

MOVING UP

Following debate over the lack of women getting to the top of the big business ladder, Next asks: Are being feminine and being corporate mutually exclusive? Gill South reports

A bright female executive stands up in front of a sympathetic audience at a seminar of high-achieving women and tells them about the time she was offered the general manager position at her company and turned it down. “It did not fit with this idea I had of myself being there when the kids came home,” she explains. “I’ve been trying to get the job ever since.

“I thought the GM role would mean a 60-hour week,” says the senior manager. At the time she was working 30 hours. “I could have said, ‘I can only work these hours, let’s look at getting in some more people to do these things’. I believed I would have to fit into a square box and my life wasn’t square.”

Which raises the question: does the woman who chooses to work in a traditional business structure need to tailor her approach – or does the company need to tailor theirs?

Sarah Wilshaw-Sparkes, co-founder of professional women’s networking enterprise Professionelle, has heard this scenario many times before. “Some of the women attending my seminars want to be leaders but feel that it’s harder for them to be accorded the rights and privileges of the leadership,” she says.

Wilshaw-Sparkes has encountered many senior career women still struggling to tick some of the crucial boxes that will help them get to the top. She claims they are, at times, reluctant to delegate, feeling too much empathy for their staff. They are also not comfortable with self-promotion, they work through lunchtimes and fail to take networking opportunities because they are too busy “getting the job done”. What they should be doing is getting in front of the decision makers and strutting their stuff. “If your boss doesn’t see the full value in your accomplishment, talk to other bosses who ‘get it’,” Wilshaw-Sparkes says.

According to experts, to get to the top women should realise those judging them are giving just 10% of their attention to their performance and 30% towards their image – for example, being known to do a good job or being skilled at negotiating. The remaining 60% comes down to their exposure to decision

makers. No matter how hard women work, they still encounter bias in the workplace. Why are talented, experienced women still unable to get ahead? Is it simply because the corporate world is full of ageing males who believe a woman’s place is several levels below them – if not in the home?

Alice Eagly, a leading thinker in gender and attitude at Chicago’s Northwestern University, lists three main reasons for the lack of female advancement.

First, women still take on greater domestic responsibility, therefore often have less intensive and more discontinuous careers. Second, she cites prejudice and discrimination, especially in relation to roles involving authority and leadership. She adds that workplace prejudice is particularly strong against mothers. Her third reason is organisational structures and practices, which have developed in ways that fit men’s lives better than women’s lives.

“Research has shown they [women] often have to be better than male counterparts to be promoted.”

According to the latest research from the US, growing numbers of women are getting to the top by ‘monitoring their behaviour’. An article in *Stanford Business Magazine* concluded that women who are aggressive, assertive and confident – but who can turn these traits on and off depending on the social circumstances – get more promotions than men or other women. In a recent study, ‘Overcoming the Backlash Effect: Self-Monitoring and Women’s Promotions’, authors Olivia O’Neill and Charles O’Reilly suggest that for women to be successful, they must simultaneously present themselves as self-confident and dominant while tempering these qualities with displays of communal characteristics.

“Women may have a ways to go, but their ability to be flexible in how they behave is leading to some extraordinary results,” O’Neill says. “Some women are starting to go very high in the managerial ranks using this strategic approach. There is no evidence that ‘acting like a lady’ does anything except make women more well liked. Women with ultra-feminine traits, in fact, are still seen as less competent in traditional managerial settings.” The response to this type ▶

of argument is twofold. On the one hand, women who don't want to adjust to the big boys' rules can – and increasingly do – choose to work for small-to-medium business, or set up their own. On the other, there are those who are determined to prove that feminine traits help bring something valuable to the table. Women bring a different viewpoint to companies, says Jo Nicol, head of organisation development at Westpac and a participant in the New Zealand Global Women, Women in Leadership programme.

“Women have the humility to ask the difficult questions and the ability to collaborate. We observe, we have a curiosity around what's going on,” she says. “Women also like to make connections. We want to make links to things, join the dots.”

Janet Faulding, general manager of online recruitment website Seek and the former GM of MediaWorks NZ, puts her success down to the “110% support” she's had from her husband. When Faulding wanted to run a radio station for CanWest Media in Turkey for three years, her husband backed her despite having a new CEO job in New Zealand himself.

The senior manager remembers telling her boss early on in her career that she wanted his job; he responded by making her life hell. But that was the “old days,” she says, and she wouldn't expect that now. According to Faulding, if you're not being recognised at work, you should be asking, ‘Is this the right culture for me?’ She adds, “Is the person leading the company the sort of person you aspire to and respect?”

The Seek GM thinks women should do their research when it comes to pay talks, something most women dread. “It comes back to confidence and knowing what you're worth in the marketplace,” she says. There are a number of places where women can check the going rate for their jobs, including Seek.

Some industries promote more difficult environments for women than others. Kim Seeling Smith, a Sydney-based speaker and career coach, says women in Australasia who work in IT and finance can feel stymied in their careers once they get to a certain level.

“IT and financial services are very much male-dominated, especially in Australia. This presents particular challenges,” she says. “Women who come to me are always asking the same thing. ‘Is this it? I have worked very, very hard and have attained a certain level. How can I a) achieve more and be more fulfilled, or b) Am I really on the right track?’”

Seeling Smith, formerly division director for financial recruitment firm Robert Half New Zealand, says men are more apt to ask for raises; they are more conditioned to rejection and bounce back. And men self-promote a lot more; while out socialising with colleagues, they are networking. Men are also more likely to go for an ambitious job. “It's the old adage, you give a man a job description with 10 points and if they can tick two points, fine, they'll go for it. A woman, unless she hits 9 or 10 of those 10 points, does not think she is eligible for the job.”

Seeling Smith recommends all her female coaching

clients keep an ‘I rock’ file: a physical folder of printed out congratulatory emails, cards and letters commending them for work well done. If they are going through a hard time, they can look through it and feel good about themselves.

But not everyone believes women are being overlooked in the corporate workplace. Kinetic Recruitment owner Kate Ross says professional women are being offered opportunities all the time, although she agrees at senior management and board level there is still a dearth of women. “I've seen evidence in my company of opportunities coming to women regularly to grow their career. A dilemma the working mum has is, by taking a promotion, how will the extra responsibilities impact on home life? It's about prioritising and weighing up what is most critical to them.”

Ross believes it does take a certain personality type to go far. “It takes a motivated person who is good at juggling and is exceptionally organised to ensure work and home life flow. I also need to add here that it's so much easier for this to happen with a supportive home life and great PA!” **N**

ASKING FOR A RAISE

Kim Seeling Smith believes that post-recession, now is the best time to ask for a raise. She suggests:

- When you go in and ask for it, name a specific amount, don't give a range.
- Prove you have added value, especially if you were one of the last people standing and you helped the company weather the storm.
- List three to five things you have done that added value to the company. Did you save the company money, enhance the company's revenue or streamline processes, for example?
- Your boss isn't a mind reader: if you want that promotion, tell them.



THE NUMBERS

These are the sobering statistics from the top 100 companies on the New Zealand Stock Exchange:

- Women hold only 9.32% of directorships
- Just two women hold CEO jobs
- Women hold 21% of senior management jobs
- At least 30% of the Top 100 NZSX companies have no women in their senior management teams