

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



Women and Men Senior Leaders - Similarities and Differences

Lessons from Coaching

PRAESTA

Introduction

There are still relatively few women senior executives in UK plc. Whilst there are now an increased number of women non-executive directors, it is a more complex and longer term challenge to change the mix in the executive group.

Most of the Chief Executives to whom we speak now understand the issues that get in the way of increasing the proportion of senior women, but are still asking: "But what do we do? We are trying most things. It's not working".

We coach around 450 of the UK's most senior leaders each year, including 120 senior women at board level, executive level and one level below. Earlier this year, we published research from our coaching of these 120 to help to address these questions.*

We were encouraged by both our own curiosity and the interest of our clients to continue this research by comparing the findings from the coaching conversations with women with those for a similar sample of male leaders.

There are some interesting and unexpected results from this comparison, in respect of both women and men.

As with our previous report, we hope that these insights will help to achieve a step change in the number of women applying for and being appointed to the UK's top roles. We also hope that it will increase the talent pool of able men in these roles.

Talent continues to be scarce and businesses have already made considerable investments in senior people by the time they reach top levels. It makes strong commercial sense to maximise the return on those investments.

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*Available from our website www.praesta.com or from the address at the back of this booklet.

Confidentiality

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

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Executive Summary of Findings

Findings

Women are looking for support for a larger range of issues than men and more want to work on building their self-confidence. But many talented male leaders are held back by lack of confidence, too. In the case of both genders, the sponsors underestimated this by 50%

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%). The top 6 issues raised by men and women themselves, once engaged in coaching, were very similar, although ranked differently. The top two issues for both men and women were: to develop greater influencing skills and to develop more presence and gravitas.

One noticeable difference was that more women (60%), especially within the confidential environment of the coaching room, raised developing self confidence as an objective, it was the third most mentioned coaching objective, whilst for men it was only mentioned by about one third of them and was eighth in rank. Sponsors saw more of the women as needing to work on their confidence than they did of the men but under recognised it by 50% for both genders.

Both men and women senior leaders are looking for help in establishing their own individual leadership style that feels authentic to them, particularly when it is not the same style as that currently prevailing at the top of their organisation. It is, in fact, in the private sector, men's top issue. Again, directors are not good at recognising it as an issue for either gender.

More than half of the private sector men (58%) and slightly less than half of the women (46%) wanted to work on establishing their own personal style of leadership that would feel authentic to them. This was particularly true where they wanted to develop a style that was not what they saw as being the prevalent style at the top of their organisation. This was the *top* issue raised by men (the sixth by women). It was also an area where the sponsors were least good at recognising the issue their male leaders were surfacing. (The sponsors failed to identify it for 32% of the men.)

70% of both men and women in the sample were under 50. In separate research into emerging male leadership styles (Metro Leaders, ref 2), we have found that successful younger male leaders are adopting a different style of leadership from the

previous generation's approach. This style emphasises relationships and collaboration. It doesn't assume authority comes from position or that senior people have all the answers. These younger leaders are comfortable having active multiple roles in life and openly managing their time to suit their competing priorities. They are focusing on authentic expression of themselves across all their roles, inside and outside work.

A significant percentage of women are still being labelled 'over-aggressive'.

27% of the women were seen by sponsors as 'over-aggressive' compared with fewer than half that number of men. Only 15% of women, themselves, 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.

In some other cases, the behaviour labelled as 'over-aggressive' came from women trying too hard to emulate a 'masculine' style, because they did not see their own natural style as a route to success.

Identifying and affirming a leader's individual strengths rather than focusing on his or her weaknesses, makes a significant, sometimes transformational, difference to the business effectiveness of leaders of both genders.

For the majority of leaders of both genders, identifying and focusing on that person's individual strengths and building his or her confidence in playing to these was a fundamental and important piece of the coaching work. In many cases, this built the platform for transformational change in the leader's business effectiveness. This was true whether or not confidence building was raised explicitly as a coaching objective. We also found no difference in the coaching approaches that were helpful and effective for senior women as distinct from men.

