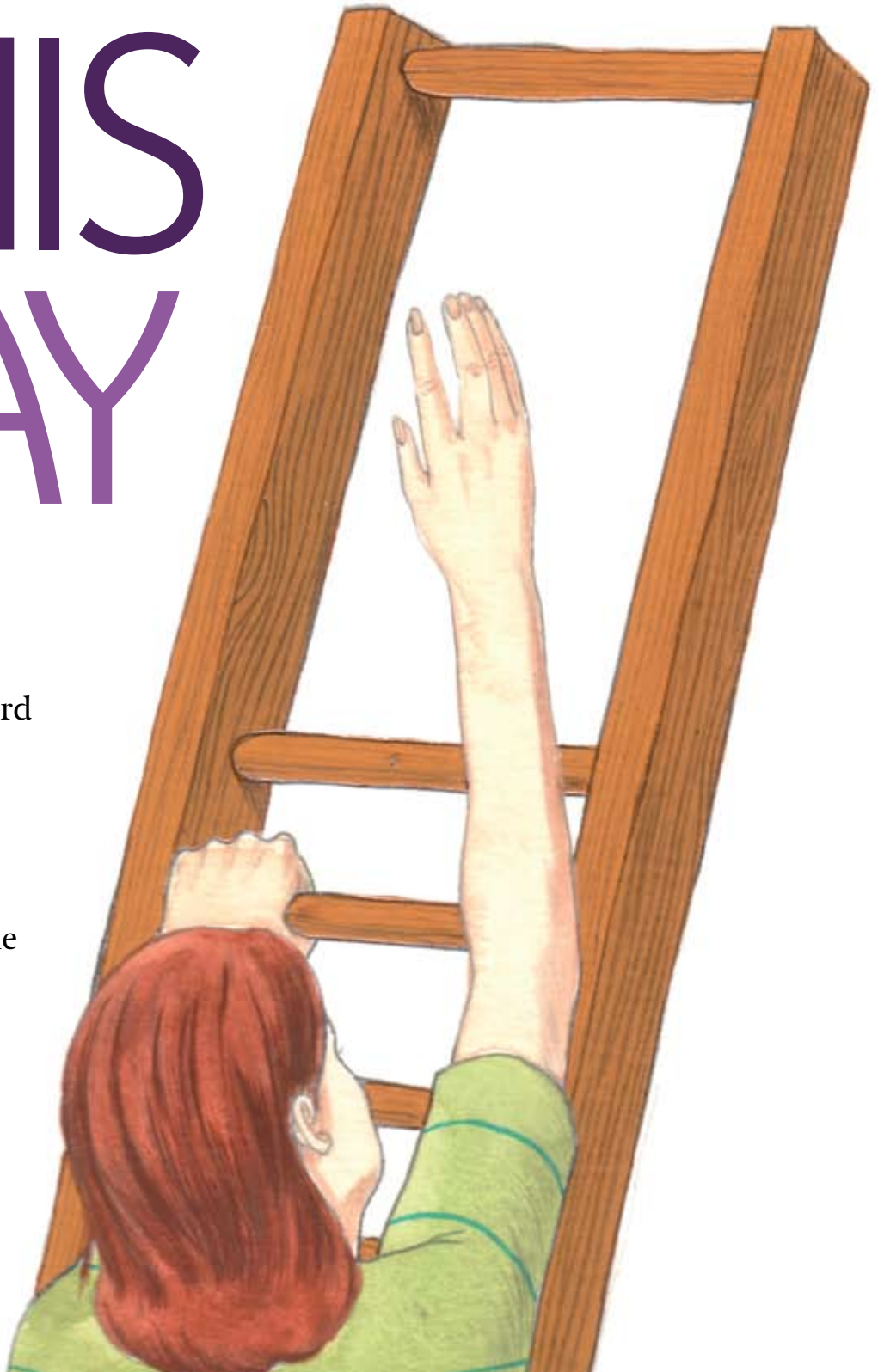


STEP THIS WAY

Most companies are aware that they have too few women at board level, yet the gender imbalance continues.

