive of this journal is available at
<http://www.business.brookes.ac.uk/research/areas/coachingandmentoring/>

gave an example of a law firm that takes WLB seriously and career progression is not dependent on input, which has positive results on retention and satisfaction. People on flexible hours are promoted to partner in this firm. It was again proposed that role models of senior leaders who work flexibly are important. Working Families undertook an academic case study (Working Families, 2011) with 1,000 fathers that showed the importance of informal flexibility also for younger fathers.

Kate Grussing is the founder of recruitment agency Sapphire that supports flexible working and diversity. She gave many reasons to be optimistic about flexible working but there are also cautions to note and more change is needed:

- Proportion of roles that managers perceive as suitable for flexible working is small, less than 1% of senior roles (research by 'Working Families')
- Promotion and compensation prospects are negatively impacted
- Disconnect of type of work and impact on flexible working, performance should be assessed by output not input
- Re-launching women's careers after breaks is the most difficult area for their firm - avoid career breaks
- Downturn/redundancy impacts mostly on people working flexibly
- Long hours culture is normal in senior roles, not anticipated to change
- Flexible working is a ghetto of low/mid-level work

Result of group work on 'What is the priority that needs changing to solve the WLB issue'?

- Job Design
- Flexible working for all
- Culture and Communication change
- Switching off
- Line Manager attitude
- Sandwich between child and eldercare

Possible Solutions:

- Emphasize social justice case, Corporate Social Responsibility
- Generation Y demands it, just do it
- Job Design and Selection process
- Performance targets to include well-being
- WLB policies need to be for diverse needs, all genders
- Male role models working flexible hours needed who are leaving on time

The afternoon concluded with a 'Question Time' panel that included Shami Chakrabarti, Director of Liberty and Chancellor of Oxford Brookes University; Professor Janet Beer, Vice-Chancellor Oxford Brookes University; Colonel Marian Lauder, Defence Academy; Sara Thornton, CBE, Chief Constable Thames Valley Police; Reverend Lucy Winkett, Rector of St James Piccadilly.

The need to move from copying male styles to authenticity for women who work in male dominated organisations was identified. Further, ideas on how to cope with being patronized were

exchanged. The panel members listed the following items that enabled their success in a male dominated environment:

- Working hard and being really good at job
- Personal courage
- Groundedness: listen to intuition, don't get persuaded by others. Don't blow with the wind and please people that hate you.
- Withholding internal consent
- Focus on achievement
- Organization structures help, e.g. graduate schemes
- Enjoyable work
- Taking some risks
- Coaching
- Networking/Relationships
- Managing politics
- Strong sense of who you are
- Tenacity
- Anger, helps to make energy for change
- Applying for the next job out of fear of being managed by less competent people

Day 2

The theme for the second day of the conference was career paths in different sectors. Dr Simonetta Manfredi, Director of the Centre for Diversity Policy Research at Oxford Brookes University had already given an overview of *The situation in the public sector and politics* on the previous day. Women are best represented in voluntary organisations with 45% of top jobs being held by women, whereas in the civil service and local authorities it is just under 30% and 25% respectively and in the police it is just over 15%. The higher education and judiciary sector give rise to the most concern at just below 15%. The situation in government has worsened in the last five years with female members of cabinet falling from 35% in 2006 to currently 17%. Members of parliament are now 22% female.

Beverly Alimo-Metcalfe, Professor of Leadership at the University of Bradford, set the scene for the day with her presentation *Gender and leadership problems and possibilities*. She raised concerns about the assessment process in organisations. The impact of the manager on performance is large. The assessment of performance is a three-step process, based on the attitudes and behaviours the assessor is looking for:

- 1) Identification of the criteria
- 2) Design of the process
- 3) Observation of attitudes and behaviours

The issue of this process is that often the assessor can be looking for clones. The general understanding of leadership and leadership theory is influenced by gender. The problem with the 1980/90's leadership models and research is that they were based on men studying men, e.g. self-reported studies with little evidence on productivity. The heroic leadership model (e.g. Jack Welch) is now questioned. The challenges that organisations face are so great that everybody's contribution is needed. The new focus of leadership is employee engagement which is associated with superior organisational outcomes. There is a positive attitude to organisation and values and commitment to

The current issue and full text archive of this journal is available at
<http://www.business.brookes.ac.uk/research/areas/coachingandmentoring/>

[International Journal of Evidence Based Coaching and Mentoring](#)

