

Mentoring Foundation Research Papers

Moments in Mentoring

Research Paper 7

Hinge Moments:

How Critical Interventions Shape Women's Careers

Introduction

Welcome to the seventh research paper in our “Moments in Mentoring” series, on which we’re delighted to have collaborated with Emma FitzGerald, Former Managing Director, Wholesale Operations at Severn Trent plc. Over the following pages we examine the nature and significance of individual interventions in women’s careers, where those interventions have been instrumental in advancing the progress of the women concerned through the executive pipeline.

These turning points – or “hinge moments” – may have been conversations, acts of sponsorship, a particularly challenging situation or a moment when the stars just simply appeared to be in alignment. In each case, we consider how these critical moments shaped the individual women, with a view to identifying themes around ‘what works’ in this context.

There is some evidence that the management of such interventions can go a long way towards shaping women’s successful career trajectories. In 2014, Bain & Company published a research paper entitled, ‘Everyday Moments of Truth’. Based on a five-year study of how and why women’s career paths differ from men’s, and a survey of more than 1,000 men and women, the report concluded that frontline managers are the key to women’s career aspirations.

The Bain paper noted: “The imbalance of women in power is a challenging issue laden with complexity and nuance.

We’ve discovered, however, that everyday interactions make a huge difference in gender equality outcomes. Classrooms and boardrooms will continue to be important crucibles for change, but by themselves they are insufficient. The conference room, where teams interact and professionals grow, is a vital additional place for progress. Our research suggests that by encouraging and enabling frontline managers to rethink their approaches to women’s career development, companies will be far more successful in attracting and retaining the next generation of top talent, both female and male.”

In a recent paper, ‘Getting The Most From Your Diversity Dollars’, published by The Boston Consulting Group in June 2017, and based on a survey of roughly 17,500 employees across 21 countries, researchers looked at 39 specific diversity initiatives and their effectiveness. They said: “Our findings show that common measures – such as one-time training sessions – are less effective than many people imagine. Conversely, other measures – such as interventions that target key points in women’s career paths (when they take parental leave or consider an international posting, for example) – tend to be underestimated but often lead to significant results.”

We are delighted to have been able to interview eight senior women about hinge moments in their own career trajectories. We are extremely grateful for the support of Severn Trent plc, where we were able to interview five senior women, and for the time of three other contributors, from Skills for Care Ltd, Tandem Bank and PayPoint plc, who also kindly shared their experiences. We would like to

thank the following interviewees for speaking with us:

- Sharon Allen OBE, Chief Executive, Skills for Care Ltd
- Sarah Bentley, Chief Customer Officer, Severn Trent plc
- Evelyn Dickey, Former Director of Human Resources, Severn Trent plc
- Emma FitzGerald, Former Managing Director, Wholesale Operations, Severn Trent plc
- Ruth Handcock, Chief Customer Officer, Tandem Bank
- Rachel Kentleton, Finance Director, PayPoint plc
- Helen Miles, Group Commercial Director, Severn Trent plc
- Nicole Westcott, Head of Organisational Effectiveness, HR, Severn Trent plc

Over the following pages, we will consider the impact of various 'hinge moments' on the course of the careers of these individuals, as well as exploring the role of mentoring in providing turning points for Mentees. We will explore how questions of confidence can be addressed through individual conversations with Mentors, to encourage a psychological adjustment and/or personal re-evaluation of how women perceive themselves, and we will consider how individual acts or initiatives can affect cultural obstacles to women's progression in the executive pipeline.

PART ONE: Case studies - 'hinge moments'

In this first section of our paper, we outline the various 'hinge moments' experienced by our interviewees. We have been fortunate to be able to examine more than 20 such moments, described by senior women as critical turning points in their career trajectories. We have detailed 15 of these stories here, and these 15 hinge moments can be broadly divided into four categories: positive acts of sponsorship; negative transformative experiences; personal turning points; and mentoring interventions.

"Interactions make a huge difference in gender equality outcomes"

*Bain & Company,
"Everyday moments of Truth"*

Positive acts of sponsorship

*Emma FitzGerald,
Severn Trent plc*

"I am dyslexic, although I didn't know that until I was in my late 30s, but if I look back on my influences, I had an incredibly



inspirational chemistry teacher who taught me at A-level, and he was the person who taught me a love of research. Learning things and doing exams was always tricky, and he gave me an outlet into original research, which allowed me to learn in a completely different way.

