



A Praesta report
reflecting the experience
of coaching 120 senior
women leaders

Why are there still so few women on executive boards?

Lessons from Coaching

PRAESTA

Introduction

Last year Lord Davies of Abersoch set FTSE 100 companies the challenge to achieve 25 per cent of their members being female by 2015. While women now make up 22.4% of FTSE board non-executive directors, the percentage of women executives remains at a tiny 6.6%. It is here that the challenge remains.

Many chief executives are extremely frustrated that, despite numerous initiatives, they can't seem to persuade enough women to apply for senior roles.

We coach around 450 of the UK's most senior leaders every year, including 120 senior women - at board level, executive level or one level below. This confidential coaching provides key insights into what is holding women back – and what chief executives and their colleagues need to do to overcome these blocks.

Whilst the women we coach are not a random sample from the senior executive population, they represent a unique and powerful source of data about senior women whom their organisations value enough to invest in.

We have discussed the findings with a number of chief executives and HR directors – and it is clear our analysis resonates strongly.

We hope these insights will help to achieve a rapid step change in the number of women applying for the UK's top roles – and play their part in helping UK plc to perform better.

Mairi Eastwood and Hilary Douglas

Praesta Partners LLP

“New women non-executives risk being window dressing unless women working in these businesses can smash through the glass ceiling.”

Lord Oakeshott, Liberal Democrat peer
and former Treasury spokesman

Confidentiality

As coaches, everything we do is confidential. We have asked permission for all case examples quoted, even for those that are un-attributable.

The case for more senior women executives

The business case for more senior women executives has now been well made in books such as *A Women's Place is in the Boardroom*², *The Female Leadership Paradox*³ and many articles and studies. This case is not based on kindness to women, nor on achieving equality for its own sake. It rests on a number of key factors:

- Businesses with diverse executive groups and boards make more diverse decisions; there is much less risk of group-think; decisions rest on a broader view of the external world
- Businesses have access to a wider talent pool
- Organisations spend a great deal of money recruiting and developing senior women, only to lose a large number of them just at the point where they are getting real payback for their investment
- Organisational cultures that are not predominantly and unconsciously based on male norms will appeal to and embrace a wider group of talent – male and female
- There are approximately equal percentages of women in both the workplace overall and in the marketplace

It is not the purpose of this report to substantiate this case again. This report is not written to convince those who, for whatever reason, challenge the business case. It is written for those who agree, and who are trying, within their organisations, to effect changes that will attract more women to stay and to put themselves forward for senior positions and for those who want to enable those senior women who do succeed in attaining senior levels to thrive. We notice, in conversation with CEOs and other senior directors, that they are often frustrated that their efforts do not seem to be moving the dial to any noticeable degree. They are puzzled about what else to do. We hope this report provides some ideas.

Contents

4	Executive Summary	<hr/>
5	Recommendations	<hr/>
	For CEOs, for HR and Diversity and Inclusion professionals, for senior women	
8	Section 1	<hr/>
	What motivates clients to sponsor senior women for coaching and is this the same as for men?	
12	Section 2	<hr/>
	Issues brought to coaching	
17	Section 3	<hr/>
	The Coaching	
20	Sample Methodology	<hr/>
23	About Praesta	<hr/>

Executive Summary

Between May 2010 and April 2011, Praesta coaches worked with 450 senior executives from FTSE 100 and other companies and organisations, and senior public sector officials. Half of these were at board or executive committee level, with a further 31% at one level below. 120 of these, in the same proportions, were senior women leaders.

The identity of our clients is confidential, as is the detail of the work we do with them. But we analysed this unique set of data, both quantitatively and qualitatively, to ask

- What prompted organisations to seek coaching for their senior men and women leaders and were there differences between the genders?
- What were clients and senior women themselves looking to get from coaching?
- Were there any useful messages for organisations seeking to increase the numbers of senior women executives and for senior women themselves?

Our research shows that:

- There is more explicit support through coaching for the *aspirations* of senior men to be on the executive committee than for women. Less than one in ten women either put themselves forward or are supported for this reason. This compares with 41% of the men who ask for or receive coaching support for their aspirations to the executive group.
- The main reason women receive coaching is because they have stepped into a new, more senior role (59%). This is true for many men, too (46%).
- Virtually all of Praesta's coaching is paid for by their company or organisation – and a director, often the chief executive, attends the first meeting to agree coaching objectives. The two most common issues that both senior women and their organisations want help with are
 - Better influencing skills and having their voice heard more strongly - women (70%), organisations (57%)
 - More presence and gravitas - women (66%), organisations (54%)
- Organisations also say they want women to have help with networking, using their connections and managing stakeholders, in 41% of cases. In 48%

of the cases women agreed. More women, however, especially within the confidential environment of the coaching room, put developing self-confidence (60%), and managing organisational politics (52%) as their objectives. They also more often see developing an authentic style of leadership (46%) and managing their career path (45%) as the important issues.

- 27% of the senior women were seen as 'over-aggressive' as compared with less than half that number who said this was something they wanted to work on. In many of these cases, the coaches' conversations with the organisation revealed that 'over-aggressive' was a label that reflected a challenge to a male stereotype of feminine behaviour. In many organisations, the path senior women walked between being labelled 'too soft' and 'aggressive' was extremely narrow.
- 38% of the senior women mentioned tension in managing their work/non-work balance as something they wanted to resolve. This was only mentioned by 16% of the sponsors. It is something that many senior women feared to be open about in their work and may be missed by the organisation.
- We found no difference in the coaching approaches that were helpful and effective for senior men than for women.
- Senior executives, whether women or men, say that they benefit from coaching at two levels. At the practical level, we support them in problem-solving and help them respond to feedback on their behaviours and ways of working. To assist longer-term and transformational change, we help them examine deeply-held beliefs and ways of thinking that may be holding them back from achieving their full potential.

