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WOMEN CHALLENGE LEADERSHIP STYLES

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By Dina Medland

The lack of progress in the UK in placing women into executive roles and keeping them there might have less to do with flexible working, work-life balance or a lack of ambition and confidence among women than it does with the absence of a clear definition of what “leadership” looks like.

“It might be that we have been talking about the wrong things,” says Mairi Eastwood, co-founder and partner at Praesta, an executive coaching firm.

Praesta recently published research around issues raised by senior women in its coaching sessions. Some findings suggest that a company’s definition of “leadership style” is very important in dictating the pace of progress towards building a female “executive pipeline”.

“Women have relatively few role models. Their leadership style is often more consensual and can be seen as ‘soft’ when it is actually very successful. Chief executives need to ensure they judge by results rather than methods and actively encourage a range of leadership styles,” says Ms Eastwood.

Most of the attention on women and business in the UK in the last year has been around increasing the number of female non-executive directors in the boardroom.

So far, there have been only small changes, while the representation of women in executive roles, as of January this year, remains low: there were just 20 female executive directorships (6.6 per cent) in the FTSE 100, and 28 (4.6 per cent) in the FTSE 250, according to the Female FTSE Board Report published by Cranfield University.

In his report on Women On Boards early last year, Lord Davies of Abersoch said the UK was not alone in facing “female attrition” when it comes to the level of women in the workforce.

His report said: “Male and female graduate entry into the workforce is relatively equal. This equality is maintained at junior management positions but then suffers a marked drop at senior management levels. The reasons for this drop are complex, and relate to factors such as lack of access to flexible working arrangements, difficulties in achieving work-life balance or disillusionment at a lack of career progression.”

While the report placed the onus on chairmen to provide the momentum for more women non-executives in the boardroom, it added: “Also, we expect all chief executives to review the percentage of women they aim to have on their executive committees in 2013 and 2015.”

It pointed to the need to keep a close eye on the progress of women, and of the importance of transparency: “Quoted companies should be required to disclose each year the proportion of women on the board, women in senior executive positions and female employees in the whole organisation. The old adage ‘what gets measured gets done’ remains true. Transparent reporting will help chairmen and chief executives to understand better the composition of their workforces and monitor attrition rates.”

By January 2012 only 34 FTSE 100 companies and 40 FTSE 250 companies had provided information on the percentage of women in the workforces and at junior, middle, senior and executive level.

Among those that are tracking and measuring the progress of women are two FTSE 100 companies and they are now in the final stages of designing and launching a programme for women to develop their executive careers.

Peninah Thomson, chief executive of The Mentoring Foundation and founder of the FTSE 100 Cross-Company Mentoring Programme, says her organisations are involved in helping: “We now have two companies interested and are aiming for six in total to run a pilot scheme. It is very important to have companies across sectors.”

The plan is for each woman in the scheme to be mentored by someone from another company, creating a “cascade effect” of passing on skills, says Ms Thomson. Mentoring and sponsorship has proved to be effective in communicating values and patterns of behaviour within an organisation. One-on-one sessions also allow people to express their true views on any subject.

“At a fundamental level it’s about being clear and thoughtful about what characteristics are important to the company at senior levels. This then flows through into how you describe a role when you recruit for it – and also into how you deal with women,” says Deborah Warburton, partner at Hedley May, an executive search firm.

She echoes Ms Eastwood’s view that there is “still a lot of dancing around the subject” of women’s progress rather than a focus on “what people really think”. She also believes many chief executives are frustrated by the lack of an executive female pipeline but uncertain how to go about generating one.

Ms Warburton says: “It is important to be honest in this debate. Many people, for example, assume that women don’t handle stress as well as men. But men are afraid to say that. We need to make the conversation more central and honest in companies to generate a solution.”

At the board consultancy and coaching firm Iddas, chief executive Helen Pitcher adds another dimension to the debate: “Some companies have started ‘reverse mentoring’ – where relatively junior women have started coaching senior men to let them know how it feels to be them,” she says.

Ms Pitcher says the development of a female executive pipeline needs to be based more around a competency-based question – do the women have transferable skills? She is seeing more organisations willing to take this approach.

One FTSE 100 company making progress on generating a female executive pipeline is Unilever. Leela Nair, its 40-year-old Mumbai-based executive director for human resources, has been with the company for 17 years and is an electronic engineer who switched to the HR function.

Unilever, which started its executive mentoring programme two years ago, now has 109 women being mentored to the most senior levels, and nearly 500 being mentored at middle management level in local markets. “We are promoting geographies where the gender balance is below the Unilever average [of 39 per cent],” says Ms Nair.

“For leadership development we have to engage the men as well – so each member of the executive team leads a priority geography,” she adds.

Verbal and visual “stories” of 16 senior women have been captured and disseminated by intranet, video and newsletter across the company to inspire and engage others. “We try to make sure we are telling stories about both men and women, as men need to change as well, to become more inclusive,” she says.