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Senior women at work — surviving in the snake pit

As girls continue to outperform boys at nearly every stage of the education process, the problems women face in being treated seriously at work are highlighted in a recent survey.

IRIS Consulting carried out the survey of middle and senior managers from public and private sector environments. Whilst the women were, in the main, positive about their jobs, commenting on their satisfaction in getting results, meeting a wide range of people and having control over their work, 80% of the respondents said they were unclear about the behaviours that were rewarded in their organisation. When asked whether there was clarity, comments such as ‘no and it drives me bonkers’ and ‘not really, the goal posts keep moving according to the latest fad’ were fairly common responses.

Unlike school, where assessment is relatively open and transparent, the respondents talked about the difficulties of working in cultures where it is only those who are part of the in-group who were recognised. Macho sexist cultures and learning how to operate effectively in those environments were identified by 30% of those completing the questionnaire. Cultures were described as “disempowering, male controlling, not dynamic and blame related.”

Whilst the women valued those organisations who offered flexibility and opportunities to “do a good job”, key concerns focused on how to be recognised for the contributions they were making. One said:

“I just cannot progress, and yet I appear to be getting results – what am I doing wrong?”

Another said she needed some guidance as to how to be more effective in a male culture and “to learn how to understand the unspoken rules.”

Not surprisingly, effective leadership was identified as a key requirement in achieving change. Some talked about behaviours. “I want more straightforward, less manipulative behaviours,”

“I need to be praised and not made to feel like deputy dog.”

Others talked about “needing strategic direction.” What is evident is that women are facing very similar problems in both public and private sector environments.

Whilst the practical difficulties women confront in terms of continuing to carry the burden of domestic and responsibilities are an element in their failure to progress, the experiences of the women in this survey suggests that the barriers are more opaque. Inhospitable working cultures

with cliques and unspoken rules are just as important. It is still not a matter of what you do but rather whether you can fit into the mono-cultural environments that still exist in many organisations, despite paying lip-service to diversity. In the words of one respondent “if I am to work in a snake pit, be upfront about it and don't pretend it is anything else.”

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