These findings make it clear that chief executives can do more to support women leaders and encourage more to emerge. There are messages, too, for frustrated HR and diversity professionals who are trying to support their organisation in this area. And there are useful observations for senior women themselves.

Recommendations

For CEOs and Directors

As the CEO of an organisation, you want a more effective and diverse board and may have been frustrated that your female talent pipeline is not giving you what you want. You may have tried a number of initiatives and are frustrated that the dial has not moved.

Our research identifies that there are five important points you need to be aware of and act on:

- Check that your **processes for talent identification** are genuinely finding talent and not overlooking those who are highly skilled but lack confidence. Many processes are better attuned to recognise those who are strong self-promoters. It is also important to encourage individuals to think about and articulate their ambitions, then support these.
- Consciously **encourage different styles of leadership** among men and women and judge by results rather than methods. Recognise that future leadership styles may look different from what has been seen as a norm in the past. Work with your board and leaders to understand these different styles and break down stereotypes. Take care that labelling of 'over-aggressive' is based on facts, not male-female stereotypes – women who have more consensual styles are often labelled as 'soft'.

- Recognise that finding an **individual authentic style of leadership** is important to effective leadership today. Women who have relatively few role models may need external input to help them develop their own authentic style.

- **Create a climate of trust where individual tensions and pressures can be discussed and addressed.**

We know that chief executives want to support their senior talent and are prepared to be flexible to support people as individuals – one may need to run an operational business; another have overseas exposure. But women do not feel confident to say the support they need may be around flexibility with their family – family demands are not static. Recognise the investment that will be lost if a senior talented person leaves.

- **Consider a sustained drive to get to 30% female representation at executive level.**

Research² shows that getting to 30% female representation on boards is the 'tipping point' for creating a real change in diversity. The same is likely to be true of the executive leadership of the organisation.

Is it right to do something special for women?

The question is often asked: Is it appropriate for an organisation to do something 'particular' for women. Will this not just make senior women feel more uncomfortable? Amongst our clients, we have found very few senior women in favour of quotas, but the majority in favour of targeted meaningful support. For boards to nurture all their senior talent, they need to consider the particular needs of each one, male and female. Good succession planning and top talent management programmes contain a tailored plan for each individual. Some go to business school, some are given developmental projects, some have coaching. We suggest that specific support for a senior woman is no different.

At this point in the development of gender diversity of executive groups and boards, there is a further point. It is a well known empirical result⁴ that when the percentage of senior women on a board reaches 30%, then the decision making culture shifts to encompass the diversity. The 30% club is created on this foundation. If CEOs can achieve 30% of their executive group being women, then the internal organisational culture will shift by a similar step change. Specific targeted support for a few key senior women is probably the most effective and leveraged way to achieve this.

For Human Resource Directors and Diversity Professionals

As a human resource professional or diversity leader, you are often the corporate conscience. You also devise and implement gender diversity initiatives for senior leadership groups. All of the findings that are relevant to CEOs are relevant for you too.

Our findings indicate that, in particular, human resource and diversity and inclusion directors could:

- Help the organisation to expand its understanding and acceptance of a variety of leadership styles
- Look at talent across the organisation and understand where strong but under-confident individual women need more encouragement to put themselves forward
- Encourage talented senior women to be confident in aspiring to and applying for promotion
- Help to tailor work arrangements to be as individually flexible as possible and support senior women with a portfolio of responsibilities to find a balance that they are personally comfortable with
- Encourage the organisation to provide external input for senior women to develop their own authentic style of leadership, particularly where there are few female role models

Terms

We have referred to the organisations who have sponsored the senior women in our sample for coaching as **clients**; the individuals who have sponsored them (and from whose budget the coaching fee generally comes) as **sponsors**. The sponsors are generally line managers and, at the level of the women with whom we work, often the CEO or another executive director. We refer to the senior women themselves as **coachees**.

For senior women themselves

As a senior women leader, the issues that our coachees brought to their coaching may resonate with you. Awareness that many others face the same challenge is often a great help in itself.

Coaching is not the only way of working on these issues and challenges, but our clients found it effective.

Our research indicates that some ways you might help yourself achieve your aspirations are:

- Seek feedback, both from the organisation itself and from someone who knows you and has your development at heart. Ask for data about specific behaviours, so that you can understand what the data tells you about yourself and what it tells you about others
- Find your own authentic style that you feel comfortable with. This needs to reflect who you are and your own values and beliefs
- Identify any limiting beliefs that may hold you back and consider if they are rational. Limiting beliefs – for both men and women – can often be unconscious and deep seated, in some cases perhaps going back to early childhood and schooling. Changing your outlook on these is a personal and significant piece of work, but one that many senior women have done and which can prove transformational
- Manage your own career and take risks in putting yourself forward
- Recognise what you want from life and be confident about this. It can be challenging to find a balance between the various aspects of your life, in a way that you feel comfortable with.

However, getting this right will reduce your on-going tension and enable you to perform at your best

These deeper areas are often where external support can provide the most value – someone who is on your side but with no agenda.

Generalisations - a caveat

Generalisations are always a problem. There is a huge diversity among the senior women we coach, as there are amongst the senior men. If we caricature the stereotypical senior male leader as being supremely confident, self promoting, assertive, competitive, with a stay at home wife who manages his out of work life, and the stereotypical senior women leader as under confident, struggling with a balance in life, multi tasking with child care, concerned with consensus, we see many clients who would sit in the opposite gender's place on these spectra. Each person is totally unique and has his or her own qualities, preferences and priorities.

Furthermore, there are challenges for anyone leading in today's difficult environment, in stepping up to a new role, or in aspiring to do so. These are times and situations when leaders of both genders seek coaching and when organisations seek to invest in their key people.