"That has not only shaped my educational choices, but has influenced the way that I have developed as a leader too, in terms of feeling very comfortable with going into ambiguous situations and making sense of them. Meeting him, and him inspiring me to have the confidence to do innovative research, is pretty fundamental. That would definitely be a hinge moment; he was also the person who gave me the courage and confidence to apply to Oxford University, because he gave me the confidence that 'talent will out'."

Evelyn Dickey, Severn Trent plc

"I originally went to work for Severn Trent for three months, to do some restructuring on a temporary basis. Then I got asked to stay on, and I was doing an operational job, which I was enjoying. One day, Tony Wray, then Chief Executive, asked me to take on the HR Director role. I hadn't thought about doing it, I didn't particularly think I wanted to do it, or could do it, and he didn't actually ask me so much as tell me he really wanted me to do it. I was really quite shocked.



"I never thought I'd be an HR Director on an

“It was about his belief in me, and his demystifying of what the role would be, that changed the course of my career.”

executive team; I didn't have all the remuneration experience or Board experience, but he was just fantastic, and said he really wanted me to do it. He had noticed a lot of operational things I had been doing, and he helped me realise that in the role I would have to be more strategic in my thinking, at a time when I didn't know what that meant. He just wanted someone who would think a bit further ahead and make things happen, and that was definitely a massive moment, because I had never thought of being an HRD in a FTSE 100 company. It was about his belief in me, and his demystifying of what the role would be, that changed the course of my career.”

Ruth Handcock, Tandem Bank

“I worked for a consultancy in my late twenties – it was small, very entrepreneurial, and had been started by a couple of university graduates who'd done nothing else, so they came at it with an incredibly entrepreneurial spirit. I'd only been there about nine months when I remember a meeting with Caroline, who was founder/CEO, where we went out, sat on the grass, had a coffee, and she said 'Right, I want you to write a business plan for your bit of the business.’

“She told me to set myself a target, and tell everyone what that target was, because then I'd be far more likely to achieve it. At the time, I found that absolutely terrifying, and I walked away from the meeting thinking “this really puts me out of my comfort zone”. But she was saying the *quid pro quo* was that she was going to trust me to go and deliver, and she was giving me total power over who to hire, how to account, what clients to go after, and so on. That felt like a huge opportunity, particularly at that stage in my career when I hadn't done it before. But I went and did it, I wrote my business plan, we exceeded it, I built a great team, and I built a little business that turned over £1.5 million by the time I left.

“For me, the hinge moment was not just the challenge, but the trust going with it. If one had come without the other, it

wouldn't have had the same impact, but it gave me the opportunity to prove myself. It's probably a huge reason I'm here, because had I not done something so entrepreneurial at that stage, I'd probably be scared of doing it now.”

Sharon Allen, Skills for Care Ltd

“How did that young, shy woman from Derby get to be a Chief Executive? My last job was Chief Executive at St Anne's, a large voluntary-sector social care support and housing provider. I'd applied to work at the organisation as Director of Operations, which was a new role. They'd been through a restructure to better manage the growth in the organisation, and as Director of Operations I was reporting to the Chief Executive, who was the guy who'd founded the organisation 25 years previously. He was a big man in terms of reputation, very well-known – he'd been local mayor, chair of the teaching hospital, and held many public appointments.

“I was very excited about working for him, and I thought there might be some succession planning going on. He's going to want to move on in a few years, I thought, and I will be ready to step up. I resolved to learn everything I could from him, to be ready. And then, when I'd been there three weeks, I went to my first one-to-one with him, and he told me he was leaving.

“I looked around the senior team, I think there were five of us, and the others had all been there a long time, so I wondered which of them would step up. I spoke to them and they all said they wanted me to do it. This was a bit too fast! Initially I thought, 'Not little me, I'm not ready, oh goodness'. I thought being Director of Operations was a big job, but Chief Executive?

“I had another meeting with the current Chief Executive, probably the week after we'd been to the board meeting where they'd been talking about the arrangements for appointing his successor, and he said, 'Have you got your application done yet, Sharon?' and I said, 'Well, no.' And



he went out, and he came back in with the application pack and just put it down. There is no stronger message than that, is there? I suppose that gave me confidence, because this man that I respected and trusted, who had set up this organisation, was saying to me, I trust you with this. And so, I did it. And I got the job."



