

# Not just a **numbers game**

## Whitepaper

The Female Talent Pipeline needs more focus  
at earlier career stages.

September 2013

# Introduction

**When it was published in February 2011, Lord Davies' report on Women on Boards set the stage for a more representative gender mix at the top of the UK's organisations. Hopes were high – and progress reports show that the percentage of FTSE directorships held by women is up from 12.5% to 17.3%. However, if you delve a little deeper the story that emerges is one of status quo rather than fundamental change: whereas the number of female non-executive directors has increased, the percentage of executive roles on boards held by women is 6.7%, a rise of just 1.2%.**

The truth is that women are still not sufficiently involved in the day-to-day strategic running of organisations. Nor are there any signs of improvement – the representation of women has also remained static in the executive committees beneath board level.

We face a very similar challenge to the one highlighted in 2011, because organisations are not tackling the problem at the right time. Getting a better gender mix at board level will not be achieved by looking at making changes at board level. This is too late.

Only by properly developing talented women who are currently at least two or three levels down from the board can organisations build a pipeline for the future, by helping a 'critical mass' of women to rise up through the ranks, and reducing churn at higher levels.

The budget required to do this is traditionally hard to come by – but later pay-off is starting to be understood, and forward-thinking organisations are sowing the early seeds of change by introducing working models and approaches that will allow female talent to progress.

Here are six tangible, high impact measures that Talking Talent is seeing those organisations which are committed to evolving their culture, and enabling women to thrive in it, put in place as part of a broader talent strategy.

# 48%

of **women** said they wanted greater personal coaching and development to support their **career progression**.

## 2. Coach the pipeline

**The lack of female talent in the upper echelons of UK business is a specific challenge which requires specific intervention. Female-only progression coaching – a form of coaching designed to maximise the potential of talented individuals and accelerate their progression – is used by Talking Talent to develop organisations’ female talent pipelines.**

Working as a core part of an overall talent strategy, the programmes are gender specific but inclusive in approach, engaging managers and senior stakeholders throughout to ensure that progression is authentic and sustainable.

Delivered either one-to-one or in a group, progression coaching seeks to provide strong commercial benefit alongside significant personal development. Organisations can expect to retain talented women who have skill sets that enable them to perform authentically at the highest level. By allowing them to reach their full potential and increasing their commitment to the business and their career direction, productivity in role tends to rise, while transitions into new roles are smoother as women start contributing more quickly. The group coaching meanwhile, can also help build self-sustaining networks amongst the high potential population, and offers opportunities to work closely with key clients on developing female talent via a unique ‘hosting’ approach.

Rather than telling women what to do, or how to ‘fix’ weaknesses or adapt their approach to succeed in a male-dominated environment, progression coaching helps them unlock their strengths and act authentically.

Conducted over a series of sessions, the programme should be designed around helping women navigate their careers through challenging times and critical pivot points – for instance moving from senior manager towards a leadership role or leaders making a transition to wider divisional responsibilities.

Over 50% of the women surveyed by Talking Talent for its ‘Up, Out or Different’ research project in 2012 said they were at a career crossroads, considering their next move.

### Self-awareness:

helping women get clear on their strengths, drivers and passions.

### Creating a clear vision for the future:

enabling them to understand career options, explore aspirations and goals, and make active choices about their progression.

### Making it happen:

- exploring and developing the authentic leadership styles, skills, attitudes and habits they’ll need to achieve their career goals
- fostering the emotional robustness to navigate challenges, e.g. the confidence to manage and overcome internal and external barriers
- forming the individual strategies and frameworks that will underpin change, applying the right tools and skills at the right time.

The content and depth of the coaching will vary depending on the needs of the organisation and the individual. That said, the critical skills and behaviours sought frequently revolve around building personal brand, developing self-confidence/belief, strategic networking, political savvy and gaining the clarity of vision to achieve ambitions.

It may also be helpful to gain an understanding of contextual issues, such as how gender bias manifests itself in modern organisations.

The advantage of running a women-only programme is that it creates a safe and supportive 'space' in which participants can acquire skills, reflect and explore, and give their capabilities free reign. A high level of intimacy and openness can be achieved because women feel freer to share experiences, frustrations, concerns and vulnerabilities. It also allows women to bring up gender-specific issues and barriers to career advancement and explore strategies to overcome them. The fresh context it provides for those who normally operate in a male-dominated or mixed working environment can also stimulate powerful new insights.