But with the above caveat, it is still possible, we believe, to draw out some issues that we do typically encounter to a greater degree with senior women. The fact of life is that many women still see it as a predominantly male culture at the top of organisations. Who knows whether, if the gender position were reversed, there would not be a whole set of parallel issues for senior men seeking to lead in a predominantly female culture?

Section 1

What motivates clients to sponsor senior women for coaching and is this the same as for men?

Half of the women (and men) who come to us for coaching are at board or executive level. A further 31% are at one level below the executive group.

This compares with men where just over half are at board or executive committee level with a further 32% at one level below the executive group.

Both men and women are generally mid career, with the average age around 45. By far the most common stimulus for coaching for senior women is stepping into a new more senior role (59%). This is a common situation for men too (46%). But almost as many men, (41%), come because their organisations want to support their *aspiration* to the executive level. Less than 10% of the women came for this reason. There appears to be more support for aspirations for men than for women.

There is a higher percentage amongst our coachees of women in the public sector as compared with all the other sectors. Whilst only 18% of our male coachees come from the public sector, approximately half our women do. There is also a marked difference in the level of seniority of the public sector women as compared to the private sector. More than half the women coachees from the public sector are one level below the executive group.

The civil service, a large part of the public sector, has done more than most organisations in terms of setting informal targets for proportions of women in senior roles (permanent secretaries, directors general and the two levels below the executive). Individual permanent secretaries have for some years been held to account in their performance agreements for progress against targets. Talented women have been encouraged to put themselves forward for development programmes, and we notice more work flexibility, for example job sharing, return to work programmes and compressed hours schemes at very senior levels.

There are now higher proportions of women in the senior public positions than in most sections of the private sector, providing a larger pipeline of female candidates for the top roles.

LEADERSHIP LEVEL - MEN AND WOMEN



Notes

Board includes Permanent Secretaries and some Directors General in the public sector and Managing Partners and Senior Partners of professional service firms.

Executive committee includes some Directors General in the public sector and practice heads, office managing partners and equivalent in professional firms.

Exec-2 includes managing directors in Investment banks.

HIPOs are high potential, usually less senior, people that the organisation has identified as its top talent of the future.

WHAT PROMPTED THE COACHING SUPPORT



Are women still waiting to be asked to dance?

A regulatory body was advertising for new members. No women applied. The chair knew two very able senior women who he thought would be excellent so he called them and suggested they apply. In open competition, both were appointed. He asks if: "women are still waiting to be asked to dance"?

If confidence is a big issue for women who have made it to the executive committee, what about the rest?

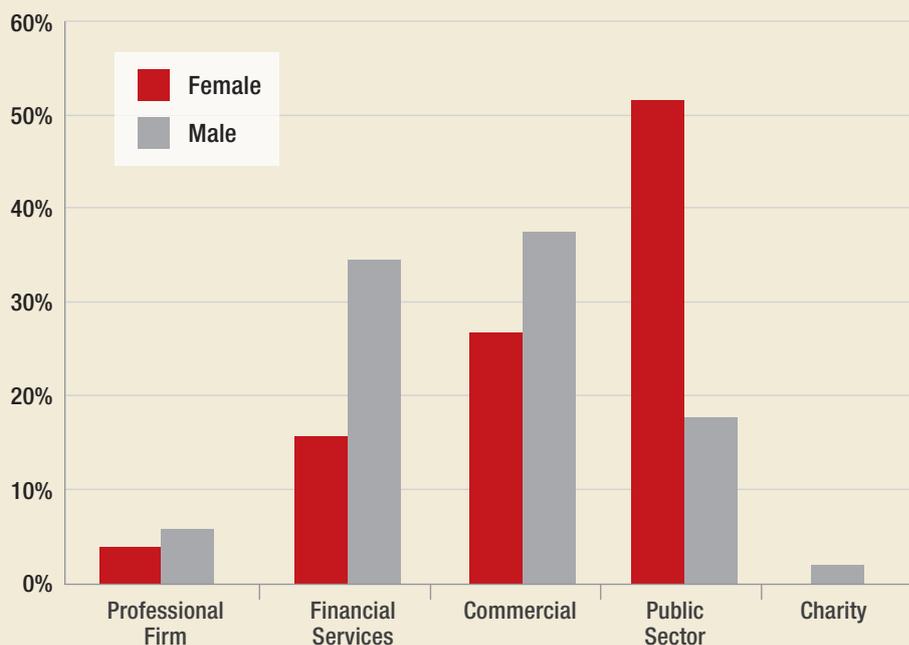
Senior executive level strikes us as too senior a level to be exploring important issues of confidence. Relatively few women do make it to such a level, so what does this tell us about those who don't - either because their talent is not recognised through their own lack of confidence in putting themselves forward or because they see in senior men a leadership style that they don't feel would work for them, but have not yet been able to find their own authentic style?

Simon Fraser, Permanent Secretary at the Foreign and Commonwealth Office, is not satisfied that only 20% of Heads of Post are women, even though the numbers are the highest ever. He recently commented on the action he was taking:

“One key element is sponsorship. I’m a firm believer in the benefits. All our board Members and some of our most senior Heads of Mission have signed up. One part of this is that they should proactively encourage those identified as having talent to apply for jobs for which they are well qualified, because experience tells us some women might otherwise hold back. I have also set up an action learning set for those aiming to be senior managers in the near future. It was really important for me that I share what I’ve learned about leadership and help foster skills, competence and confidence.”

Distribution of clients by Sector

SECTOR - WOMEN COMPARED TO MEN



Civil Service emphasis on women leaders

Lord O'Donnell of Clapham, the recently retired cabinet secretary and head of the civil service, was a driving force behind targets for women in senior posts from deputy director up to Permanent Secretary. Significant progress has been achieved against these targets.

