

Turning words into action to get women on boards

By Gill Plimmer

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So we've just had the Davies Report into how we can get more women into the boardroom. There was a huge amount of publicity when it came out – but what is our organisation actually supposed to DO now?

Peninah Thomson, partner at Praesta, an executive coaching firm, and director of the FTSE100 Cross-Company Mentoring Programme, says:

We found some evidence earlier this year that FTSE companies were already starting to recruit more women to their boards ahead of Lord Davies's report.

But while that's a good response, they also need to start developing their own staff or there's a danger they will all be recruiting from the same existing pool of talent.

What do companies need to be focusing on? For some blue chip organisations, developing staff is part of the warp and weft of how they run themselves.

But that's not the case for everyone. Getting the right performance management systems and development processes in place – free, crucially, of unconscious bias – is going to be a very early priority for those companies that have been slow off the mark.

Mapping where their talented women are is going to be an issue for some companies. When the FTSE 100 Cross-Company Mentoring Programme started eight years ago, one of the big discoveries was that some organisations – even large ones – didn't have a clear picture of where to find their most talented women. They didn't know where they worked in their organisations and in order to nominate a mentee to the programme, they had to try and identify them.

It was a big discovery – that some companies didn't have breakdowns of senior roles by gender.

Eight years on and some are a lot better at it, but there's still work to be done.

So companies need to find ways to tap their talent. Second, they need to give good career guidance to women with potential.

I was talking to the chairman of a FTSE100 company the other day and he said that one of the early issues post-Davies is how to help women build careers which include profit and loss responsibilities.

A lot of able women have gone into functional roles such as human resources and while these are excellent, it is rare for experts in them to get a seat on the board.

Companies need to advise women on how to structure a portfolio of professional experience that doesn't preclude them from joining a board in later life. You can't just decide you want to join a board when you hit 48; you've got to ensure earlier on that you get exposure to both finance and international working.

This is a challenge for women, who typically have non-linear careers. How can women do this? How can organisations do this? It requires everyone to think creatively about the structure of work. One of the women being mentored on the FTSE-100 Programme is a first-class candidate for a non-executive director role. But she was advised by a headhunter that she wouldn't get one because she had no international experience.

To help get round that, we've approached our sister programme in France. The leader has offered to provide additional mentoring that will give her exposure to the CAC-40.

Helen Pitcher, chairman of Iddas, a boardroom effectiveness consultancy, says:

Women typically under-play their capabilities at interview. They need advice and support to build their confidence – or at least come across that way. They also need to be pro-active about networking. They must volunteer for extra responsibilities, which will bring them into closer

contact with the board.

It can help to find a sponsor; someone who is already active on company boards or in recruiting for boards. They will recommend you to their clients and colleagues.

One non-executive director I know initially approached headhunters ad infinitum with no success. She got her first non-executive role through a contact, who recommended her to headhunters, which meant they started to take her seriously.

FTSE-350 companies, headhunters and consultancies also need to collaborate more comprehensively.

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