Sarah Bentley, Severn Trent plc

"I was working in the States for this consulting business – it was a fairly small listed consulting business – and did large-scale projects, competing with much bigger firms. I was running the R&D centre, which was great because the whole purpose was to work with

entrepreneurial start-up companies in Silicon Valley to help them commercialise their ideas. My role was to find the companies in that space, and then to find ways to make this emerging technology scalable and applicable.

"This consulting business I was part of was itself part of a larger firm, and the decision was made to spin out the smaller part, which was where the real value was. So, in order to galvanise investor interest around this smaller bit of the business that was doing really well, a group of investors were brought from New York, down to see me in the R&D lab, to understand what it was all about and what it was doing. And it was great for me to be able to bring it to life and, having brought it to life with other business people, bring it to life with investors.

"As a result of the success of that visit, just as the CEO of our division was leaving, he said to me, 'Would you run this spin out? You've really put this thing together, would you run this?'. And I was naive and curious, and, without really thinking about it, I said yes, largely because I lived in New York at the time, and I thought I might get home at least one day a week.

"I became acting CFO and General Counsel of the division overnight. I didn't have any legal or financial background whatsoever, and I was young, in my 20s, and it was New York. I didn't think it was going to be too much, but it was a publicly-listed corporate divorce: I didn't sleep for nine months! It was the first transaction of its kind so we were learning regularly – it was a weekly cycle of trying to figure out how the transaction would occur, working with our investors, doing all the

corporate structuring, working with our legal team – totally new ground. Having such insight and responsibility around some of the financial and legal considerations of the business was really, really interesting."

Negative transformative experiences

Emma FitzGerald, Severn Trent plc

"After completing my first general management job in Shell, in what had been a difficult and tricky situation, I was asked what I wanted to do next. I was really keen to go out and live and work in Asia. So, the opportunity came up for me to go and live in China, and to run a part of the Asia Pacific business for Shell. But the challenge was that the person I would be reporting to was not a particularly nice man, and I was warned to go in with my eyes open.

"I was also told by other senior managers that it would be career suicide, because of the nature of the challenge and the need to turn the business around. But whether through naivety or sheer determination, I just went and worked my way through. What I learned in terms of a hinge moment was that the individual who was my boss did not recognise my leadership style at all, and he was not comfortable with the way we interacted. There was a lot of psychological and performance pressure placed on me, to the point where I didn't want to engage with him or talk to him at all. But that taught me a huge amount of resilience and independence.

"In the end, I had a performance review, and I did politely tell him what I thought. And he did respond to the feedback. So, I learned that you've got to stand on your own feet and find your own path, but equally have the courage to give feedback, because people may then respond and evolve, and change might happen. That was actually quite an important moment for me in terms of the formation of me as a leader."

Helen Miles, Severn Trent plc

"Back in the day, when I was relatively junior and working part-time with two young children, we had a restructure and they grouped some grades together to make one grade. The grade in the middle could either go into the higher or the lower grade, and my job got put into lower grade. I felt that was unfair and spoke to the CFO at the time. I was told that because I was working part-time and living outside London, I was unlikely to get a senior job.

"I took that as a clear signal that if I stayed in that part of the organisation, I wasn't going to get anywhere. Although I wasn't crazy ambitious to get to the heady heights, I knew I was capable of more, so it didn't satisfy me, and I felt I was being pushed down, so I knew I had to change something.

"I reached out to someone with whom I'd worked on a project, and told him I was looking for a move. He asked me to come and speak to him, as they were setting up a transformation team and wanted commercial, financially-literate people to look at projects that could drive



costs out of business. It was nothing that I'd done explicitly before, but I think he thought I was capable. So I moved across and worked for him.

"That was a real hinge moment, because I knew I couldn't stay in the environment I was in, and I didn't believe it was true that that was the end of it. I didn't believe that being part-time meant that you couldn't have a career, and that if you didn't live in London you couldn't have a career. But if the person making the decisions believes that, then you're stuck! I did something about it."

Rachel Kentleton, PayPoint plc

"An opportunity for a promotion came up, and I decided to put my hat in the ring, even though I thought I probably wasn't ready, because I thought it would be good experience to go through that process. I'm a fairly open person, so I shared that view with my colleagues, which my Mentor at the time was fairly incredulous about, because he thought I had completely ruled myself out before I even started.