There is currently much more explicit support through coaching for men's aspirations to join the executive group than there is for women.

We reported this in our previous research and it continues to be the case. Fewer than one in ten

Findings and Recommendations

women either put themselves forward or were supported through coaching in their aspirations to be on the executive board. Four times as many men, 41%, asked for or received coaching for their similar aspirations.

Recommendations for CEOs and HRDs

Recognise that it is important to younger leaders to find a personal style of leadership that feels right for them and it may be different from the prevalent style.

Younger men and women want to have active multiple roles (spouse, co-parent, and leader) and want to lead in a style that incorporates all these in a single identity in an authentic way. This may be different from the style of the current leadership – or indeed your own. In our experience, it is likely to be more collaborative, with authority based on relationships and credibility rather than position. They will be looking for ideas to come from everywhere and not expecting to have all the answers themselves. Teams are more prevalent. You need to ask yourself and your colleagues whether you are genuinely letting the new generation lead in their way or whether you are requiring them to do it your way. In our experience this style is natural to many women, so getting it right for women may well assist in getting it right for younger men, too.

Both women and men who do not feel they have internal role models may need external input to help develop their own style.

Ensure that the organisation's processes for talent identification and succession planning are not overlooking those who have high potential but are not strong self promoters.

Question carefully what is causing women to be labelled 'over-aggressive'.

Be alert to either biased stereotyping of what appropriate women's styles are seen to be or to women over reacting in copying and excelling at an aggressive style because they believe that to be the style that successful men are deploying.

As CEO, take more time out to provide more personal encouragement to the very able, but less confident, of both genders. Women may, right now, need more encouragement, and so there is a case for some specific initiatives, but both genders benefit from the same approach and this will increase the depth and effectiveness of your talent pool.

Some leaders may feel that spending time affirming and encouraging their team members is too much like 'mothering' and shouldn't be necessary in the business place. Others may feel that such activity is what human resources are there to do.

Our research shows that it is important that the leadership and HR do not inadvertently collude in this becoming primarily HR's responsibility. Personal encouragement from a respected and more senior leader is different from encouragement from HR. Younger generation leaders, in particular, see leadership as a relationship based activity.

It is likely that we do not see the most confident leaders in coaching and that our sample is not fully representative of the leadership talent available. However, each one we have coached has been a senior person whom the organisation has valued sufficiently to make the considerable investment that coaching at this level represents. Many have gone on to the very top positions. This personal investment is therefore well worth while.

For senior women themselves

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

What is clear from this additional study is that many male leaders are grappling with the same issues. When you feel that it is particularly hard to be a senior woman leader, you may reflect that it may just be that, in many cases, it is just challenging to be a leader of either gender in today's business world. Our research indicates that many of the issues that are important to senior women are becoming equally important to younger male leaders. They will benefit from the attention you focus on these issues.

Coaching is not the only way of working on these issues and challenges, but our clients found it effective. It is the opportunity to discuss issues with someone 'on your side' that has been most significant for our senior women clients.

Our original report: *Why are there still so few women on executive boards?* And our separate research: *Metro Leaders – A new breed of men in business* are available on our website www.praesta.com or from Praesta Partners, Berger House, 38 Berkeley Square, London W1J 5AH.

In our earlier report, we identified some ways you might help yourself achieve your aspirations. We thought it worth repeating these here:

- 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 individual 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. Transforming your outlook on these is a personal and significant piece of work, but one that many senior women have done and has been transformational.
- Actively manage your own career and take risks in putting yourself forward.
- Recognise that establishing what you want from life and the balances and tradeoffs that involves is a challenging, but essential and ongoing task that will reduce your continuing tension.

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**.

Generalisations - a caveat

Generalisations are always a problem. There is huge diversity among the senior women we coach, as there is 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 this spectrum. 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?