In a recent interview with the FT, Lord O'Donnell said that the civil service had already reached a point where half the Permanent Secretaries in the 16 home departments were women. He said there was a growing contrast between the public and private sectors in terms of gender balance.

"I'm really worried about the private sector in terms of it's failure to pick up on a huge reservoir of talent in terms of women. I would never think I was conquering the diversity issue in the civil service if I put lots of female non-execs on the board."

Level	% of Women (April 2011)
Permanent Secretary	24.2
Director General	28.0
Director	30.0
Deputy Director	37.8

This compares with 12.5% at director level for FTSE 100 companies and 7.8% for FTSE 250 companies in 2010-11.

LEADERSHIP LEVEL OF WOMEN - PRIVATE COMPARED TO PUBLIC SECTOR

Board



Section 2

Issues brought to coaching

Most people coming for coaching (other than CEOs themselves) have a sponsor in their organisation. This is the person who has suggested or authorised the coaching investment. It is our normal practice to understand at the outset, usually in a meeting of all three, what the organisation would like to see from the coaching. We seek to understand what each of the sponsor and coachee would regard as a successful outcome.

Further issues often arise in the course of a coaching programme. The coach may notice specific issues or patterns. Once trust and an effective working alliance has built up between the coach and coachee, the coachee may also raise some issues that he or she has not previously felt able to talk about.

So our research looked at coaching objectives from all three perspectives: from the sponsor's point of view, from the coachee's point of view at the outset and the additional issues that arose during the programme.

The most common two issues that both the senior women themselves and their organisations want coaching to help with are:

- Better influencing skills and having one's voice heard more strongly (organisations 57%; women 70%)
- More presence and gravitas (organisations 54%; women 66%)

Organisations also say they want women to have help with networking, using their connections and managing stakeholders, in 41% of cases. In 48% of the cases women also raised this. More women, however, especially within the confidential environment of the coaching room, put developing self-confidence (60%), and managing organisational politics (52%) as their objectives. They also more often see developing an authentic style of leadership (46%) and managing their career path (45%) as the important issues.

For both men and women, promotion to a position on the executive requires a shift from just running a business unit or a function to contributing on all issues across the whole business. Across all our coaching work, (men and women), this is the most common challenge at this level.

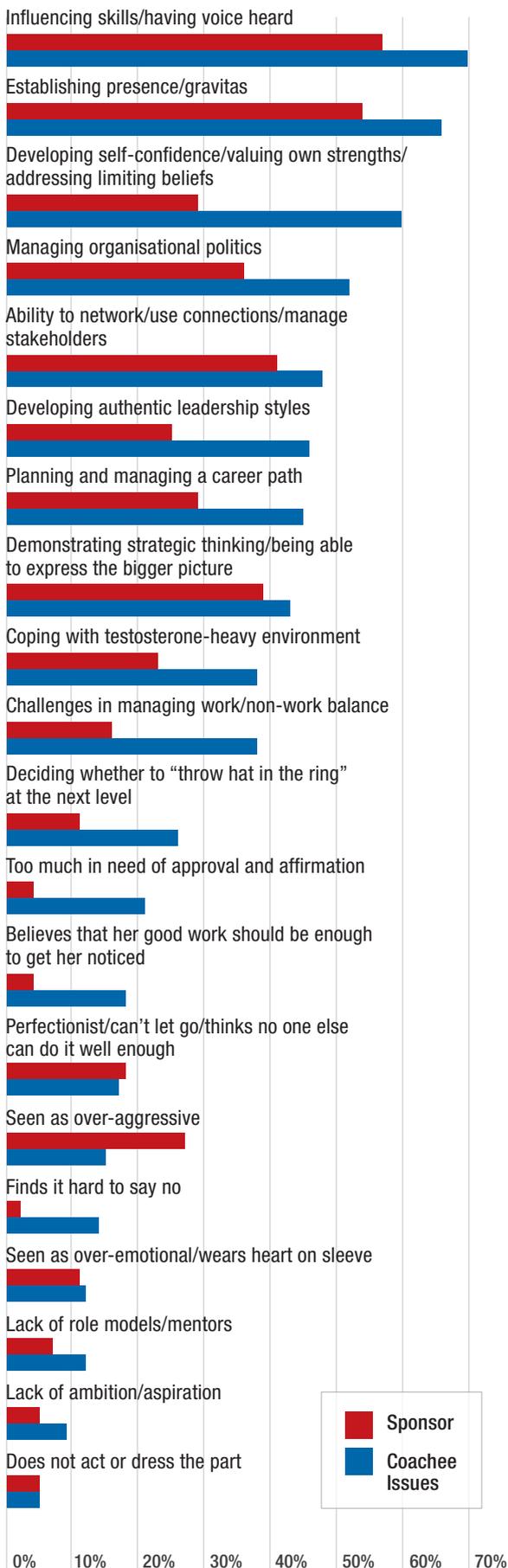
Top 6 issues raised by sponsor

- 01 Influencing skills/having voice heard
- 02 Establishing presence/gravitas
- 03 Ability to network/use connections/manage stakeholders
- 04 Demonstrating strategic thinking/being able to express the bigger picture
- 05 Managing organisational politics
- 06 Planning and managing a career path

Top 6 issues raised by women

- 01 Influencing skills/having voice heard
- 02 Establishing presence/gravitas
- 03 Developing self-confidence/valuing own strengths/addressing limiting beliefs
- 04 Managing organisational politics
- 05 Ability to network/use connections/manage stakeholders
- 06 Developing authentic leadership styles

SPONSOR AND COACHEE ISSUES



< Comparison of coachee issues (raised at whatever time) with the issues expressed by the sponsor

Being seen as over-aggressive

The *only* area where the sponsors raised an issue more frequently than the senior women was 'being seen as over-aggressive'. 27% of the senior women were seen as 'over-aggressive' as compared with only half that number who raised this themselves as something they wanted to work on. Indeed, most of the women who had feedback that they were seen as over-aggressive disputed the reality of this strongly.