"Anyway, I didn't get the role, which was fine, but I was told I didn't get it by telephone, which I didn't like. I didn't mind not getting it, but I didn't like the way I was told, without being sat down and having a proper conversation. Later on, I was taken aside by HR and told I had absolutely outperformed what people had expected of me, and come really close, but because I didn't feel that I'd been dealt with decently, I think it propelled me forward and made me more determined to get a better role elsewhere. I learned a lot about how to position yourself and handle yourself when you don't get the position you hoped for, and I learned a lot about leadership as a result of that experience."

Personal turning points

Evelyn Dickey, Severn Trent plc

"I think the first hinge moment for me was when I had my daughter, 21 years ago, and I was coming in to talk about coming back to work, and I didn't want to come back full-time, but I wanted to work. I was senior manager at Boots, and no senior managers worked part-time. None. So I thought how am I going to ask for this? It's going to be really awkward. And so I took my daughter in with me, deliberately, and sat her on my knee, and had the meeting with my manager, and asked if I could work part-time, and explained how I thought I could do it. And he said yes.

"That was a really big moment, because it was the first time I'd thought properly about wanting to work or not

"I became the first senior person that worked part-time at Boots, and that was really significant in my career."

wanting to work. And the juxtaposition of family life and work was a new topic – people didn't really talk about work-life balance 21 years ago. And I still don't know to this day why I didn't arrange for someone to look after my daughter; it could have been a disaster. But I became the first senior person that worked part-time at Boots, and that was really significant in my career."

Nicole Westcott, Severn Trent plc

"After 22 years in BT I was high-performing, dedicated and absolutely loving my job. I was giving more and more of myself to work; I'd become a successful coach to others and I was spending more time away from home. I was also fiercely cost-focused, which meant off-peak travel kept company costs low and my commute to London was a 14-hour routine.

"My son was 14 and one evening while I was on my off-peak train home, 19:03 Euston to Coventry, he called me. He needed some help breaking down a key question in his



homework, for his GCSE coursework. He'd left it lingering (because he needed help) and it was now time-critical. All he needed was some help to mind-map his thoughts. After 20 gruelling minutes, five or six calls with an intermittent signal, and a

whole lot of frustration and stress, he said, 'This is pointless, there's no point asking you, you're never about when I need you.'

"That was my hinge moment right there, which told me that change had to come from me. I had unexpected contact about an opportunity in Coventry at Severn Trent, and I really did not know at that stage if I could leave BT. I explored it further and every step closer to this new opportunity in my life started to feel positive and a bit like fate. Three months later, I took the leap into a new industry and a different culture; I left BT on an absolute high. Now I live life as a mum ... with a very successful career."

Ruth Handcock, Tandem Bank

"I was 30, and I took a step back and applied for a job working out in Africa, very, very speculatively. I saw the job spec and thought I had no idea how to do it, I shouldn't apply, but someone said why not, you have nothing to lose. So I applied and went for an interview, and another interview, and at some point thought 'Oh my goodness, they're going to offer me this job and I'll have to move to Sierra Leone!'

"I applied at a moment when it didn't feel like a risk, and then suddenly I was a bit committed, and I was faced with a decision. My boss at the time didn't want me to leave, and offered me the opportunity to set up a consultancy for the firm in New York. So I faced this real hinge moment; New York or Sierra Leone... managing director of my own little business, or going to work in the office of a President in West Africa. You don't get much more different choices than that! It was probably the only point in my career where I had real sleepless nights, because it felt like such a big deal to get wrong.

"I had this moment of realisation that I now call 'the pub test'; if I was sat next to someone in a pub, which would I be most proud to tell them that I did? I think that's

probably what swung my decision to go to Africa; that and the fact that my boss's business partner said that I could always do the New York job when I came back from Africa. So I took probably the bravest decision of my life, and the things I learned living in Sierra Leone for



""I had this moment of realisation that I now call 'the pub test'; if I was sat next to someone in a pub, which would I be most proud to tell them that I did? I think that's probably what swung my decision to go to Africa"

a year, and working in government, are things I don't think I'd have learned any other way. It was a hinge moment, and one where I really thought about pride, which was quite interesting."

Sharon Allen, Skills for Care Ltd

"I got a call on a Friday afternoon from some headhunters, and they were looking to recruit a Chief Executive for Skills for Care, and by that time I was involved with Skills for Care as a regional committee member. I wasn't interested - I just wasn't in that place - but they sent me the profile to look at over the weekend, and I'm very inquisitive, so I took a look.