Vol. 10, No. 2, August 2012

Page 115

improvement that affects the discretionary effort put into work. It is a two-way process that facilitates empowerment and feeling valued. She posed the question as to what engaging leadership is day to day and presented a gender inclusive study from Leeds University. It was a repertory grid process study (a tool that excludes the influence of researcher) on private and public organisations, asking about managers. Gender and constructs of leadership were researched and very different notions of leadership were found, which is confirmed by other studies. It is the largest study of leadership in the world with 6,000 participants and direct reports of 2,000 managers were questioned. Engaging leadership predicts productivity, morale and well-being. Women are rated more engaging than men on 13 out of 14 dimensions. This research should influence the selection of senior managers. Further studies on gender bias in managerial stereotypes were presented. Original studies from 1973 were repeated in 1989 and show differences between countries by gender, e.g. German women don't associate women with effective managers.

Sarah Veale, CBE, Head of Equality and Employment Rights Department TUC, talked about *Glass ceilings and sticky floors – women in the workplace*. She proposed that the argument of women not being suitable for and not being interested in leadership roles still prevails and supports the attitude that no change is needed. Organisations and leaders look for clones of current leaders. This makes it difficult for women to acquire leadership competence. Entry barriers to professions have been removed, e.g. in medicine and law. Pay and education is not the only thing that is important. Non-graduate/traditional female jobs like hairdressing and childcare depend on the 'male main bread winner' model. This and unequal pay is in the way of men taking flexible working options. Laws on equal pay and sex discrimination rely on women complaining about unequal pay, it is difficult for women to fight this. Women segregate around flexible working options but flexible working is undervalued. Part-time working is seen as part-time commitment, resulting in losing out on promotion and training opportunities. Sarah Veale evaluated the UK Equality Act as a timid measure and proposed that lots of organisational changes and cultural shifts are needed before women will move into leadership

Liz Coffey, MD, Spark Leadership Ltd. proposed that *Strategic influencing*, is the most important skill for senior leaders. Her recommendations were based on a PhD by Joel de Luca. Rational and moral reasons are blocks for people to move from being political avoiders to political activists. Firstly the assumption that organisations are rational and that quality and merit should be good enough. She proposed the following tools and tactics:

- Informal influencing works best but based on strategy, be systematic about it
- 51% guide: you need 51% to understand your new idea and to be willing to explore it further
- Agenda linking: Understand agendas of people you want to influence and link to yours
- Credibility path: know who trusts whom and use as influencing path, evaluate risks of conversations and choose lower risk
- Use of group meetings: plan enough time to influence before meeting, perhaps postpone if not ready
- Plan-act approach: Have a strategic plan and then act

The day continued with a panel session on *Women in Law*. The panellists were: Professor Lucy Vickers, Oxford Brookes; Rt. Hon. Dame Janet Smith, DBE, Judge of the Court of Appeal; Sue Ashtiany, Employment and Discrimination Lawyer; Alexandra Marks, Partner Linklater LLP. Each panellist gave a statement followed by a discussion.

Dame Janet Smith: Few women are judges, QCs or senior partners in law firms. There are long periods between qualifying and getting to leadership positions in the sector, for example 25 years for judges. She had a role model herself who enabled her career progression. The entry situation seems to be fine and lots of progress has been made, but she expects a high rate of attrition of women which is influenced by the following factors:

1. Degree of commitment required in independent professions. Career breaks and working part-time is perceived as not being committed
2. Women typically opt out for personal reasons

Confidence and pro-activity is required if women want to progress to leadership positions. The current student generation has high levels of confidence and the playing field is level. The judicial appointment board is anxious to appoint women and the appointment process has become more transparent.

Sue Ashtiany: She gave an overview of the development of equal opportunities and discrimination legislation and practice. There was a shift from the initial focus on equal opportunity to diversity. During the same period the length of maternity leave in the UK increased. Professional services firms are least friendly towards the modern way of working. 12 months is a long time for an Associate solicitor and there are challenges of re-integrating after maternity leave. The inability of women to go to the top of private law firms is a problem of the career model, there are few female partner appointments and few partner openings in general. The model works for partners but it is questionable if it works as well for clients. The judicial appointments board is systematic, looking for good women to appoint, an overt system that works which is not the case for professional services firms. The Law society now asks legal firms for diversity statistics but they stagnate. The change of the environment in law firms will be a fight but the situation at the Bar is currently better for women.

