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Supporting Women from Middle Management into Senior Leadership Roles



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Women's progression into senior leadership roles remains a challenge, not due to a lack of talent, but because of structural barriers, self-limiting beliefs, and outdated workplace cultures. At our latest roundtable, we explored how organisations can do more to support women moving from middle management into board-level positions.

Through open and honest discussion, it became clear that coaching, sponsorship, and organisational change are key to unlocking potential. To create real change, businesses need to go beyond traditional diversity initiatives and rethink leadership structures, role expectations, and the way career conversations are held.

Coaching, Sponsorship & Leadership Mindset

One of the biggest takeaways from our discussion was the role of coaching and sponsorship in helping women step into leadership roles with confidence. Many senior female leaders have had therapy or coaching to navigate biases and develop a stronger leadership mindset.

However, there was also a strong view that coaching shouldn't reinforce imposter syndrome but should instead reinforce psychological capital and their voices to help leaders own their presence and respond strategically to challenges.

- Women often feel pressure to adapt to 'male energy' in leadership, whereas sponsorship can help them succeed by amplifying their own leadership style rather than conforming to outdated norms.
- Career progression shouldn't rely solely on self-promotion. Senior leaders need to actively advocate for women's growth and development.
- Leadership roles need to be redesigned to be less isolating, ensuring clear expectations and structures that enable success. In addition, clearly defining board-level responsibilities helps new leaders transition more effectively.

- Work-life balance and setting boundaries were discussed as essential for long-term, sustainable leadership rather than 'doing it all' with flexible working practices seen as essential enabler to support women in leadership.

The Impact of Early Career Conversations & Role Models

A particularly striking discussion point was the way early career experiences shape confidence and ambition. Many women unknowingly cap their potential in the early stages of their careers, believing that leadership isn't for them.

- Without visible female role models, many women struggle to see themselves in senior leadership positions.
- Career advice given at graduate level can have a long-term impact on ambition and self-belief. Women often focus on overcoming imposter syndrome, while men are encouraged to 'work harder' to succeed.
- Sponsorship from senior leaders plays a critical role in helping women see what's possible and providing them with meaningful opportunities.
- Even simple actions, like offering women a seat at the table in meetings, can shift perceptions and build confidence in leadership potential.

Shaping an Inclusive Leadership Culture

Beyond individual development, there's a clear need for organisations to embed DEI within leadership strategy, ensuring that women feel psychologically safe to lead authentically.

Key enablers for change include:

- Succession planning with diversity targets. For example, the 40/40/20 rule (40% women, 40% men, 20% open representation).
- Encouraging male leaders to challenge gender biases and model inclusive behaviours.
- Reframing career success so that it's not just about working harder but about building confidence, resilience, and leadership skills.

- Recognising that AI and automation may shift traditionally male-dominated leadership skills, opening new opportunities for more diverse leadership styles.

Creating Pathways to Leadership

For real change to happen, we need clear, structured pathways to support women into senior leadership. This includes:

- Ensuring that career conversations involve multiple stakeholders (e.g., managers and HR) to provide better guidance.
- Redesigning leadership roles so they are more attractive and sustainable, avoiding burnout or unnecessary barriers to entry.
- Helping women define their leadership style, set clear boundaries, and embrace their own version of success.

When women are supported and empowered, leadership teams benefit from greater diversity of thought, innovation, and resilience. The challenge now is not just to open doors for women but to actively invite them in and champion their success.

Questions to Consider:

1. How can we **redesign leadership roles** to make them more sustainable and appealing to women?
2. What **early career interventions** can we introduce to build confidence and ambition?
3. How can we **strengthen sponsorship and advocacy** within our organisations?
4. What **behaviours and leadership styles** should we encourage to create a more inclusive culture?

Conclusions

For too long, women have been told they need to change themselves to succeed in leadership. Instead, organisations must change the way they support and promote women, ensuring that leadership opportunities are visible, accessible, and sustainable.

It's not just about improving representation, it's about creating a workplace culture where women feel empowered to lead with confidence, authenticity, and impact.