A gender-specific programme can be designed and delivered to target particular development areas, learning styles and leadership styles, and address the specific issues women in the organisation face, such as juggling family and work.

Women-only coaching needs careful positioning within the organisation, however: it will be counterproductive if the programme is seen as discriminatory, or if women believe it means they need 'special help' in certain areas to 'catch up' to male counterparts.

**The top 3 skills women say they need for career progression:**

**55%**  
need self belief and confidence.

**54%**  
would like better networking skills.

**40%**  
would like to build their personal brand and profile.

Source: Talking Talent's 'Up, Out or Different' research of 2500 UK women, 2012.

### 3. Positive role models

**Of course, coaching is only one part of the solution to developing talented women further down the pipeline. Once participants are moving through the progression coaching process, they need to observe the skills and behaviours they are learning being successfully put into action by other women in the organisation – particularly those who have already reached senior levels – and to have the opportunity to learn from their experiences.**

For many organisations finding these role models is a challenge. Senior women do not always wish to be seen as role models, while their behaviours, shaped by operating in the male-dominated upper echelons, are not always authentic or necessarily desirable for the women below them.

For some of the organisations Talking Talent works with, including McKinsey, the role models of today were proactively identified and selected years earlier, to create a specific group of talented individuals that are nurtured and supported in their development and career so they can authentically reach the senior roles within the organisation.

The next step is to raise awareness of these role models, and demonstrate how they're achieving progress through the organisation. This could be done by profiling them in internal communications, producing case studies, asking them to mentor talented women or getting them to tell their story to the broader organisation.

As you approach a board level position there becomes a greater desire for role models and senior sponsorship, reflecting the different support needs of women at this level.

## 4. Secure top buy-in

**Engaging with senior executives to win their support for developing female talent is essential – not only to get the official stamp of approval, but also to help make it work. It is critical that the right behaviours and approach are demonstrated by the executive level team so that an organisation and its managers can evolve culturally, and the changes that occur from interventions such as coaching are sustainable.**

For many organisations, convincing exec/board level members that developing female talent is a commercial imperative remains the key battleground, and success here can underpin the success of future programmes.

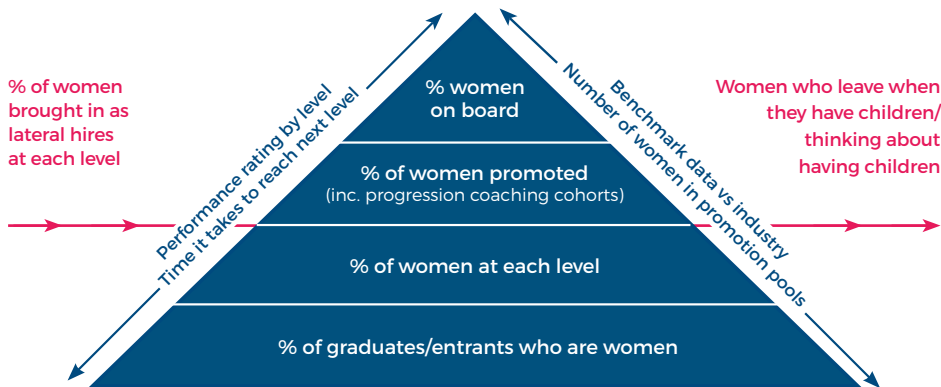
The business case should showcase the benefits, and use historical and existing data to benchmark progress in engagement and retention. Qualitative content such as case studies and organisational insight from programme feedback will also give it weight.

Organisations also need to be ready to answer challenging questions such as ‘Why do we need to prioritise progressing female talent?’ and ‘When budgets are so tight, why would we want to invest in expensive 1:1 support?’ This means articulating and proving the bottom-line impact, linking benefits directly to corporate objectives, and including third party evidence that illustrates how women-only coaching is an effective way of achieving real change.

# 5. Measure success

**Data and evidence will enable an organisation to measure the success of the female talent programmes against its core objectives, and demonstrate the performance level improvements that are achieved.**

First, find out where you are now in terms of the engagement, retention and progression of talented women, measuring representation from junior to senior levels. You could look at, for example:



This will give you a benchmark against which to measure progress. The next step is to set future targets and projections, then track the changes over time.

