

Instead of championing women's progression to the board, could HR be hindering it by using a competency framework that is biased towards men?

Masculine wiles

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Why are there still so few women in senior management positions? It's a question that has vexed female employees, professional bodies, academics and governments for years. The explanations vary: the difficulty of juggling children and a career; childcare problems; a lack of part-time or flexible work in senior positions; and, of course, sexual discrimination.

Now a new theory has been put forward – HR could be complicit in keeping women out of the boardroom.

The reasoning behind this is that HR's objective means of assessing individuals for recruitment or promotion – the competency framework – may not be so objective after all.

According to Peninah Thomson and Jacey Graham,

authors of the new book, *A Woman's Place is in the Boardroom*, the competency framework is biased towards men, making it particularly difficult for women to reach the top jobs.

Thomson says: "HR has to take a keen look at the language that is used in documents providing frameworks for promotions. It needs to make sure there is no inadvertent bias."

The problem, say the authors, is that many of the most widely used assessment and evaluation tools are based on the Bem Sex Role Inventory, which uses adjectives to describe masculine and feminine attributes.

Masculine adjectives include the ability to be self-reliant, analytical, aggressive, individualistic, competitive and ambitious. Feminine attributes include warmth, compassion,

sensitivity to others, loyalty and understanding.

The adjectives are listed as masculine and feminine rather than male and female, so women may demonstrate masculine attributes and vice versa. But because modern companies tend to have a predominantly male leadership, they are likely to favour masculine qualities as the required characteristics for senior management positions. Competency frameworks reflect that.

Yet masculine and feminine styles of leadership complement each other, and the authors argue that companies that strike a balance between these qualities on their boards will gain competitive advantage by becoming more dynamic. Thomson and Graham say there is a need for new leadership models to be developed.

So what should HR do? Dianah Worman, CIPD adviser, diversity, thinks that a lack of alternatives to the existing competency framework makes it difficult for HR. "There's no point in inventing alternatives out of the ether," she says. "Until there is more academic research, it's hard to change the system because it would just be a stab in the dark."

However, Worman believes there is a need for greater awareness. She says that competency frameworks can be

biased because they are written, and informed, by humans. An assessment tool may appear to be merit-orientated and objective, but people, with their own unconscious prejudices and stereotypes, have identified the required skills for a job. Worman says that, to guard against bias, HR needs to ask whether it is sacrosanct to have these skills.

Susan Vinnicombe, director of the Cranfield Centre for Developing Women Business Leaders, agrees. She says HR practices and competency frameworks should be "gender-proofed" on an annual basis by checking the number of men and women who were promoted. The same can be done for the black and ethnic minority and disabled workforce. Organisations need to be certain that their assessments are bias-free, she says.

Vinnicombe claims that competency frameworks are not to blame for the lack of senior women, although she does believe that bias is the root cause. The problem, she says, is that many senior appointments are based not on competencies but on other subjective standards.

Cranfield carried out research at a firm to find out why women were less likely to be appointed to partner level. The company was adamant that there was no bias because the firm selected new partners against global

HOW WOMEN CAN REACH THE TOP

Peninah Thomson, co-author of a new book, *A Woman's Place is in the Boardroom* (Palgrave Macmillan), advises women who want to reach the board to get overseas experience, as this will become increasingly important to companies operating in the global market.

She also suggests that they get as much operational experience as possible. Thomson says it is inadvisable to spend too much time in HR or marketing, as many companies regard these departments as "pink ghettos".

"They'll get more respect if they come through the operational route," she says. "Women who want to make the board should make themselves as visible as possible in the organisation. This can be done by leading high-profile projects, going to conferences and networking."