Peninah Thomson maps the challenges women must overcome if they are to keep moving up the ladder



We thought we'd covered our ground when our book came out in 2005. *A Woman's Place is in the Boardroom*¹ explained why gender imbalance on boards was a problem for business. We revealed how the imbalance was perceived by those implicated in it, and affected by it – chairmen, female directors and women who aspired to main board positions, and headhunters. We broke the problem down, suggesting ways to address each component cause. Our intention was to provide the tools to help companies achieve a better balance on their boards.

Two years later, however, the number of women holding executive and non-executive directorships on FTSE-100 boards had barely moved – from 121 in 2005 to 123 in 2007. Female non-executive directorships had crept up from 107 to 110, but the number of female-held executive directorships had actually gone down – from 14 to 13. Meanwhile, the latest data from the Equality and Human Rights Commission's annual report, *Sex and Power*, reveals there are fewer women in top posts this year in almost half of the 25 categories.

In the past three years, we have received hundreds of emails and letters from women all over the UK and abroad, asking for help in their effort to progress in their careers. We have also been invited to address hundreds of organisations – universities, NGOs, FTSE-100 and international companies, departments of state in government and the World Bank – on issues connected with the retention and progress of senior women executives.

Although our book had made some impact, the problem was a

good deal more complex and intractable than anyone had thought. Our publisher suggested we write a sequel. This time we would focus on what women and companies could do to try to make beneficial change happen².

We hope very much that this second “set of tools” will contribute to a significant increase of pace in a process of change that has, to date, been rather glacial.

Writing the second book involved drawing on analytical and experiential data from two sources: three years of directing the FTSE-100 Cross-Company Mentoring Programme³ and my own experience of coaching senior women.

The book outlines the eight challenges for women seeking to position themselves as credible candidates for executive and non-executive directorships:

- taking the decision to engage;
- understanding how boards work – structure, finance, and so on;
- learning about board dynamics and social etiquette;
- identifying sectors and companies of interest and looking at their boards;
- cultivating board qualities – for example, awareness profile, image and presence;
- producing a “personal marketing plan” based on one's own selling points;
- identifying areas for personal learning from feedback and engaging in behavioural change;
- building experience for the top and breaking on to first board.

It specifies the means by which those challenges can be addressed, by women themselves and by companies. Identifying and understanding those challenges just below board level involved a “deep dive” into the knowledge base, practices and behaviours that really work for women executives on their journey to the top.

As the work progressed it became increasingly clear why coaching senior women on their response to some of those challenges brings us into complex and subtle territory. Discussing the crafting of a “Power CV” or how to acquire surrogate board experience is one thing. Working on an individual's perception of appropriate leadership behaviour for women – on her attitude to politics, or her own power, influence and authority – is quite another. Coaching is addressing issues connected with the fundamental belief systems held by an individual and their concept of who they are.

Here we will focus on the coaching implications of two of the eight roadmap challenges: “deciding to engage” and “the unwritten rules”.

Deciding to engage

Above a certain level in the company, and particularly at the penultimate level, my experience is that most women want to pause and take stock. They need to feel prepared, emotionally as well as practically, to engage with the uppermost echelons of the

“Most women need to feel prepared, emotionally as well as practically, to engage with the uppermost echelons of the hierarchy”



hierarchy. This “reading” is important because women are not natural hierarchy climbers. It takes a conscious act of will for a woman to throw her hat into the ring, whereas it takes a conscious act of will for a man to withdraw voluntarily from the competition for leadership positions.

Over the past 10 years, as I watched yet another able, experienced and aspirational woman hesitate before placing her foot firmly on the final step, I have identified three reasons for this reticence. First, she may have a fear of failure, which, if it occurs, is likely to be very visible. Second, she may prefer to feel completely ready, on all counts, for the next stage. And third, she may experience an (often unexpected, and unwelcome) inner questioning about whether she can actually “do it” – whatever the “it” might be.

Exploring and working with a senior female executive through any, or all, of these takes time. But the work must not be rushed, because if a woman does not engage with these issues, pushing herself through in a desire to “get on with it”, she risks setting herself up to fail. The questions

that are often addressed at this stage include:

- Is this the right opportunity?
- Will I regret it if I don’t go for it?
- Am I good enough?
- Could I contribute and make a difference?
- What will I have to sacrifice?
- Do I want the legal responsibilities?
- Will I be able to cope with the pressure and play the politics effectively?

