

Women only coaching **why bother?**

Whitepaper

Why women-only coaching programmes are making a difference to the female talent pipeline.

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Introduction

Over the past four years Talking Talent has seen a rising number of businesses introduce coaching tailored specifically for HIPO women. Programmes with the specific aim of strengthening the female talent pipeline, improving diversity at senior levels and bringing more inclusive cultural change. Despite initial resistance, from both men and women, the programmes have quickly demonstrated their value and return on investment.

From launch onwards the programmes offer a wonderful opportunity for:

- Organisations to show their commitment to female talent
- Women to take greater control of their careers
- Managers to lead more inclusively
- Talent budget to be spent where it's needed most
- New networks of women to form, and role models of the future to emerge.

The longer term bottom-line business benefits are also clear. A gender diverse leadership makes an organisation more competitive and more attractive to top talent, and is proven to deliver better returns on equity, sales and invested capital.

So what's stopping organisations building talent programmes to improve their female talent numbers? Despite the number of women in their business falling dramatically at the more senior levels, there remains for many organisations a real reluctance to invest specifically in programmes to support high talent females. For Talking Talent's most established programmes, retention rates are over 90% and promotion rates up to 75% so there is a real opportunity to directly impact the depth of the female talent pipeline.

In the majority of cases the need to take specific action is well recognised within HR. However for many organisations that commercial understanding and belief is far less established at board and senior leader level. Changing the lack of female talent from an HR issue into a commercial imperative remains a goal for many.

In this Talking Talent insight paper we explore the five biggest objections our clients hear when proposing our women-only Progression Coaching programmes. We look at the responses that have been the most effective in overcoming those objections and the success that we have seen from our programmes to date.

2. That isn't inclusive!

“If it's women-only, that isn't fair or inclusive.” What's behind it: A concern from the business that men will feel disadvantaged or that the coaching will not develop the inclusive culture being sought.

The programme is gender specific for a reason: the current status quo is not fair. This support is about helping women to navigate a system that is biased, and a working world that is not a meritocracy. Senior roles, career paths and recruitment processes are still largely built around male models of leadership or in the same image of those leading today.

At the more senior levels, women are in the minority and they need specific support to operate and succeed within that environment. However confident and assured they are, women can feel exposed and uncomfortable discussing their challenges and feelings in a mixed group. In a women-only coaching session they can be open and honest without worrying how they'll be perceived. At the start of the coaching, realising that they are not alone in the challenges they face comes as a very palpable relief.

Although the coaching is gender specific the approach is very inclusive; indeed, a core purpose of the coaching programme is to create a more inclusive environment. Senior sponsors are involved throughout and line managers are coached as part of the programme, developing their approach to managing diverse teams and becoming far clearer on the systemic gender challenges in play.

EXAMPLE SYSTEMIC FEEDBACK

“Be open minded – see the benefits of different styles and take decisions based on the facts, not only the diversity targets.”

“Recognise female leadership capabilities.”

“Foster a culture of being more open to different styles throughout the organisation.”

“Consider career development based on the skillset required, rather than location and working patterns.”

“Encourage and support cross-functional moves.”

“Don't link women in leadership or female diversity with family leave policies – men have children too, and not all women have families.”

“Encourage sponsors and managers to spread the word; it shouldn't only be down to the women themselves.”

“Provide ongoing coaching for managers to help them manage diverse talent appropriately.”

“Increase the understanding and acceptance of career journeys that follow a different path and pace from traditional, linear routes.”

“I feel like I have an action plan which is very executable, and that I can actually influence and drive my future.”

“Words cannot express what I have gained! It's been amazing, has given me the confidence at a point in my life when most needed. I feel confident, empowered and motivated. Thank you!”

3. You can't change the culture

“There is no point in coaching the women if you can't change the culture.” What's behind it: A concern that the gender challenge is insurmountable and that the holy grail of culture change is too distant an objective.

For women-only coaching to be a success, of course we would agree that it needs to run alongside other talent and gender initiatives. It's also true that to make the change sustainable, those initiatives require line manager and leadership involvement and a collective desire to create a better working environment.