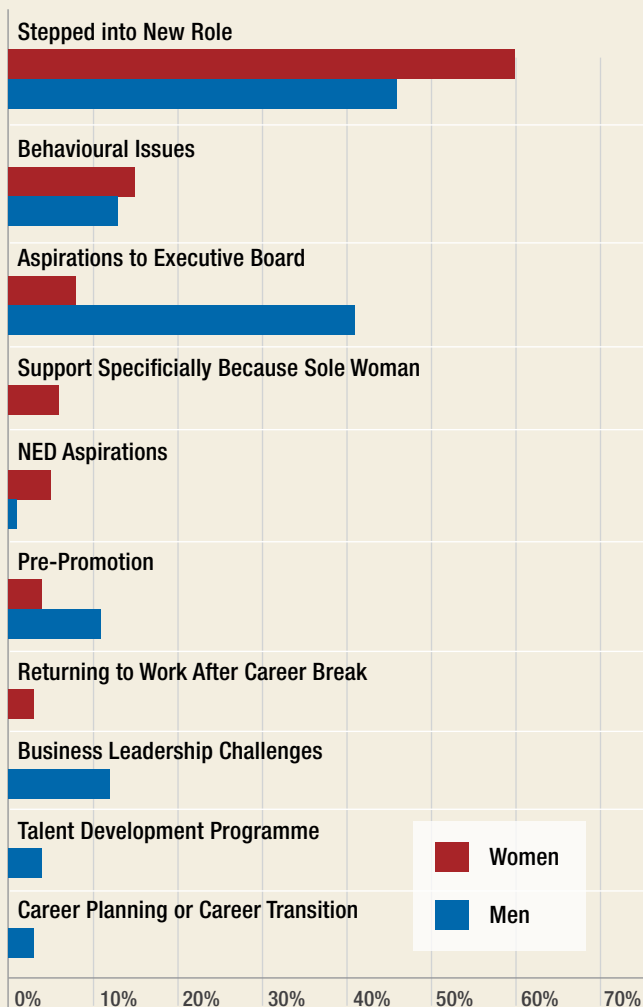
Section 1

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

By far the most common stimulus for coaching for senior women was stepping into a new more senior role (60%). This is a common situation for men too (45%). But almost as many men, (40%), come because their organisations want to support their aspiration to the executive level. Less than 10% of the women came for this reason.

It is also noticeable that a significant number of men identified support in facing business challenges as the prompt for coaching, whilst this was not at all raised for women. Often senior men seek coaching support to find a sounding board for an external challenge. Women, with more predisposition to internalise, tend to express their need for support more in terms of themselves and their qualities.

WHAT PROMPTED THE COACHING SUPPORT



Section 2

Issues brought to coaching - how do men and women compare?

Our research looked at coaching objectives from 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 top two issues to work on raised by the sponsoring CEO or Director were the same for men and women:
 - to develop greater influencing skills (women 57%; men 44%)
 - to develop more presence and gravitas (women 54%; men 45%).

These were also the top two issues raised by women themselves (greater influencing skills: 70%; presence and gravitas: 66%).

- Developing better influencing skills was also a top issue for men themselves, (58%) but equal top was developing an individual leadership style that felt authentic to them (also 58%). Noticeably, this was raised by more men than women (46% and the sixth top for women.)
- More women, (60%), especially within the confidential environment of the coaching room, raised developing self confidence as an objective. It was women’s third most mentioned coaching objective, whilst for men it was only mentioned by about 33% and was eighth in order.
- More women than men raised almost every issue, indicating that women are looking for support across a larger number of issues.

SPONSOR ISSUES



COACHEE - INITIAL AND ADDITIONAL ISSUES



Being seen as over-aggressive

27% of the women were seen by sponsors as 'over-aggressive' compared with fewer than half that number of men and also in comparison with fewer than half that number of women 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 labeled 'too soft' and 'aggressive' was extremely narrow.

We also noticed cases where a competitive woman was merely seeking to emulate a style that she saw worked for men in the organisation and succeeded too well.

COACHEE ISSUES - PRIVATE SECTOR



SPONSOR ISSUES - PRIVATE SECTOR



Private Sector

The results for the private sector mirror the results for the whole sample in many ways, except that in comparing the issues raised by the men and women themselves, there is a much closer match between the genders than there is when comparing the sponsor's comments on the coachees of different genders.