The coaching process is twofold: first, validate the

concept of a pause or stock-take; second, accompany the client through an enquiry process. This can take time – sometimes the most pertinent questions are not the most obvious ones and may indeed be out-of-awareness to the woman herself.

Identifying, naming and addressing the “real” issue or issues, however, is the bedrock for the client’s next career stage. Unaddressed, she risks having one or more of those fundamental issues emerge unexpectedly at a later stage: an experience that can be destabilising. A period of reflection, and some work on the issues that emerge from that reflection, stand a putative director or non-executive director in good stead.

The French have an apt expression for this phase: *reculer pour mieux sauter* (to draw back in order to make a better jump).

Having decided to engage, the next challenge is understanding and getting to grips with the unwritten rules at board level.

The unwritten rules

For the female executive, working on the implications of the legal framework, FSA regulations, contractual obligations, accounting standards, codes of practice, the informal (but often powerful) controls exercised by investor

and public opinion on high-profile matters such as the pay of the CEO and of workers in poor countries, and on environmental, social and community responsibility, is relatively straightforward. Understanding the unwritten rules and norms that operate in the board milieu is quite a different matter.

It's important that a new female director or non-executive director recognises at the outset that the board milieu – the various board meetings and committees, and also the social anteroom of boards, those places and situations where board members get together, socialise and network – is essentially political and, for historical reasons, essentially male.

This situation is changing, but very slowly, and the boards of most UK companies have very few women on them. As a result, the existing (male) board members will be accustomed to doing things their way. When they think of leadership, for example, their mental model of excellence is likely to be founded on the way men lead. They will not think of it as male leadership, but as leadership. When a woman joins the group (especially if she is a lone woman) and leads, or makes interventions, her way, it is unlikely to look, or sound, like “leadership” to them.

This can cause all sorts of misunderstandings and difficulties, and some of the most important work that can be done by a coach working with a senior woman preparing to go on to a board is to support her in identifying, validating and honing her own, personal, authentic leadership style. Operating with a male leadership model will not work for women.

“ While female leaders are scorned for being ambitious and aggressive, male leaders are admired if they are warm and friendly ”

A double bind

Many studies have shown that women are not seen as being authentically female when they exhibit aggression, ambition, dominance, self-reliance and individualism – traits commonly associated with leadership. If, on the other hand, they behave in ways commonly associated with women – if they're affectionate, kind, friendly, sensitive and softly spoken – they are not considered to have the right qualities for a leadership position.

Researchers have described this paradox as the “double bind”⁴. It does not seem to apply to men: while female leaders are scorned for being ambitious and aggressive, male leaders are admired if they are warm and friendly. One coaching client expressed succinctly the challenge she faced: “One of the issues for me is that I've seen a lot of unproductive board behaviour, so the role models are not always the best ones. The challenge is to find a way to operate effectively within a culture functioning in a certain way, without resorting to precisely the kind of behaviour

making it dysfunctional in the first place.”

The superficially simple answer to this conundrum is: be yourself. Of course, it is not quite as easy as that: the “self” that a new woman director or non-executive director presents may, to her chagrin, not be one to which male board members attend. Her voice may not be heard (figuratively, sometimes literally); her opinions may be discounted; her judgments mistrusted. And all because she has not found a way of operating effectively within a male culture.

Faced with this situation, some women may struggle, becoming exasperated and strident in an effort to contribute, or retreating into silence and leaving the field to more dominant voices. There is, however, a third way, and taking the time with her coach to identify, hone and be comfortable with her own leadership mode and style will help a new female executive or non-executive director to “find her voice”, and ensure that her interventions are more likely to be attended to and respected. ■

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- 3 The FTSE-100 Cross-Company Mentoring Programme is sponsored by executive coaching firm Praesta Partners: www.praesta.co.uk
4. A Eagly and L Carli, “Women and the labyrinth of leadership”, *Harvard Business Review*, September 2007.