"I happened to go and visit my parents that weekend, and my partner said to them, 'You'll never guess, Sharon's been headhunted for this really big job'. I said to my mum, 'I'm not going to go for it,' and she asked me why not. And so I started to explain to her why not, and in that process, thought to myself, 'What are you talking about? Why aren't you going for this? It's the perfect job for you'.

"So that was very pivotal, and I rang the consultants back on Monday, and got very excited and put all my energy into the process. So I had a little lightbulb moment, triggered by my mother, and that was terribly powerful."

Mentoring interventions

Emma FitzGerald, Severn Trent plc

"A real hinge moment for me was when I started to work with my Mentor. He had an unfailing confidence in my ability to do whatever it is I wanted to do, and on one level that was objective, in the sense that he wasn't working with me, it was just literally through the interactions that we'd had and what he'd got to know of me. He would ask me, 'why isn't anything possible?' I learned that you believe what you want to believe, and achieve what you want to achieve; there's nothing stopping you.

"He was also able to reinforce that through his own observations and perspectives, and through the way he

built my confidence. He was just unfailingly upbeat, and that all-encompassing sense of positivity and faith was actually quite important and helped when it came to the right first executive opportunity for me.

“He tempered his support by reassuring me that I didn’t have to jump at the first thing, but should keep pushing myself to make sure that what I chose was something I really cared about and could fundamentally put my energy into. So on the one hand, he was being relentlessly positive, on the other hand he was asking me to discriminate, and being very challenging. I learnt that the most effective leaders are people that can be really positive and really challenging at the same time.”

Evelyn Dickey, Severn Trent plc

“The coaching and mentoring I received from my Mentor was fabulous. He was interested in people issues, as well as me as an individual. He got me to think about what I wanted to do next in my career, and challenged me, because I was thinking about going plural, and he encouraged me to give the exec career a bit longer, because I was motivated by it. I’ve probably continued for two or three years longer than I would’ve done, but he was absolutely right – he made me think.

“I was talking to someone who had no axe to grind, and who was disinterested in the true sense of the word. Very often he would talk about challenges he had faced, so it felt reciprocal, and I learned a huge amount from him.”

Rachel Kentleton, PayPoint plc

“I started working with my Mentor at a point when I had put myself forward for a job, which was a big opportunity, and I had put myself forward while saying I didn’t think I was ready but it would be good experience to go through the process. When I told him what I had said, he just looked at me with incredulity, and gave me long list of reasons why I should have positioned myself differently and why I should have been right in there.

“I didn’t get the job, and I went through the whole process while working with my Mentor, who was fantastic throughout. He was more than mentoring me, he actually coached me on how to carry myself through not having got the job – what to say, how to behave, and so on. That was important, and I think I did it very well; he really helped me get through a difficult situation. My mentoring helped me enormously, and then I landed a non-executive director role, and then a new job, and through all of that I had my Mentor’s voice in my head, when he was

incredulous with me for effectively ruling myself out of that first role. If I hadn’t had the mentoring at the time, I wonder if it would have been such a positive outcome for me long-term, in terms of my toolkit. I would have had to rely on my inner resilience, without having this Mentor, who didn’t know me very well but was nevertheless giving me this list of reasons why I was perfectly qualified for the job.”



PART TWO: The importance of critical interventions

In this second section of our paper, we turn our focus to the lessons that we can draw from the experiences of these women, and the themes that emerge when we examine their individual hinge moments in composite.

As we consider ‘what works’ in the context of critical interventions in women’s career paths, it’s instructive to break our analysis down in to three parts: who is intervening; what are they doing; and when. In each case we can draw some insightful conclusions from our case studies that might usefully be applied elsewhere.

Critical interventions – who?

Our case studies tell us that hinge moments can involve interventions from all manner of individuals, be they mentors, family members, frontline managers, superiors, colleagues or teachers. Sometimes a turning point in a woman’s career comes as the result of a conversation with someone they know extremely well; other times the fact that an individual is objective, and even a stranger, can add far more value.

A good intervener is someone who is open to possibilities, and not afraid to diverge from the obvious. If the intent is to help people achieve their full potential, and make their optimum contribution, then it pays for interveners to have a pretty broad range of – and tolerance of – diverse patterns of experience and expertise, along with a generosity of spirit and the imagination to recognise the value in the range.

