

FEATURES

Women-only coaching: Girls allowed

Stephanie Sparrow 04 June 2008 14:00 This article first appeared in Training and Coaching Today. [Subscribe online](#) and save 20%.

Some in the coaching fraternity believe women-only coaching should be offered to female managers. We look at the pros and cons.

Women are still failing to make their voices heard in the boardroom. In fact, for the most part, they are not even in Britain's boardrooms.

Estimates by the *Financial Times* show that despite making up half the workforce, women still only occupy 2% of top jobs, and that it could be 40 years before they reach the same level of responsibility as men. And the pay divide remains – the same newspaper also reports that women in the legal profession earn an astonishing 50% less than men.

Penny Hamer, director of coaching and development consultancy Breaking Glass, is not surprised. She says women need encouragement to break free from the constraints of self-awareness and self-criticism.

"Women are reluctant to delegate. They don't get themselves out of the detail and into the bigger picture.

"Their competence drives them on and so they often find themselves in technical or specialist roles such as finance, communications and HR," says Hamer.

Coaching could be the answer. Paradoxically, the heightened self-awareness that can impede women's progress, can also ensure they are effective participants in the coaching process.

"If you start a coaching process and identify the issues, you will find that women are much more likely to focus on that approach. A man can conceptualise the issue but is much less likely to take the risk."

Hamer adds that often it is the structure of an organisation, not the self-limiting beliefs of women, which stem the increase in the number of female power players. Age also plays its part.

"The generation I am coaching is the one behind baby boomers. This generation doesn't know how good they are. They are a bit risk averse," says Hamer, who works with senior women in the 40-50 age group.

Employers need to be mindful that women exhibit different levels of confidence and expectations according to their generation, says Diana Hogbin-Mills, director at coaching and talent management consultancy Talentmax.

But the generation behind them is different, she says. "They are very impatient. They want the big jobs now. They want 18 months in a job and then to move on."

Hogbin-Mills says impatience is prevalent among generations X and Y and is giving employers' concern. There is an uncertainty about what these younger women will do next.

"Will they try to break through the glass ceiling or opt out, and if so will it be to work on their own businesses or to have a family?" she asks.

Generation Y women are likely to expect employers to offer them coaching.

"Generation Y have had their baby boomer parents paying for them to have coaching to translate A-levels into a job, they have been coached since the year dot on the sports field and to pass SATs," says Hogbin-Mills. "And Generation Y has an expectation of feedback, such as appraisals, almost straightaway, such as after a meeting, whereas the baby boomers hold appraisals twice a year."

Hogbin-Mills says that coaching can help to calm and direct this demanding generation.

"Through support and coaching, which they are likely to access at a much younger age than their seniors, they will have the opportunity to work through any professional or personal challenges they face," she adds.

The challenge for the coach and the sponsoring organisation is to not limit the scope of the coaching.

But others take a different view.

"It is best to be person-specific, not gender-specific," says Heidi Dawson of Pathways Coaching. She offers coaching on juggling family and work demands to both parents, and says corporate structures are at fault.

"Often it's issues within the workplace that need to be resolved, such as the need for a cultural change to an environment to use more female skills than male ones," she says.

Similarly, at management development and leadership specialists Jo Ouston & Co, managing director Jo Ouston is wary of gender-specific treatment. She wants to see an emphasis on empathy and creating a mutual understanding within organisations. She believes that group coaching sessions can do this.

"If you have the ability to create a safe atmosphere then the group can share the information necessary to get the task done," she says.

Ouston is also not keen on women being exclusively coached by women, a concern which Hogbin-Mills shares.

"There is a benefit in seeing the world through a male lens," says Hogbin-Mills. "If a woman has a female coach then she will also benefit from having a different, male perspective, which can be gained through a male mentor."

But other experts in the field identify a dearth of suitable mentors for women. The lack of senior women who could be mentors means that other women don't make it to the top and so the cycle continues.

"The lack of mentors is one of the five main issues specific to women," says Kate Grussing, managing director and founder of Sapphire Partners, a specialist headhunter and coaching consultancy with expertise in placing and coaching senior women.

Aside from mentoring, Grussing identifies four other problem areas that tailored coaching can solve: confidence, taking a holistic view of every aspect of their lives, identifying a natural leadership style, and charisma.

Women struggle with charisma she says, pointing to the efforts of Democrat candidate Hillary Clinton, which seemed strained in comparison with the effortless charm of Barack Obama, or even her husband, bouncer Bill.

For Grussing, gender-specific coaching can help address these challenges.

"Tailored coaching helps women to focus on achievements," she says. "Women don't perceive that self-promotion is part of building a career but good coaching will facilitate these broader conversations and help women to find their voice. A woman doesn't have to act like a man."