Understanding from sponsors exactly what specific behaviour gives rise to this criticism is often critical for the coach. Undoubtedly, as with male coachees, there are some situations where a leader is behaving in a way that may feel intimidating to more junior staff. We have observed that, in some particularly 'macho' cultures, women become more 'aggressive' to compete with male colleagues. In our experience, however, the phrase 'over-aggressive' often reflects no more than a challenge to what is sometimes a male archetypal view of how a woman should be. Whilst the coach is not commissioned to work with the sponsor, our role is often to question and challenge the assumptions here.

It is clear that, in many organisations, women are required to walk an extremely narrow band between being seen as not assertive enough and being called 'over-aggressive'.

Tension in managing work and outside work responsibilities

38% of the senior women mentioned tension in managing their work/non-work balance as something they wanted to resolve. This was only mentioned by 16% of the sponsors. It is something that many senior women fear to be open about in their work and so it can easily be missed by the organisation.

At the level we coach, all the women with children had logistical arrangements in place for childcare. For ambitious and able women, the inevitable compromises of balancing different important responsibilities against what they could achieve in either if they were doing only one of these roles are tough. For many it is a dynamic situation and so an ongoing unresolved tension. Often, too, women add elder care to their portfolio of responsibilities

and this adds significant extra pressure. In our experience, each one has to dig deep to find their own comfortable balance. At this point in society, this is less true for senior men, but as more men are taking on more of a shared caring role, we imagine the same self-questioning will arise.

Confidence and Presence

There is a strong theme of building confidence in both the sponsors' and the coachees' descriptions of what they want from the coaching. Lack of confidence was usually a strong factor in the top two issues: 'establishing presence and gravitas' and 'having one's voice heard'. Establishing an authentic style of leadership that feels comfortable is made increasingly difficult where there is a predominantly masculine style with little openness to other alternatives. In these circumstances, it was additionally hampered by lack of confidence, even in the most talented women.

The women we see are nearly all at board level or one level below the board. This is quite a senior level to be exploring these important issues.

Given that relatively few women do make it to such a senior level, we also ask what this might tell us about those who don't. Is talent going unrecognised because of their own lack of confidence in putting themselves forward? Have they not yet been able to find their own authentic style because they see in senior men a leadership style that they don't feel would work for them?

Authentic leadership

Contemporary writers on leadership emphasise the importance of authenticity as a leadership quality. People want to work with and be led by men or women who are transparent about their values and beliefs and act on these through their style of leadership. Followers want to know who their leader is and what he or she stands for.

Successful leaders need to be able to flex their style and consciously deploy aspects of their personality that will work best with the people and situations they are dealing with. You can't do that with integrity unless you really understand yourself and know what your values and beliefs are. You have to work out how to live these values and be transparent while still deploying a wide range of skills.

"Authentic leaders know who they are, and what they believe and value. They act upon these values and beliefs, and communicate transparently towards their followers."⁷

"The coaching gave me greater confidence, I'm comfortable in my own skin and in career terms. My relationships with people in the organisation have improved. I tailor my communications to meet their needs and perceptions. I'm nuancing it for different people to get the best out of them."

Chief Operating Officer, Public Sector

"The senior men in my organisation had a different, slightly more aggressive style of engagement than the one I wanted. Coaching helped me to maintain who I am yet be effective without going the whole way into their style. It helped me be more directive without being so forceful. It also helped with meetings. I often allowed myself to be talked over and I developed techniques to stop that happening. This has stood me in good stead ever since. I have found that the tenor of the executive group is all down to the leader."

Marketing Director

In many, if not most organisations, the prevalent style is masculine. This is not surprising. There are many more senior men. Almost all leaders written about and studied are still men.

Judy Rosener, in a well-known study conducted in 1990⁵ identified male and female traits in leadership of that time. She noted that male traits include being dominant, strong, competitive, independent, while feminine traits include being empathic, supportive, sensitive. There is some evidence that this may be changing with the influence of generations X and Y in the workplace. The traditional 'male spectrum' and the stereotypical 'female spectrum' are overlapping more and more. 'Consensus', 'buying people in' and 'co-creation' are becoming an expectation.

Nevertheless, the predominance of a 'masculine' style is not always recognised.

Historically, many women have worked to adopt this style. Some have found it unnatural and therefore stressful; a few, trying to outperform, have taken it on too strongly and been seen as bullies.

We find that both men and women seek to work on establishing their own authentic style. In many organisations where there are very few women at the top, however, women particularly struggle to find their own style and to have it recognised as equally effective as, if different from, the prevailing style. There are relatively few role models for them to choose from, so they may be pioneering. And, from lack of organisational experience, the prevailing masculine style may be viewed culturally as the only way to success. Like the fish, who is in the sea, is the last to know what the sea is, because he is in it.

In fact, it is this diversity of style and thinking that will not only make it easier for each leader to find and deploy their own authentic style but also to provide the very diversity that organisations need at the top to broaden creativity and avoid group-think.

Note: Judy Rosener, in a well-known study conducted in 1990⁵ identified that male traits include being: dominant, strong, competitive, independent, while feminine traits include being: empathic, supportive, sensitive. See also *The Way Women and Men Lead, Different but equally*⁶.

Networking

We find that the most common image conjured up by the word networking is exchanging cards with strangers at cocktail parties. This is a relatively inefficient method of getting to know people you want to meet and many senior men waste their time at networking functions because they don't do research and find effective ways of getting to the people they want.

