

Mentoring Foundation Research Papers

Moments in Mentoring

Research Paper 2:

A Sense of Personal Agency: roadmap for a working culture reboot

(Part 2)

Research Paper 2 (Part 1)

outlined some theory and our own investigative research into senior women's experience of a sense of personal agency as they transition to positions at the very top of their organisations; examining in particular how this personal agency can be used to bring about change. Our research work is timely as women begin to achieve high office in greater numbers and gain with it the ability to have a broader impact upon their organisations and our society. We are not alone in observing this phenomenon. Describing the Radio 4 Woman's Hour 2015 Power List, the programme's website defines the women who will appear on the list as having "...a huge impact on our lives, not because of their job title, but because of their personal impact and their ability to influence others". How women use personal agency is becoming increasingly visible as a potentially important vehicle for beneficial change.

On 19th May 2015 more than 40 FTSE Chairmen, Chief Executives, Senior and Managing Partners of leading professional firms and other business leaders, senior HR Directors and Mentees and Alumnae from our Programmes - some of the UK's most senior female executives, as well as the next generation of potential women leaders - gathered at Buckingham Palace with members of the Royal Household to discuss the question

of how individuals and organisations can encourage their women leaders to flourish and act as a "force for good".

In his opening remarks, the Master of the Royal Household, Vice-Admiral Tony Johnstone-Burt, highlighted the need for a fresh approach; a recalibration of our perspectives to transform both our organisations and the way both women and men work in them. This is no small task. The round-table discussions held at the Palace examined how those women leaders who so wish, can be encouraged to act as agents of change.

This research paper examines the output from the discussions at Buckingham Palace and proposes a roadmap to encourage women leaders themselves to act on the personal agency that comes with their positions of authority, and to encourage organisations to put in place cultures and practices that enable women, as well as men, to flourish.

What our participants said

Discussions were lively and animated and the output from the table groups reflected this. Many thoughts emerged and these can be grouped into two overarching themes. First, as might be expected, many familiar thoughts and experiences continue to be voiced. These relate to women needing more confidence, lacking role-models and feeling isolated. But newer themes also emerged, focusing on increasing empowerment for women and women's leadership style, with a particular emphasis on authenticity and the type of work culture that can best support them. We examine these overarching themes below, and make proposals for

addressing them at both the individual and organisational level.

Mars and Venus

Strong ideas about different leadership styles among men and women persist (although this is also seen by many as an unhelpful stereotype) and about workplaces that do not support women's career advancement. Some examples of the comments made are:

- "We recognise the importance of women/different styles/ ethnicities in shifting culture to create a more open, human, caring environment."
- "We need to create diverse teams, valuing different leadership styles in both men and women."
- "We must be careful not to put men and women into categories by generalising."
- "Women need to lose the self-deprecating language habits"
- "Women in authority tend to be accused of being bossy or aggressive if they behave in the same way as men. Nothing is as formidable as a woman who remains calm."
- "All the women always do their homework on the Board. This is not always the case for all the men."
- "There remain very few senior women. Is this prejudice? Or lack of ambition?"
- "Women bring focus, emotional intelligence, diligence and insight and are better at doing than talking."
- "We need to help women develop more confidence to take risks, to understand their strengths and to manage their careers upwards."
- "Organisations can do more ...- fixing the organisation rather than fixing the women."

These soundbites offer insight into deeply

"People can get stuck in their stories if they do not feel heard."

held and often conflicting views: that women and men have different management qualities but that stereotypes should be avoided; that women's management qualities are "softer" and not valued in most organisations; and that women lack the confidence to put themselves forward. These themes are not new and some observers are surprised that they persist. We have heard some of our Mentees express exasperation that women are, in their words "still having the same conversations". It may be true that when invited to discuss this topic, we tend to repeat our existing insights and experiences – risking becoming stuck in our stories, rather than acknowledging that things have moved on. However, the rate of change is not even-paced across all industries and companies. Our observation is that for many women these views are based on their own current experiences and therefore remain pertinent.

Daring to do....advice for organisations and women leaders

The second theme constitutes nothing less than a call to action for both women and organisations. Several key words and phrases emerge: authenticity, taking risks and role-modelling. Some examples of what was said are:

- "We need to develop broad, authentic and diverse role-modelling"
- "We urge you to be a conscious and authentic role model and know your elevator pitch."
- "We identified that organisations are made up of individuals. Change can create momentum, and it can be started by an individual."
- "It's important to maintain a succession plan that reaches down into the organisation, makes time for and re-thinks the processes."
- "We advise that organisations change the men as well as the women. Don't say you want diverse organisations – Show it!"