Measurement will also shed light on the real 'pinch points' at which the organisation is shedding high-potential women – such as maternity transition – opening the door to investigating the extent of and the reasons behind these costly disappearances, and developing strategies to address them.

These are the hard measures which help to inform business approach and allow for the ongoing assessment of the female talent strategy. For coaching especially, there are also a number of other ways to assess the individual and commercial improvement:

**Skills uplift:** e.g. self-awareness, career planning, authentic leadership.

**Behaviour change:** e.g. stepping outside of comfort zone, better delegation, greater authority, stronger relationship with clients/suppliers.

**Performance improvement:** e.g. increased number of promotions, improved performance in role against specific measures (for instance more billable time in a professional services company), increased client revenue.

**Strategic imperative:** diversity of senior talent, attraction of new talent, new business wins.

54% of women who responded to Talking Talent's 2012 'Up, Out or Different' survey said their manager was a key source of career support.

Many organisations struggle with collecting and tracking data on gender statistics. There is software available that has been specifically designed to measure, model and benchmark diversity data across an organisation, and then present it using visualisation so issues can be spotted fast and performance tracked over time. Talking Talent's technology partner, Gender Gap, even has a leading edge private cloud platform that allows organisations to compare benchmarks securely against internal divisions, regions and competitors.

### CASE STUDY: FORTUNE 500 ORGANISATION

This organisation wanted to invest in their high potential female talent, helping them drive their careers forward by developing authentic leadership skills whilst also expanding their network and increasing commercial opportunities.

"The development programmes we have run with Talking Talent have created a wonderful platform for our high talent women to develop and progress. It was quickly evident to us from the trial how much value the people and our organisation were gaining and we were delighted to roll the programme out further in 2012 and into 2013."

Head of Diversity & Inclusion

The programme combines coach-led workshops and one to one coaching as well as business-led sessions and peer coaching. The content of the programme was defined following in depth interviews with key business sponsors and female role models together with academic and business research.

Key themes included:

- Developing and maintaining gravitas and presence
- Understanding personal authentic leadership and values
- Navigating gender issues in a male dominated environment
- Developing political awareness and influencing skills

The coaching has been rolled out across EMEA and to date 8 cohorts of 15 women have successfully completed the programme.



## 6. Managers journey

**While senior level sponsorship will get the programme off the ground, the people who will keep it in the air are those with hands-on responsibility for managing the women going through the coaching process. They hold the key to unblocking the pipeline by evolving the organisation's culture to enable women to flourish, so they, too, must believe in the case for progression coaching.**

Managers are integral to the solution, and to its long-term success. They need to be able to recognise both the generic and unique talents possessed by the women on their team, to understand their aspirations and the challenges they face, and be prepared to both challenge and support the participant as they apply the skills and tools they've acquired to daily working life.

This means integrating managers into the female talent strategy, and into programmes such as progression coaching. Many of the organisations Talking Talent works with also provide managers with coaching of their own in areas such as the maternity transition and unconscious bias, so they feel equally supported and challenged to make a difference.

## 7. Conclusion

**Aholistic approach. By engaging key female talent sooner rather than later in their careers, organisations can reap the rewards of building a more sustainable future talent pipeline: fewer women exiting or losing traction in their careers, a more even mix of gender diversity, a reduction in the financial burden that accompanies the loss of talented women, improved performance and productivity, an accelerated pipeline, and talent that is progressing.**

One size definitely doesn't fit all when it comes to progressing female talent, however. Each organisation and its people will be at different evolutionary stages, so if the 'needle' is to move the programme must be a bespoke solution with pace and content tailored to the culture and objectives of the organisation and the individual.

Nor is women-only coaching the 'silver bullet'. If it is to have a positive and lasting impact on who's sitting around the boardroom table in 10 to 15 years' time, it has to be part of an overall talent strategy for the entire organisation. This requires top down commitment, role models for men and women, ongoing measurement of success at all levels and working practices that will help to retain talented people at crucial points in their career and life.

For those organisations that get the talent strategy right, the commercial impact will be huge. Talent will be retained, talent will be attracted, performance will grow - and bottom line benefit will be seen from the investment made. For some of Talking Talent's clients this is already the commercial reality of the approach they are taking.



**UK Head office**

102 Crowmarsh Battle Barns,  
Preston Crowmarsh,  
Oxfordshire,  
OX10 6SL

**T** +44 (0)1491 821850

[www.talking-talent.com](http://www.talking-talent.com)