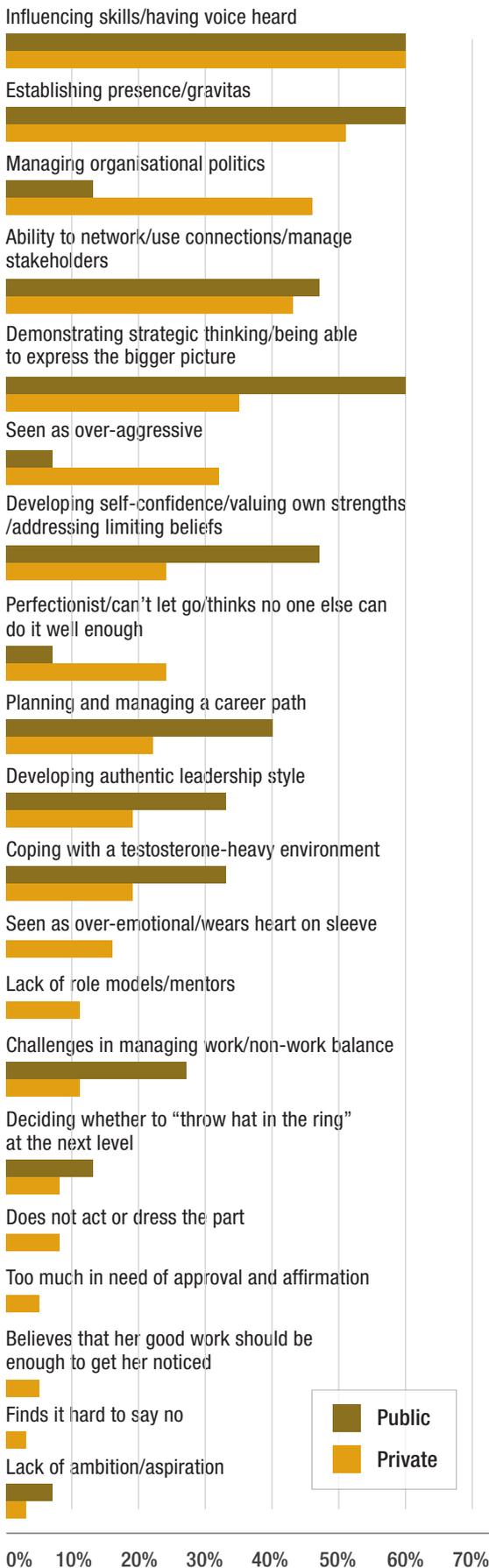
Although many functions that are helpful are in the evening, breakfasts, lunches, coffees, afternoon cups of tea are just as good and sometimes easier ways to get into diaries. You just have to be much more creative and targeted. Networking is so important that you need to give up some of your desk work time to do it.

Case Study:

A senior woman who grew up in a family where her brother, as a boy, was highly valued and she was not, recognised through work in coaching that she had ingested a core belief that she was not really entitled to be heard to the same degree as a man and that what she would have to say would not be as worthwhile. She was not really aware of this unconscious limiting belief, but once the 'mirror' was held up and showed it, it was a relatively easy piece of work for her to see that it belonged to the past and wasn't true in her current business environment.

Comparison of Public and Private Sectors

ISSUES AS DESCRIBED BY SPONSOR



We note that managing organisational politics, being seen as over-aggressive, and being perfectionist are more commonly cited for the private sector women than the public sector. This may be a reflection of the culture they are operating in: we can only speculate. Similarly, there are more mentions for the public sector women of issues like strategic thinking, developing self-confidence and an authentic leadership style, planning a career path and managing in a male environment. These issues may be culture-specific but we think it more likely that they reflect the relative juniority of the public sector cohort compared to their private sector peers.

Section 3

The Coaching

Coaching is not the only solution for organisations and senior women who want to work on the issues identified in our research.

Given that it was the one selected by our sample women and their organisations, we wanted to find out whether it had been effective and what had been most effective and most valued elements. It is important to say that coaching is a partnership and any achievement depends on openness, work and reflection on the part of the coachee as well as on what the coach does.

We found that the coaching approaches we took working with senior women towards these objectives were not materially different from the approaches we took with senior men who had the same objectives and we didn't find any predominant patterns related to gender.

We found, rather, that the approach coaches used was dependent on the individual style of the coachee. Business, organisational and strategic frameworks we made use of were universal. In more psychological areas, again we drew on the same wide range of frameworks of understanding, including recent learning from neuroscience, as with men.

For issues such as building confidence, increasing influencing skills or presence and gravitas, we generally worked (as with men) in three ways. Firstly we collected feedback from the organisation and looked at this together to establish what it meant and to separate perception from reality. Secondly, we worked at a behavioural level. We co-developed, with the coachee, behaviours and ways of working that would create immediate changes.

Thirdly, we worked at a deeper level, examining together deeply held and sometimes unconscious beliefs and thinking that might be limiting to confidence, to achieving aspirations and to effectiveness in the senior business leadership team. Where this latter work was successful, it delivered more transformational results.

Coaching is sometimes described as a reflective glass. From our research, helping our coachee to reflect on her own and others' reactions was the most commonly mentioned feature of our work in coaching. The coach acted as an independent, honest resource to assist in this reflection, bringing both business experience and skills in psychological frameworks.

“She played back from my view point. She played back myself to myself, which is very strong. You need to see yourself to know how you have to adjust.”

Marketing Director, Leisure Industry

“I lacked confidence, particularly in financial and strategic areas. My coach stretched my thinking. He made me look at myself and what I wanted to achieve. He noticed what I said and asked questions: What if? Why do you think that? What do you think about that? He helped me with the knowledge that I really had the answer. He showed me that I had the capabilities in a way that I hadn't identified. We would often rehearse my points and my arguments and so when I made a point at meetings, I was much better at landing it with gravitas. He gave me a courage around my own contribution.”

Board Member, Major Retailer

Is this about fixing women?

There are two schools of thought about what coaching senior women on issues related to leadership should encompass. One is that it should focus on coaching women to function most effectively and with as little pain as possible in existing organisational structures. This normally means helping them adjust their style to fit in with masculine contexts and leadership styles.