- For the private sector coachees themselves, the largest gender gap is for challenges in managing conflict or having difficult conversations, (a difference of 42%) which was something mentioned by very few men in our sample. Finding it hard to say no, needing approval and affirmation, and establishing presence and gravitas were the other largest gaps where more women than men felt they had challenges.

Public sector

For the public sector element of our sample, the data on issues raised by sponsors tells a different story. There was less detailed input from sponsors about male coachees; much more about the women. The public sector have been focusing strongly over the last few years in supporting women leaders and, indeed, the proportion of senior women in our sample is much higher than the proportions of public sector men (see Sample Methodology). Civil Service leaders have been focusing on developing influencing skills and on establishing presence and gravitas, which may give rise to more detailed input. For men, the background has been more generally about stepping up.

How close is the match between the sponsor's objectives for the coaching and those of the coachees themselves?

We looked at the gaps between the issues that the sponsors raised and those that the coachees themselves were raising. We would have expected gaps. Sponsors are not always very good at articulating what the detailed issues are. Often the coach needs to tease this out in a three way meeting at the beginning of the work. (This can be, in itself, a valuable part of the coaching, by aiding communication). And sometimes (perhaps surprisingly, given the size of the investment in coaching and the seniority of the people we coach), despite our best efforts, the sponsors are not available to give this quality of input.

- It is not surprising that planning and managing career path shows a large gap. It is very often an

