



Hay Hill Highlights

## Women in business: highlights from coaching



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## Overview

One of the messages coming from the various initiatives focussed on increasing the number of women in the top echelons of organisations is that 'push-pull' strategies are essential – companies need to encourage their successful women to 'push' themselves forward but at the same time find ways to 'pull' them forward by changing the operating culture and some ways of working in and around the boardroom.

Over the years we have been working with senior executives we have observed some patterns in the issues executive women raise.<sup>1</sup> Interestingly, none of the issues we have identified is exclusive to women - men bring a remarkably similar list. However, the number of issues and the way they cluster often distinguish female executives from their male counterparts.

This paper outlines the patterns we have identified and we hope it will be helpful to both women and men. For women, knowing that they are not alone in facing the issues highlighted may be helpful in itself. For male and female executives, it may shed some additional insight into how to provide the most effective support to their female direct reports.

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<sup>1</sup>Our clients are successful senior executives who are at or close to the top of their organisations - generally board / Exco members and their direct reports

## Our observations fall into three categories:

### Leading self

Some women put more emphasis on their shortcomings than their strengths, are not sufficiently direct about their achievements and can be overly risk adverse. Recognising and becoming more comfortable about putting themselves forward is clearly important.

### Engaging the organisation

Some executive women assume that participating in the formal processes of their organisations and achieving their specific objectives will be sufficient to get them the recognition they deserve. As a consequence they sometimes fail to build the broader relationships that can provide support, perspective and sponsorship.

### Managing an executive career

The importance of actively managing careers cannot be over estimated but some women nevertheless find it difficult to 'own' their ambition. This can be for a range of reasons which include being pulled in a variety of directions in their lives as well as being unsure if they are 'up to it' and consequently wanting to 'take it a step at a time'.

The patterns we have observed are set out below together with some potential strategies for managing the issues highlighted.

### Leading self

Encouraging clients to take responsibility for their own development is often an important aspect of coaching executives of both genders. In our experience, there can be particular themes in this area for women in business.

**Developing awareness of strengths** – it is important to identify and develop strengths. However, we find that some women can attach undue importance to their shortcomings. Whilst it is clearly important to understand what you are less good at and to develop strategies to work around those things, it is at least as important to understand your strengths and to cultivate them. Unsurprisingly, focusing on strengths often also helps boost confidence.

**Taking full credit for abilities and achievements** - some women feel uncomfortable taking credit for their abilities and achievements. Some even consciously step away from them. One of the consequences of this is that colleagues do not fully understand their contribution, which can in turn make it harder to help by, for instance, suggesting relevant new assignments and roles. It can be helpful to experiment in being bolder, in taking the credit for successes and in ensuring colleagues understand what you have to offer.

**Being direct about what you want and need** - women are often less direct about what they want in their careers than men. Some think they are delivering clear messages to their colleagues but are in fact couching what they want to say in such veiled terms that the messages do not get through. It can be helpful to rehearse the messages for sensitive or uncomfortable conversations and to get advice from a trusted advisor about the impact you are making.

**Taking calculated risks** - women are sometimes reluctant to take risks for themselves and for the businesses they run. Stepping into a boardroom, with the visibility that comes with it, or taking a challenging senior role, with the possibility of failing, can feel high risk. But stepping away can be career limiting. Seeking some support or input that can calibrate the risks can help in keeping them in balance.

**Developing greater presence and authority** – it can be hard for some women to work out how to display strong leadership partly because women are sometimes judged in different ways to their male colleagues. For instance, there can be a thin line between an executive women being seen as authoritative and credible on the one hand, and ‘bossy’ on the other. Derogatory descriptors can undermine a woman’s leadership ability and her reputation. It is essential to recognise this complexity and to actively determine how to manage it.

## Engaging the organisation

Appreciating the importance of effective engagement is a topic that often appears in our coaching work. Our key observations in this area are set out below.

**Developing strategies and approaches to managing the micro inequities** – women can experience many individually relatively minor but cumulatively significant number of micro inequities – instances where they do not feel included. Not surprisingly, these can put a woman off her stride. They can range from being the only woman at working dinners, or a male boss catching up with their male direct reports over a drink in the bar, to not being invited to a golf day or being talked over at meetings. Rather than deal with these situations only as they happen, it can be helpful to think through an overarching strategy. This can reduce the negative impact and the sense of isolation these sorts of situations can engender.

**Working the informal system** – some executive women focus more on the specifics of their role and rely on formal corporate structures to get things done. This can mean that they are overly reliant on their line manager to represent them to their organisation. As a consequence their contribution may be less well understood by other influential colleagues. Also, by not working the informal system, an executive may be less

in touch with the political mood and what is happening in their organisation. Many decisions are made in the informal system, including evaluations about promotions and access to key opportunities. Not knowing a particular internal role was becoming free and/or not understanding how or why it was filled the way it was, can be an indicator of not being sufficiently plugged into the informal system.