In its research on everyday moments of truth, Bain concluded that, while classrooms and boardrooms are important drivers of gender equality outcomes, it is everyday interactions at conference room level that can be

the most important drivers of change. Several of the women we spoke to told of hinge moments involving superiors with whom they worked on a daily basis, who spotted their potential, chose to champion their careers, and/or found them opportunities to grow.

Bain identifies five daily “conference room actions” that frontline managers can focus on, in order to be engines of change and facilitate women’s career development:

- Set an example for your employees by being open about your own path to success and by getting to know them personally.
- Visibly reward and outwardly champion employees who break the mould, offering public recognition for those who are successful using non-traditional schedules or career paths.
- Facilitate open discussions with your employees about their career aspirations, listen intently and co-create strategies for how you can best support them in reaching those goals.
- Be an advocate for your employees. Find opportunities for them to grow in the organisation through such avenues as recommending them for promotion, assigning them high-profile projects and prompting them to raise their own hands for step-up opportunities.
- Connect women to a variety of high-potential role models, regularly refreshing the connections as the employee’s needs and focus change over time.

Source: Bain report: ‘Everyday Moments of Truth’

When we scrutinise what works in the context of critical interventions, with a particular focus on the individuals making the interventions, we draw the following conclusions:

- it is important that the individual intervening in a woman’s career is someone that she respects, and whose judgement she trusts;
- the woman herself must be receptive to an intervention, by being willing to listen and engage with the intervener;
- hinge moments often involve someone believing in a woman and her career potential, at a time when she perhaps lacks belief in herself;
- all positive acts of intervention rely on sponsors, or mentors, who appreciate diversity and difference, and are willing to look beyond the obvious candidates;
- the best interveners are able to challenge, as well as

support, women that they are working with; and,

- the most effective interveners, who make the most positive impacts on the careers of those with whom they engage, are willing to take a risk on people.

Critical interventions – when?

In its analysis of gender diversity initiatives and their effectiveness, researchers at Boston Consulting Group found that among the ‘hidden gems’ of initiatives – those highly valued by women on the ground, but underestimated by senior leaders – were targeted interventions at ‘moments of truth’ in women’s careers.

The BCG report notes: “At several critical junctures in a woman’s career, companies can take measures that have a disproportionate effect on that career’s trajectory. These moments of truth include returning from parental leave, applying for an overseas position, and aiming for a promotion with much greater responsibility.”

We see from our case studies that many of the hinge moments experienced by our interviewees occur at such points – when looking to address work-life balance issues, or when contemplating new roles.

The report continues: “Women returning from maternity leave can benefit dramatically from measures such as flexible working models, additional administrative support, and more direct access to leadership. Similarly, when a woman considers taking an overseas position, clear communication and targeted logistical support – such as advice on housing, child care, schools and taxes – can materially shift the likelihood of her moving, and thus her future career trajectory.”

We would add, from our own conversations, the fact that hinge moments can occur at any point in a woman’s career, regardless of her seniority, but often involve a conversation with someone who believes in their abilities at a time when they may be doubting themselves. A reassuring affirmation of a woman’s capabilities, at a time when she may be considering a change in direction or role, can be critical in aiding the upward career trajectory.

We draw the following conclusions in relation to when critical interventions are most effective:

- interventions work best when women are facing hinge moments in their careers, either as a result of external pressures, or when they are considering new roles or responsibilities;
- hinge moments often involve a boost of confidence, or independent affirmation, at a time when a woman may

be experiencing self-doubt about her capabilities;

- interventions can only be transformative or useful if they come at a time when the woman is open to new possibilities and external contributions;
- hinge moments can occur at any moment in a woman's career, regardless of seniority; and,
- companies can usefully target interventions at crucial moments of truth for women, so assisting in their advances through the executive pipeline, and addressing broader cultural obstacles to women's progression that may exist.

Sarah Bentley, of Severn Trent plc, points out the importance of women being receptive to external interventions. She says: "There's one thing about having a hinge moment, and there's another about acting on it. I'm not sure how many people really put themselves in the mind-set of even being aware of hinge moments, or being open to them. Maybe some hinge moments propel people along a fairly predictable path, and others are more pivotal and tangential. In both cases, one has to be open to the opportunities, and ready to embark on new directions."