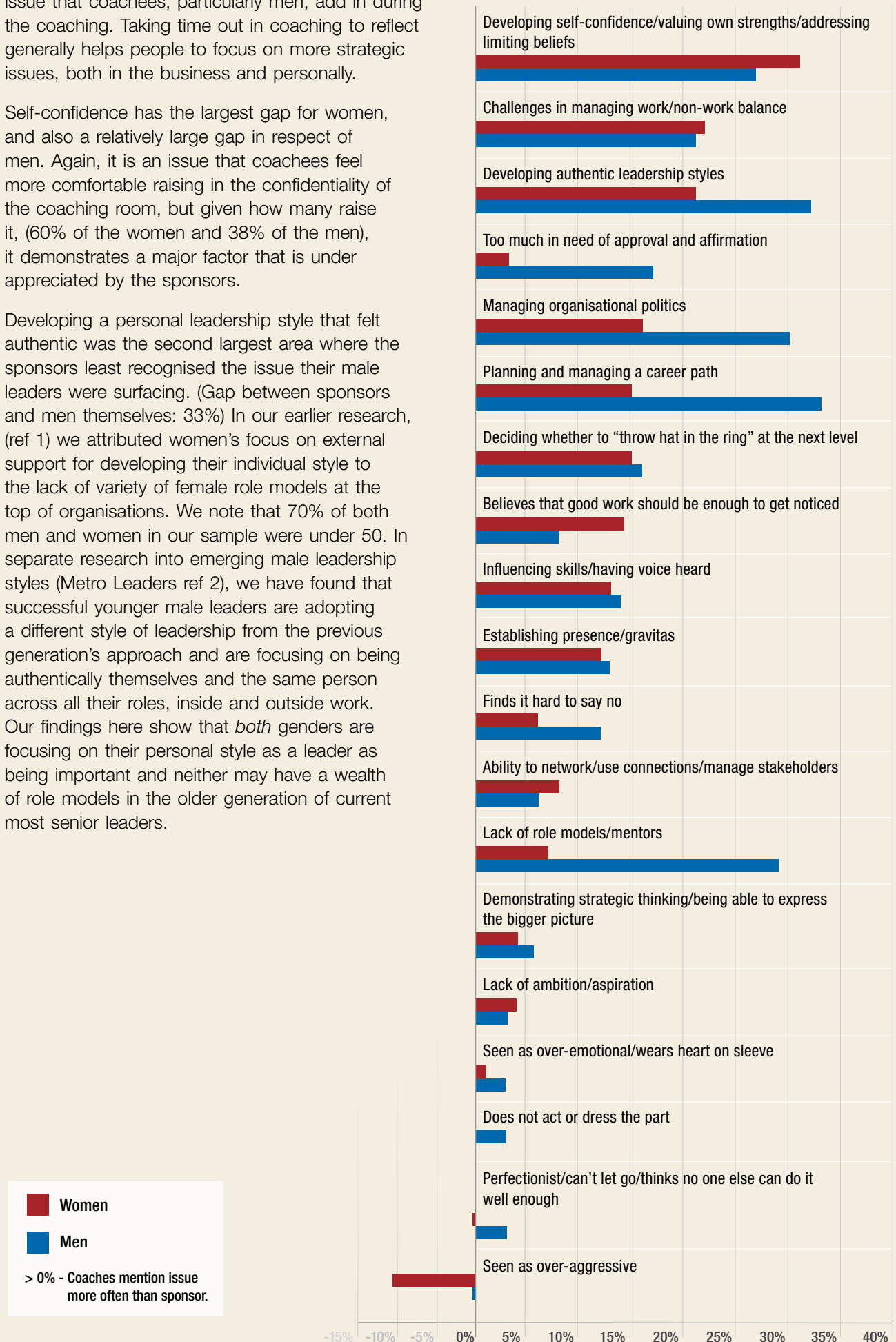
COACHEE ISSUES - PUBLIC SECTOR



issue that coachees, particularly men, add in during the coaching. Taking time out in coaching to reflect generally helps people to focus on more strategic issues, both in the business and personally.

- Self-confidence has the largest gap for women, and also a relatively large gap in respect of men. Again, it is an issue that coachees feel more comfortable raising in the confidentiality of the coaching room, but given how many raise it, (60% of the women and 38% of the men), it demonstrates a major factor that is under appreciated by the sponsors.
- Developing a personal leadership style that felt authentic was the second largest area where the sponsors least recognised the issue their male leaders were surfacing. (Gap between sponsors and men themselves: 33%) In our earlier research, (ref 1) we attributed women’s focus on external support for developing their individual style to the lack of variety of female role models at the top of organisations. We note that 70% of both men and women in our sample were under 50. In separate research into emerging male leadership styles (Metro Leaders ref 2), we have found that successful younger male leaders are adopting a different style of leadership from the previous generation’s approach and are focusing on being authentically themselves and the same person across all their roles, inside and outside work. Our findings here show that *both* genders are focusing on their personal style as a leader as being important and neither may have a wealth of role models in the older generation of current most senior leaders.

GAP BETWEEN SPONSORS AND COACHES



Section 3

The coaching

In looking at the coaching work we did with both the men and women, there was no discernible difference with the approach we had with different genders for any given issues.

Time and again we noticed that identifying and pointing out coachee's strengths, affirming these and working with coachees on how best to deploy these has been an important building block of the coaching and of creating noticeable change. This is not the only thing that coaching does, but it is noticeable what a significant difference it makes to many people who come for coaching.

Increased self knowledge, self appreciation and self determination to do something with their strengths is important in creating change. The fact that we ourselves, as coaches, have all been in senior leadership positions, helps to give the recognition of these strengths greater validation to our clients. And resolving, in front of a witness, to take some specific actions based on them creates a more powerful commitment to change than just saying to oneself in one's head.

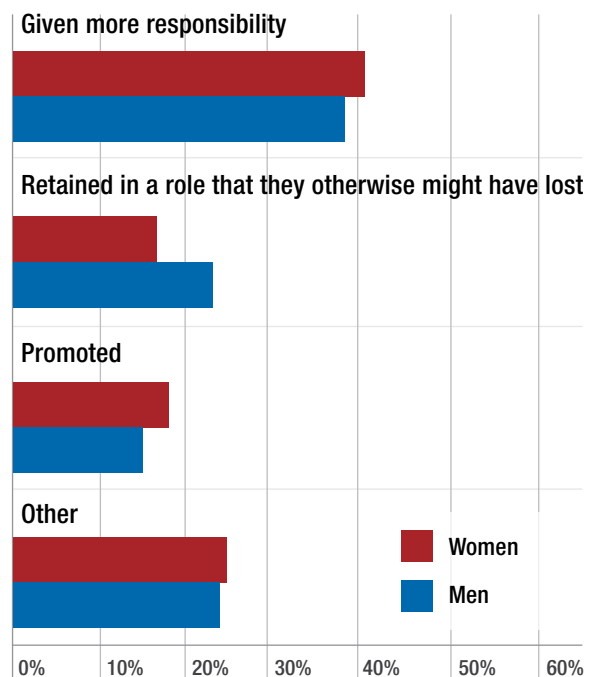
In these ways, coaching has a powerful effect. All of this is equally true of men and women, but a little more so for women, given the relative lower levels of confidence.