**Building a support network** – some executive women feel they need to do everything themselves – that it is a requirement of a senior role to be self-sufficient. It can be harder for women to form supportive informal friendships with peers who are often all or largely men. Women can get used to being on the edge of an organisation’s social network. If they do find support from other women it tends to be in smaller groups, which, if visible, can be regarded with suspicion by men. Not having the appropriate support network can exacerbate the feelings some women have that they do not fit in, as well as the isolation that often accompanies senior roles. It can be very helpful to have a very small number of people who really know who you are, and who can provide candid advice, perspective, as well as affirmation.

**Actively seeking mentors and sponsors** – an emphasis on being self-sufficient can lead some executive women to focus excessively on ‘making it’ on their own merit. They can also sometimes see it as somehow ‘political’ to seek help. They consequently do not actively look for mentors and sponsors who could provide valuable insight, assistance and sponsorship to help them advance their careers. As there are often few role models that women can look to, mentors can be particularly helpful in providing perspective on how to manage a variety of situations, including corporate politics. Having sponsors who can use their influence to advocate an individual can also be critical in navigating key stages in a corporate career.

**Developing an external network** – some women see the development of their external network as peripheral to their role, rather than as an integral part. Its importance in broadening perspective and thinking can be underestimated. Developing a network of peers can be very helpful in providing a range of connections to draw upon when tackling complex issues and indeed, for those at the highest level, it may provide one of the few arenas in which people are prepared to be entirely candid. It is therefore helpful to have actively built the relationships over a number of years.

### Managing an executive career

It is important for executives of both genders to actively manage their careers. Being clear about your own attitude towards corporate culture, planning and decision making can be helpful.

**Decisions on participating in the working culture** – some women are hesitant about whether they want to participate in certain aspects of what they feel are ‘macho’ cultures. It can be helpful to recognise this and to make an explicit decision about what to do rather than endure nagging hesitancy.

**Owning personal ambition** – in addition to being reluctant to take credit for abilities and achievements, female executives are sometimes uncomfortable with the notion of ‘ambition’. They often rigorously deny they have any! Sometimes executive women can relate more to the notion of aspiration, which somehow seems less ruthless. Whatever the word that is used, this discomfort can mean an executive woman may not be actively managing key stakeholders who could help shape the roles they might want and ultimately which would support their careers. Whilst some women do try to communicate what they want, their discomfort can mean they are not sufficiently direct for their colleagues to understand the messages about their aspirations.

**Taking a longer term view** – taking a strategic view of a career can have the advantage of raising an executive’s sights about what can be achieved, not just in the longer term, but in their current role too. It also means an executive can plan and be proactive in anticipating experience and skills gaps – and in plugging them. Some executive women take a more incremental approach to their careers, thinking if they can master the current role, they will then think about the next. This often means they progress more slowly. Taking a longer term view, and working out in what phases to get particular experience and develop certain skills, can also be helpful in feeling more relaxed about the impact of a break in career, such as maternity leave.

**Building resilience and determination** – not surprisingly, it can be tough at the top of organisations. It can be easy to underestimate the challenge of operating at this level and to assume that the challenge is largely accounted for by being a woman. It is imperative to be able to learn from setbacks and to be comfortable with greater visibility. It is also important to work out how to handle competition. There is danger in taking organisational life too personally and in concluding that you are unsuited for a senior role. Instead it can be helpful to consider actively developing strategies to build resilience and determination.

**Making explicit decisions about how to balance different roles in life** – it is self evident that both women and men have difficult choices to make about balancing various aspects of their lives. Although we are seeing an increasing number of executive men looking to address these choices differently, for many reasons, including traditional gender roles, men appear to feel less guilty about choosing to focus on their careers. In contrast, many women feel guilty about their choices and are burdened by them. They talk more about experiencing considerable emotional pain caused by being away from the people in their lives they care about. There is no easy way

through this. It can be helpful to regularly review these choices and actively work at accepting the implications of the choices that have been made at that point in time. It can also be helpful to talk to other senior women and explore how they deal with these challenges.

Whilst the observations and patterns set out above highlight the pitfalls of the issues, many have positive aspects. For instance, being aware of shortcomings may mean a person is more open to feedback and input of others and also to collaboration. A strong focus on delivering in your immediate role (rather than your own career) can be very positive for the business you work for. The women we work with are high performing and successful and it would be entirely inappropriate to suggest that they need to make significant changes to their ways they work. Small adaptations around the margins may, however, make corporate life feel more comfortable, help more women to feel at ease in the top echelons of organisations and therefore increase the number of women in and around the boardroom. We are keen to support that objective.

### Further reading

*Lean in - women, work and the will to lead* by Sheryl Sandberg, W. H. Allen, 2013.

*A Woman's Place in the Boardroom The Roadmap* by Peninah Thomson, Jacey Graham, Tom Lloyd, Palgrave Macmillan, 2008.

### Acknowledgements

*Women in business: highlights from coaching* was written by Dr Jane Stephens with the help and input from colleagues and clients. Jane is a partner at Hay Hill Partners LLP. After gaining her PhD in Psychology, Jane had a 20 year business career spanning large multinational organisations, professional partnerships and new ventures. She became a business coach in 2006 and has since worked with executives in a wide range of industry sectors.

### About Hay Hill Partners

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