The other holds that coaching should focus on helping senior women identify their own authentic leadership framework.

Our belief (with regard to both men and women) is that it is important for every leader to find their own authentic style. It is this authenticity that will recruit people to follow them and this is now widely

recognised in leadership research and literature. It is also true, however, that all authentic leaders need to be able to flex their styles according to what works for their team and stakeholders.

In practice, therefore, our coaching will encompass both support and help for our coachee to establish and ground their own effective style and also some strategies for handling what, for many of them, is essentially a masculine style of organisation.

In terms of psychological health, though, it is important for the coachee to be consciously flexing or deploying coping strategies, as opposed to unconsciously trying to bend herself out of shape.

Case Study:

A very capable general counsel and company secretary of a FTSE board composed otherwise entirely of men came for coaching because she said that, despite the fact that she had been accustomed throughout her career to working in male dominated industries and used to being part of otherwise all male teams, she was finding this particular one really getting to her. “Too much testosterone, even for me”, she said. “I can’t get my points across. I need some help to deal with this. No one listens to me.” I set about enquiring and helping her analyse what was going on. We both expected that it would all be about how she spoke, how she behaved in the meeting. When we looked at what she was very good at – making clear business cases for actions; using influencing skills to pre position proposals she wanted adopted - we discovered that she knew exactly what to do; she had been thrown by the culture into not doing what she could clearly do very well. At the end of the first three sessions, I said: “Let’s review what we’ve been doing against the objectives you set for coaching. How are we doing? We don’t seem to have really worked on how to help you with the predominating male culture.” “I have realised, she said, that I can cope well; I have all the skills; I was just letting it deflect me.”

Being Heard at Meetings

Some behaviours

Do your preparation.

read the papers, think about what point you would really like to make. It's a myth that really confident people just extemporise and don't have to prepare: mostly they prepare too.

Recognise where you have alliances, where you are going to have difficulties.

Prepare by socialising ideas and building relationships as well as working on the content of your case.

Where do you sit?

Notice where people who do get heard sit, how they hold themselves, how they catch the facilitator's eye, how they interject and join the conversation. Adopt the practices that you feel comfortable fit your style.

Don't wait for the perfect sentence.

You've got to this level – what you say if you just go for it will be good enough.

Use the media with which you are most comfortable if you are making a presentation.

Don't look tense and nervous.

Think of how you look when you are relaxed. Notice in a mirror and try acting it. When you act 'as if' you will start to become less nervous.

Some work on changing your thinking and beliefs

Congratulate yourself when you do well.

Optimists recognise that both you and life aren't always perfect; and congratulate themselves on their successes and aren't too hard on themselves when they don't succeed. Pessimists believe that if it goes wrong it was their fault, if it goes right, it was luck. How rational is that? If you start consciously applying notice to your successes, energy will flow in that direction.

Take something with you that reminds you of the successful you.

Think of a time when you were really confident and it worked. Really get into how you were then and what you did leading up to it. Re create the state of mind. Take some of the same steps in preparation for the upcoming meeting. Take something along that reminds you of a time when you were playing at the top of your game.

Make friends with your inner critic;

give him a name, talk to him and tell him to be quiet for now. This helps to recognise that the critic is just one aspect of you, not your whole personality. (The good side of the inner critic is that he motivates you to achieve!)

Working out what may be unconscious

How were you 'heard' when you were young?

If you weren't listened to, remember that was then; this is now.

The Sample Methodology

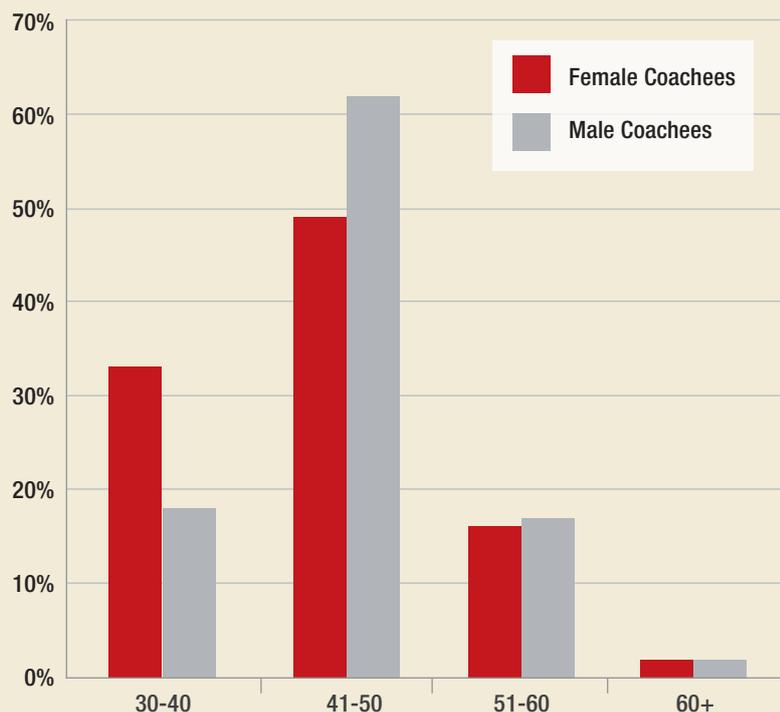
We analysed the demographics of all 120 senior women we coached from May 2010 to April 2011 and also compared these with all the 330 senior men we coached for the same period. We then analysed a sub sample of 78 senior women's coaching programmes in detail, looking at the specific objectives of their coaching as expressed by their sponsors and themselves and what had been useful in the resultant coaching programmes.

To date, we have not yet completed a similar analysis of the detailed objectives for the senior men we coached. This is our next project!