There is a message here for chief executives. Some time spent with their direct reports, doing the relatively simple things of getting to know them better and reinforcing and encouraging their strengths can make a very powerful difference. However, it also begs the question as to why top leaders in organisations: Chairmen; Chief Executives; Directors; don't do more of this, themselves, for their direct reports and so improve their performance?

What do we notice gets in the way of this happening?

- Time is a major factor. In the current 24/7 full on business environment, leaders don't have enough time with their direct reports to really get to know them.
- Performance management systems tend to be focussed on identifying and improving on areas of weakness rather than focussing on strengths and how they can be deployed.

WAS THE COACHEE AS A RESULT OF THE COACHING... - WOMEN COMPARED TO MEN



- At the most senior levels, leaders do not like to admit to things they find difficult. Whilst a good chair can be a very effective mentor to a CEO, many CEOs fear admitting any weakness to their chair and non-executives.
- Many more traditional leaders are reluctant to engage in what seems like too much 'mothering' of their senior people. Their view is that, at that level, individuals should be more self-sufficient.
- People who have got to top positions are generally highly driven. Driven people have strong self critical functions. The good side of this is that it provides the energy and motivation to keep trying harder. The negative side is that driven people don't often give much recognition to their own successes and so are, possibly unconsciously, equally bad at giving others positive recognition.

We notice that there is a difference here in respect of organisation size. Smaller, more entrepreneurial organisations are generally more focussed on external matters than internal ones: how to survive; how to get traction in the market; how to beat the competition. Culturally more united to defeat the common enemy, colleagues look for strengths in each other to build on and create results. In larger organisations, emphasis on internal politics and internal competition creeps in and so focus on individuals' weaknesses becomes part of the 'game' of internal politics and promotion.

Sample Methodology

Over the course of a year, Praesta coaches work with around 450 senior executives from FTSE 350 and other companies and organisations in the private, public and charitable sectors. In the past year, as with earlier years, around half of these were at board and executive committee level, with around a further third at one level below the executive.

Consistently over the past few years about 120 of these have been women, their organisational levels matching the total group.

The identity of our clients is confidential, as is the detail of the work we do with them. But we are able to draw conclusions both quantitatively and qualitatively.

Earlier in 2012, we analysed this unique set of data to ask:

- What prompts organisations to seek coaching for their senior men and women leaders and are their differences between the genders?