Critical interventions – what works?

We have looked at who can usefully influence hinge moments in women's careers, and the points in time when those interventions can be most effective. Now we turn to 'what works', and question what makes a hinge moment, and what we should look out for if we wish to facilitate more positive acts of sponsorship as a means to encouraging women's progression in the executive pipeline.

And so how might we define these hinge moments when considering the experiences of our interviewees? First, our case studies reveal that a hinge moment can emanate from both positive and negative experiences – we have learned how being denied an opportunity has, in some cases, served to inspire our interviewees on to greater things. As such, organisations need to be alive to the potentially critical repercussions of not just positive but also negative interventions, and must work to eradicate, or mitigate the impact of, the latter, as much as they seek to encourage the former.

Where hinge moments have occurred in positive circumstances, a critical intervention often appears to be like 'a hand in the small of the back', a gentle nudge, and frequently results in a sense of liberation and empowerment.

"There's one thing about having a hinge moment, and there's another about acting on it. "

Further, hinge moments typically involve turning points where questions of confidence have been addressed through individual conversations with Mentors or sponsors, encouraging a psychological adjustment or personal re-evaluation of how individual women perceive themselves.

In summarising what works, therefore, we conclude:

- a hinge moment can be a positive or a negative experience;
- a critical intervention is like 'a hand in the small of the back', a gentle nudge, and often results in a sense of liberation and empowerment; and,
- hinge moments typically address questions of confidence, encouraging a psychological adjustment or personal re-evaluation of how individual women perceive themselves.

PART THREE: The role of mentoring

Several of our interviewees spoke of the critical role that their Mentors played in guiding them through hinge moments on their career trajectories, and we have seen how questions of confidence in particular can be addressed through individual conversations with Mentors.

Rachel Kentleton at PayPoint described the importance of having her Mentor to speak to as she went through a gruelling, and ultimately unsuccessful, promotion process. "Looking back, it was a fantastic experience actually, for me to go through. I keep coming back to the importance of having my Mentor on hand; of having someone removed from the situation to whom I could talk about it. In some ways, he sort of played things back to me. He told me how to play it, and he didn't allow me to dress things up in my own head."

We have seen that the most effective interventions frequently come from an individual that a woman trusts and respects; who is one step removed from, or disinterested in, her career progression; who will challenge, and encourage a personal re-evaluation; and who can help a woman build self-belief at a time when she may be lacking confidence in herself.

“a critical intervention often appears to be like ‘a hand in the small of the back’, a gentle nudge, and frequently results in a sense of liberation and empowerment.”

These characteristics often feature in a successful mentoring relationship – outputs valued by Mentees who have participated in the FTSE 100 Cross-Company mentoring Executive Programme include increased self-confidence, strong ongoing relationships with their Mentors, broader horizons, and enriched networks, as well as promotions and appointments.

CONCLUSIONS

Individual acts or initiatives can have a huge bearing on addressing the cultural obstacles to women’s progression in the executive pipeline. Critical interventions can provide significant turning points on issues of confidence, by encouraging a psychological adjustment or a personal re-evaluation by the women concerned.

Turning points – or hinge moments – in the careers of senior women can take the form of conversations, acts of sponsorship, challenging experiences, or simply moments when the stars seemed to be in alignment. We have seen that these hinge moments can be positive or negative, and can involve colleagues, family members, Mentors and other role models.

While there is no ‘magic bullet’ to ease the progression of women’s careers through the executive pipeline, we can draw the following conclusions around ‘what works’ in the context of critical interventions:

- it is important that the individual intervening in a woman’s career is someone that she respects, and whose judgement she trusts;
- hinge moments often involve someone believing in a woman and her career potential, at a time when she perhaps lacks belief in herself;
- interventions work best when women are facing hinge moments in their careers, either as a result of external pressures, or when they are considering new roles or responsibilities;
- interventions can only be transformative or useful if

they come at a time when the woman is open to new possibilities and external contributions;

- all positive acts of intervention rely on sponsors, mentors or role models, who appreciate diversity and difference, and are willing to look beyond obvious characteristics;
- hinge moments typically address questions of confidence, encouraging a psychological adjustment or personal re-evaluation of how individual women perceive themselves; and
- encouraging these conversations, acts of sponsorship and positive interventions is extremely important if we are to overcome some of the more intangible hurdles preventing women moving up the executive pipeline.

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