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27/02/12

<http://www.thetimes.co.uk/tto/career/article3333460.ece>,

The route to the boardroom is defining success and going for it

The door to increasing the number of women in FTSE 100 boardrooms remained stubbornly closed in 2011. Despite Government initiatives to put more women in company boardrooms - the "women on boards" campaign which is being led by Lord Davis - many companies failed to make any significant impression on the target of women making up 25 per cent of board-level positions by 2015.

Help up the career ladder could arrive from Brussels in the form of an EU quota, but that prospect is still a couple of years distant. Women looking to make headway with their careers in 2012 will need to focus on what they can do on their own to move forward.

Confident communication skills and personal impact will positively influence how you are perceived by others. Women need to be in control of their impact on others and the impression this creates. This is all part of developing a personal brand and the magic ingredient is self-awareness.

By identifying your unique talents and strengths you will be well placed to raise your profile to become more visible and memorable. Women tend to under communicate their achievements and performance results. It is important to get comfortable communicating what you have achieved.

Communication isn't as simple as saying what you mean, how well you communicate is crucial. Prepare set-piece replies to common work questions such as: "So, what are you up to at the moment?" Instead of playing-down your work load: "Oh, you know. The usual." say: "I've just finished project A which resulted in B, so my current focus is achieving C."

In her book *The Female Brand* Catherine Kaputa suggests that the 21st century is the era of female leadership style. She says that today's companies need flexible leaders who can lead through inspiration not dictatorship. Women bring unique skills to the business arena such as, superior emotional intelligence and a more lateral, risk adverse approach to leadership. Recent studies have shown that companies that supported women suffered fewer losses than most in the recession.

Women's rapport and relationship building skills are a significant advantage in career development. The ability to read interactions and flex communication styles accordingly is a key influencing skill.

Women should take advantage of these innate skills to reach out and build strong professional networks both inside the organisation they work for and externally. Asking trusted colleagues and clients for feedback will enable you to be more aware of the impact you have and highlight areas where you can improve.

It's a fact that women face harder choices between professional success and personal fulfillment. Women need to set both short and long-term goals early in their careers, setting clear and specific objectives. By doing so, you will have more control over your career progression.

Ambitions also need to be articulated and communicated to others, such as partners, colleagues and bosses, in order to achieve a planned career progression.

The issue of achieving a sustainable work/life balance is a constant for women. Yet, while women may be great at delegating in the workplace, data consistently shows that there is a discrepancy between the sharing of family responsibilities at home.

Women are often the first to sacrifice their careers. A study by Youngjoo Cha from Cornell University found that it's overwhelmingly women who will quit if both they and their partners work long hours, something which is far more common as a result of the financial crisis. In the legal profession, for example, women leave law firms at every stage of the professional hierarchy at a much higher rate than men, reducing the pool of potential partners.

While flexible work arrangements enable women to continue working after maternity leave, it is much more difficult to get back on the promotion track when they return to work after time off to raise a family. This is due to a number of issues not the least of which is confidence and self belief.

Organisations should think more creatively about how to keep women in the work place and put plans in place to enable that talent pool to return to work, but women who recognise the problem can help themselves, too. Women must raise their levels of self awareness to enable them to understand and communicate their development needs in a more robust way.

Be proactive, be willing to ask and negotiate for what you want. Learn from those who have gone before you - focus on developing relationships with senior executives who are well positioned and can encourage you to achieve your goals. As you navigate your career, mentors can be a great source of advice and guidance. Define what success means to you. If you don't know what you want how can you possibly achieve it?

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