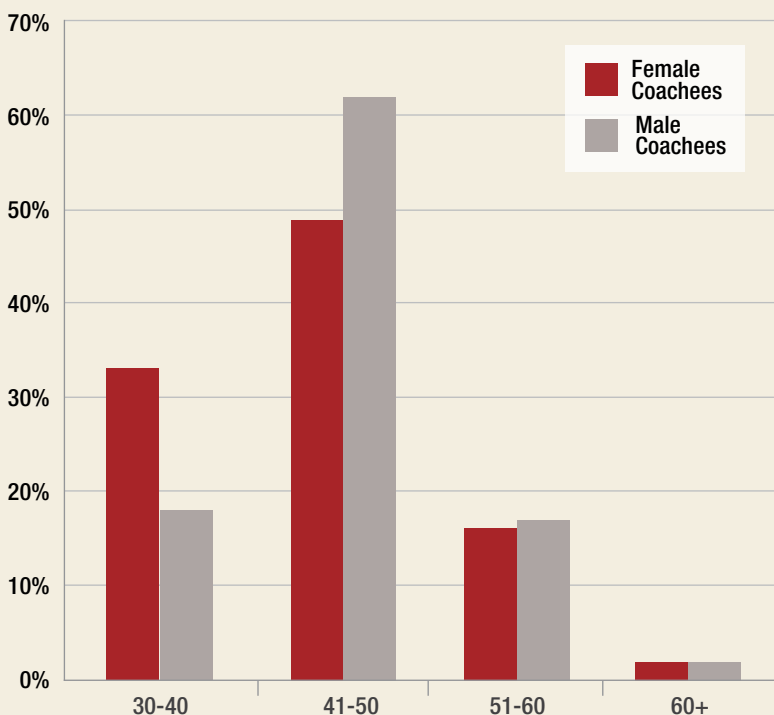
- What were clients and senior women themselves looking to get from coaching?
- Were there any useful messages for organisations seeking to increase the numbers of senior women executives and for senior women themselves?

This further research compares the findings from a sample of 120 male leaders selected at random from our year's cohort of around 330 men with those of the original 120 women.

Some of the men and 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 of the women and one of the men 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



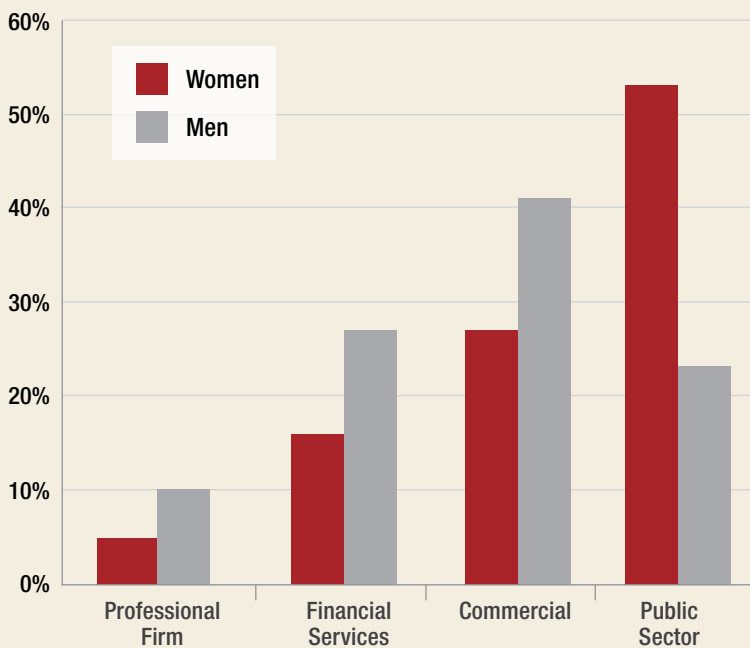
Our sample covers all sectors of the economy.

There is a higher percentage amongst our coachees of women in the public sector as compared with all the other sectors. Whilst only 20% 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 were one level below the executive group.

LEADERSHIP LEVEL



SECTOR



A Caveat

Of course, the leaders who come to us are not necessarily a random sample of all those in such leadership positions. There had been a specific reason for engaging in coaching. Furthermore, the ratio of women to men we work with is higher than the proportion of women in the leadership population from whom they are drawn. So our conclusions from this research are not necessarily about leaders as a whole. Nevertheless there are some interesting findings that we believe give clear indications for action for those wanting to have the best talent at their disposal for leadership in their organisations.

Confidentiality

As coaches, everything we do is confidential. We do not disclose any individual data except by permission, even if the situation is unattributable.

References

1. Eastwood, Mairi and Douglas, Hilary, *Why are there still so few women on executive boards, Lessons from Coaching*, Praesta Partners, LLP, 2012
2. Stephens, Jane, Hindle Fisher, R, *Metro Leaders, A new breed of men in business?*, Praesta Partners, LLP, 2012

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.

This report was prepared by Mairi Eastwood on behalf of the whole team at Praesta, who contributed their findings.



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