Some of the women we coached had made their own decision to seek coaching and obtained support. For some, their chief executive or similar level 'line manager' or sponsor had suggested it as a support mechanism. Some, a smaller minority, had been 'recommended' or 'sent' for coaching to work on specific behaviours. Four approached us on their own account to obtain support and paid for themselves.

Most of the women and men we coach are mid career and the average age is around 45.

AGE BREAKDOWN - FEMALE COMPARED TO MALE COACHEES



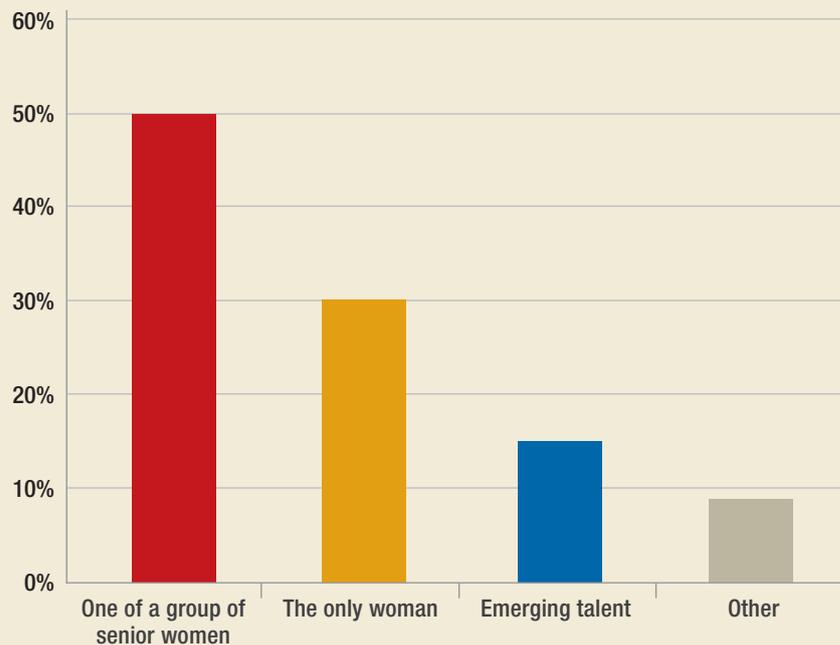
Choice of coach - male or female?

Our research indicated an interesting difference in whether the senior women chose a male or female coach. Male coaches are seen as standing in the shoes of the woman's male colleagues and reflecting how she is seen by these colleagues.

Women working with female coaches see someone who will have had similar experiences, will see the world through their perspective and be in more of a mentoring role.

With a male coach, women worked slightly more on behavioural strategies and organisational frameworks. Those with a female coach worked more on self reflection and self-analysis. In fact, all our coaches do both, so this would seem to reflect a perception and choice by clients, as much as preferred approaches by our coaches.

WERE THEY THE ONLY WOMAN/ONE OF A GROUP OR EMERGING TALENT?



Confidentiality

As coaches, everything we do is confidential. We have asked permission for all case examples quoted, even for those that are un-attributable.

References

1. Vinnicombe, S et al, *Female FTSE Board Report 2011*, International Centre for Women Leaders, Cranfield School of Management,
2. Thomson, P, Graham, J and Lloyd, T, *A Woman's Place is in the Boardroom*, Palgrave Macmillan, 2005
3. Visser, M, *The Female Leadership Paradox*, Palgrave Macmillan, 2011
4. Kramer, VW, Konrad, A M, and Erkut, S. *Critical Mass on Corporate Boards*, Wellesley Center for Women's Publications, 2006
5. Rosener, J, *Ways Women Lead*, Harvard Business Review, Nov – Dec 1990
6. Kabakoff and Peters, *The Way Women and Men Lead – Different but Equally Effective*, Management Research Group, 1998
7. Visser, M, *The Female Leadership Paradox*, Palgrave Macmillan, 2011

About Praesta

Praesta is one of the leading firms of executive coaches in the UK, with associated firms internationally. Our heritage goes back to 1994 (when we were called The Change Partnership).

We were founded with a mission to help new board directors make the transition from head of a function to making a contribution across the business.

We coach directors and others at a similar level (as individuals and in teams) across all sectors: private, (commercial organisations and professional firms) public, not for profit. We currently have twenty six coaches and mentors in the UK (15 men and 11 women), all of whom have themselves been in senior leadership positions and all of whom have additionally trained as accredited coaches or master coaches.

Each year, we coach, one to one, about 450 senior executives. They are mainly at board level, executive level and one level below. A smaller number are high potential future leaders.

In the last few years there has been a steady proportion of around 120 of these 450 who have been women. This is disproportionately high (27%) compared with the percentage of women actually in the senior executive population in our client base.

In 2003, we set up and sponsored the FTSE 100 Cross Company Mentoring Programme to work with Chairs of FTSE 100 companies who offered to voluntarily mentor senior women in other FTSE 100 companies to help them achieve board positions (usually non-executive). The success of this programme has resulted in its spin off as a separate not for profit entity, The Mentoring Foundation, and it now does the same excellent work, but for a wider group of companies and organisations across all sectors.

This report was prepared by Mairi Eastwood, Hilary Douglas and Joanne Gavin on behalf of the whole team at Praesta who contributed their findings, and help.



Mairi Eastwood

Email

mairi.eastwood@praesta.com



Hilary Douglas

Email

hilary.douglas@praesta.com

Praesta Partners LLP

Berger House
38 Berkeley Square
London W1J 5AH
United Kingdom

Tel: +44 (0)20 7907 2450
Email: info@praesta.co.uk
Web: www.praesta.co.uk

Praesta Partners LLP

Berger House
38 Berkeley Square
London W1J 5AH
United Kingdom

Tel: +44 (0)20 7907 2450
Email: info@praesta.co.uk
Web: www.praesta.co.uk