Alexandra Marks: Mentors were helpful in her career. Her message to women was: be unreasonable to enable change. If flexible working is an adaptation or a fix for some reject it, it is for all. Flexible working is not advancing women into leadership, it is counterproductive. Women who will survive and thrive are those who have adapted to the existing environment which is based on male partners with non-working wives. Nobody (at partner level) has first hand experience and understands the reality of combining caring for children and working. There is a lack of positive female role models. Flexible working will not change the model; it is a way of keeping women on board who are highly productive which has enormous benefits for organisations. Quality work for part-time workers is needed; there is an issue of the perception of lack of commitment, which leads to penalties for career progression. Reviewing job criteria and job design is critical. Able people don't want to do the jobs as they are currently designed.

In the following panel discussion portfolio careers were seen to enable the cross-fertilisation of skills. However, work outside legal firms (e.g. board memberships) is perceived as not being committed and skills in law need to be used frequently. The partnership structure in law firms is an issue as line management responsibilities are not clear. Lack of interest in developing people is an issue with partners, as their job is to find new business and they are usually not interested in personal issues. Mentor or Champions work to help women progress, but it is a matter of luck to find them. Different business models have been tried as clients don't like the input-based, billable hours system either. Women tend to leave for other jobs, leading to high attrition rates, which is advantageous to men in the sector.

The conference continued with a review of the situation for *Women in Politics*. Panel members included Anna Bird, Chief Executive Fawcett Society; Dinti Batstone, Vice-Chair of the Campaign for Gender Balance, Liberal Democrats; and Rt. Hon Jacqui Smith, Labour.

Women are under-represented in politics. Economic policies and spending cuts have a disproportionate impact on women's lives. Career barriers to women in politics are similar to business and professional services. There is a lack of competence and a lack of role models who are important. Further there are life cycle issues as women start their political careers often later in their 50s which means there is a lack of women in their 30s/40s. Work in politics is also designed for men with stay-at-home-wives. Politics is worse than business as it requires living in two places and there is an assumption that someone at home takes care of domestic issues. Presenteeism is prevalent and the culture in the EU parliament seems more appealing to women as more women stand and are elected to the EU parliament. Men use sponsorship as main promotion strategies, women less so. Opportunities the panel saw for progress were:

- Structural change is needed
- Women need to be empowered to participate in politics
- Women need to talent spot younger women
- Stand for parliament on a job share basis
- Use House of Lords reform as a way to get women in
- Increase women's confidence through networking, support from others

A summary from Professor Janet Beer, Vice Chancellor, Oxford Brookes University concluded the conference:

- Use evidence to enable change and deploy it, otherwise it is just opinion
- Transparency of appointment processes work
- Flexible working is for everybody
- Appropriate job descriptions needed
- Continuing the debate on quotas/target

Lessons from the conference for coaching

The talent pipeline is healthy and coaching can contribute by enabling talent to develop further by working not just with women but also with male Chairmen and CEOs. For example, gender diversity initiatives could include coaching male Chairmen and CEOs and reverse mentoring.

The regulatory pressure on organisations to increase the number of women on their boards is expected to rise since the progress with voluntary measures has been slow (European Commission, 2012). It follows that the topicality of the gender gap in leadership positions is expected to remain and the need for debate and research in this area will continue to rise.

References

Department for Business Innovations and Skills (2011), *Women on boards*. Accessed 17 May 2012 from: <http://www.bis.gov.uk/assets/biscore/business-law/docs/w/11-745-women-on-boards.pdf>
– Often called ‘Davies report’

Equality and Human Rights Commission (2011) *Sex and power*. London: Equality and Human Rights Commission. Accessed 15 May 2012 from
http://www.equalityhumanrights.com/uploaded_files/sex+power/sex_and_power_2011_gb_2_.pdf

European Commission (2012) *Women in economic decision-making in the EU: Progress report*. Accessed 17 May 2012 from:
http://ec.europa.eu/justice/gender-equality/files/women-on-boards_en.pdf

Working Families (2011), *Working and fathers*, Accessed 17 May 2012 from:
http://www.workingfamilies.org.uk/admin/uploads/WF_WorkingAndFathers-Report-FINAL.pdf

Claudia Filsinger is an independent Learning & Development Consultant and Coach. She holds an MA in Mentoring and Coaching Practice from Oxford Brookes University. Her coaching expertise and research interests include women’s career development.

Sally Worth is an Organisation Development Director and Coach. She is currently finalising her professional Doctorate in Coaching and Mentoring at Oxford Brookes University and the subject of her study is the exploration of coaching women towards authenticity in the workplace.