The Ballroom, Buckingham Palace

- “It’s important to break out of “the groove” and a narrow self-perception”
- “Organisations could be braver, and take risks on people who may not conform on paper.”
- “Companies should focus on changing the system rather than putting in place a barrage of initiatives.”

Again, these ideas have been aired before and it is worth examining what they might represent. On reading them, the underlying sentiment is apparent. There is frustration that the rhetoric of change is not yet yielding results in changing broader work cultures. The many references to authenticity suggest that frequently women (and perhaps men) do not feel that their work environment accords with their own internal view of themselves and the leaders they would like to be. As a result, they feel pressure to change in order to fit in. The work culture still appears to be too homogeneous: daring to be different and appointing outside the traditional mould are still seen as a risk.

Moving on

The output from the discussion reveals competing frustrations and a sense of “stuckness”: we know the outcome we want to achieve but are not yet sure how to get there. Whilst some progress has undoubtedly been made, enabling and encouraging women to become leaders is a job half done. Nonetheless, we feel that the output offers some insight into how we can move (and are moving) forward, to achieve the more agentic qualities that we described in Part 1 of this Research Paper.

Culture of listening People can get stuck in their stories if they do not feel heard. Encouraging women at all levels in the organisation to tell their story (including the positives) can help both them and the listener to learn, see things differently and, if necessary, adapt. This is often not easy to achieve in organisations where speaking up about difference can be seen as potentially career-limiting. We observe in our mentoring relationships that where trust is established, both Mentees and Mentors value very highly the confidential space in which they can recount their experiences and achieve fresh insights.

Open to change A key feature of our mentoring relationships is the open stance of both Mentor and Mentee. “Breaking out of the groove” as described in the output can only happen if you are open to new ideas. Again, confidential conversations with a trusted person in an atmosphere of collaboration, offer the opportunity for both parties to take on board the different views of the other person and to shift their own perceptions as they encounter new ideas.

Culture of individual empowerment

The output indicates ways in which many women perceive their true leadership style to be different from the prevailing leadership culture and calls upon organisations to foster environments that value women’s leadership and enable women to flourish. Again this is easier said than done. In the mentoring relationships we facilitate, our women Mentees have the time and space to reflect upon their qualities and the kind of leader they would like to be. Research Paper 2, Part 1 showcases examples of this process. Encouraging and facilitating reflection and conversation about this can help organisations understand what it is in their culture that



prevents women from feeling that they can both be authentic and succeed. It can also help them understand the shifts necessary within the organisation and the “nudges” that may be needed to the women themselves, to help them achieve broader authority and personal agency in their leadership roles.

Dare to do...

The output also reveals frustration over the lack of action for change. The open, listening process described above is not, on its own, enough. But, if carried out properly, it should enable organisations to identify areas where they can improve their culture in a demonstrable way.

It can also help build communication lines with talented employees who might otherwise feel overlooked or ignored and ultimately leave the organisation. Our mentoring pairs give us some insight into this process, as Mentees and Mentors work together on how Mentees can improve or enhance their working lives and commit more firmly to succeeding at the highest level in their careers.

Conclusion

The Mentoring Foundation event at Buckingham Palace demonstrated that there is much to celebrate. Over 40 FTSE Chairmen, CEOs, Senior Partners and other business leaders were present, demonstrating their commitment to our work. More than 60 senior female executives and aspiring next generation women leaders were also present. These numbers alone show that women are, in increasing numbers, succeeding to the highest level and that many of the UK's largest and most prestigious organisations are making serious attempts to build more inclusive work cultures.

Yet, there remains much work to be done for true diversity in our organisations to be achieved and for women to find, as they achieve positions in power in greater numbers, a broader sense of authority and agency to act. Achieving true gender diversity and broader cultural change is, in

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our view, a joint endeavour between men and women, individuals and their organisations. The Mentoring Foundation’s raison d’être is to build conversations and connections, bringing people together so they can better understand and learn from each other. We are proud of the outcomes reported to us from the joint endeavours of our Mentors and Mentees. They offer an insight, also, into how the same mechanisms of open, collaborative and trusting dialogue between those in power and those aspiring to it, can bring about lasting change for good.

Peninah Thomson OBE, and Clare Laurent
The Mentoring Foundation
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Roadmap for a Cultural Reboot

1. Create a culture of listening: encourage women’s stories to be heard.
2. Be open to change from the top down, avoid defensive listening – encourage new ideas.
3. Create a culture of individual empowerment.
4. Recognise individual leadership qualities, in particular those that are different from the majority.
5. Dare to do. Be accountable and act on learning from this process in a demonstrable way.

‘The Rise of the Female Executive: How Women’s Leadership is Accelerating Cultural Change’ by Peninah Thomson and Clare Laurent with Tom Lloyd, will be published by Palgrave Macmillan in autumn 2015.



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