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A final push can break the glass ceiling

Sylvia Hewlett

Despite enormous progress in the lower and middle rungs of the career ladder, too few women are making it to the very top. In the US women hold just 15 per cent of seats on corporate boards, make up less than 5 per cent of top earners and comprise a mere 3 per cent of Fortune 500 CEOs. In the UK the situation is just as bad, with women accounting for 12 per cent of board seats and only 5 per cent of FTSE 100 CEOs.

Those last slippery slopes of careers remain extraordinarily difficult for women. Theories abound as to why. Some see outright discrimination, while many focus on the awkward trade-offs women must make between careers and family. Others talk of women lacking the "vision thing" needed for corporate leadership, or

posit that they are not sufficiently ambitious to endure the 80-hour work weeks expected of most senior executives. But such theories have always been unsatisfying.

Now new research provides a more convincing answer: women who are qualified to lead stall not for lack of drive, but for lack of a push. Unlike men, senior women often lack the backing needed to propel them into upper management – a powerful executive sponsor in their line of command prepared to go out on a limb for a chosen protégée and push for their next promotion. Having such a sponsor, the data show, boosts prospects for advancement by 23 per cent for men, and 19 per cent for women. But while executive women often have mentors dispensing friendly advice, they're much less likely to have sponsors than their male counterparts.

Why do women have difficulties forging these relationships? The reasons have little to do with credentials,

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or experience. These days the level in companies just below very top management, sometimes known as the "marzipan layer", is packed with women, many of whom out-perform male colleagues. The real reasons centre on trust and testosterone.

Take executive presence, that hard-to-define quality that differentiates between those selected for the top, and those passed over. Only a tiny

proportion of high-performing women ever get feedback from male bosses on appearance, body language or personal style. But senior men don't hesitate to give a junior man the same unvarnished advice.

And then there's testosterone. Sex tinges many male-to-female relationships at the office. Because sponsorship between a male boss and a female subordinate can look like an affair, sensible senior men and smart junior women often avoid it. The data here are sobering: fear of being suspected of an illicit sexual liaison causes 64 per cent of senior men to pull back from one-on-one contact with junior women. For the same reason, half of junior women are hesitant to initiate, let alone cultivate, one-on-one contact with a male superior.

These findings have wide implications. In the UK next month Lord Mervyn Davies will present a plan to parliament to take female representation on corporate boards to 50 per cent. On Tuesday a group of major companies launched a new "30% club" aiming to increase female board representation to 30 per cent by 2015. Others from Lloyds, American Express and Deloitte, to Intel, Unilever and Morgan Stanley are also trying to develop sponsoring relationships for women with high potential.

These are promising steps, but many similar efforts risk coming unstuck unless they take account of the difficulties women experience building serious connections with senior leaders. As companies design similar initiatives they must recognise that such advocacy will work only if female protégées can develop genuine sponsorship relationships, not just watered-down mentoring equivalents.

Sponsorship is not the only thing that matters in finally breaking the glass ceiling. Getting to the top in an era of slow growth is difficult enough; especially so for women battling domestic overload, conflicting priorities and outright discrimination. But the promise of sponsorship is probably the most important missing piece of the jigsaw for high-performing women within sight of the very top of their professions. As Heide Gardner, senior vice-president of marketing company the Interpublic Group, puts it: "Everything else is trumped if you have a sponsor with power." It is a message those trying to support senior women would do well to heed.

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