For TT progression coaching, the line managers are separately coached as part of the programme and senior stakeholders are part of the diagnostic, launch and close phases of the programme. It's critical that the women see strong engagement from this population, which in turn creates great energy and commitment to the programme.

Introducing a programme aimed at retaining and progressing the most talented women is a huge step forward for many organisations. By building a pipeline of future role models who progress far quicker through the organisation an immediate impact can be made, the ripple effect of which goes far beyond just those involved in the programme.

By integrating managers and leaders into the programme you are making a key change in how the broader business engages with gender equality. Line managers especially have a crucial role to play and the programme allows them to be far clearer on the systemic challenges and management approaches they need to take to be more inclusive leaders for all their team.

The systemic feedback we receive and provide will also lead to wider improvements. These are the broad observations on what it's really like to be a woman in the organisation, and recommendations on how to improve progression levels. The themes that emerge provide a clear picture of where future work is needed across the organisation, including its working culture.

“I've learned techniques to deal with difficult situations, and strategies to control negative beliefs and capitalise on positive ones to boost my confidence – all of which can be easily applied in daily work situations.”

44%

of **women** say their gender has hindered their career, or will in the future.

4. Adequate programmes

“We already have development programmes in place which are perfectly adequate for both men and women.” What’s behind it: A lack of awareness of programme content, the environment created and how the programme is tailored to the participants.

While the topics may look similar to those covered in other programmes, for Talking Talent’s coaching they are based on research¹ and the experience of coaching 10,000 women. The behavioural led skills we focus on are proven to have the strongest career impact. Topics are tackled in a different way, viewed specifically through the lens of a woman trying to succeed in a largely male dominated environment. What the coaching is not, however, in any way, is remedial. This is not about fixing the women!

Talking Talent’s progression coaching programmes give women the space to explore their career challenges and choices, and provide a framework and toolkit to help them succeed in a male-dominated environment. Crucially, it’s about progressing authentically, without having to compromise who they are to fit in with a way of working or a peer group. It’s also strengthsbased; it doesn’t try to change people. Rather than telling participants “you need to do these things or you won’t succeed”, it looks at what each person is good at and how to build on that to be more successful within their organisation.

The feedback Talking Talent receives from the women who attend progression coaching is phenomenal: they love building an ongoing network of female peers, talking in a safe environment about issues they feel are taboo or career limiting in a mixed group, having their challenges normalised – discovering that ‘it’s not just me’.

The coaching also presents a wonderful opportunity for employers to show how much they value and want to invest in female talent. The feedback from attendees, and other employees observing the programme, around the investment being made is powerful and in itself creates loyalty and belief.

“The fact that this has been organised makes me feel the bank cares about my progression and that the hard work pays off.”

14%

of **CEOs** globally are women. A man starting his career in a UK corporate is 4.5 times more likely to reach Executive Committee than a **female counterpart**.

6. Budgets are tight

“Budgets are tight; can we really expect a return on this investment?” What’s behind it: A lack of awareness of the business impact and bottom-line benefits.

There’s a very powerful commercial imperative. A diverse leadership is proven to deliver better financial results: companies with three or more women in top management functions deliver 10% better return on equity, achieve 16% higher return on sales and 26% higher return on invested capital. This happens because women consistently display the leadership traits and behaviours required to help a company become more adaptable, collaborative, innovative and responsive⁴.

Having a mix of different styles and ways of working reduces risk by avoiding blind-spots, generating fresh approaches and creativity, and often bringing a greater understanding of the customer base. Overall a greater balance exists in the strategic approach and decision making.

Ultimately, to improve performance and profitability an organisation needs to get the best from all of its talented people and this means engaging and energising them through different talent programmes and approaches – each with specific objectives. The knock-on effect of that engagement is greater performance, retention and progression. According to 2013 data from the Hay Group, companies with engaged employees enjoy revenue growth 2.5 times higher than peers with average levels of engagement.

For many organisations the gender splits in their talent pipeline shrink from around 50/50 at graduate level to 80/20 or even 90/10 male to female by the time you reach board level. As worryingly, at the levels immediately below board the representation is no better and in many cases is worse. If proactive steps aren’t taken to progress more HIPO women then the commercial impact will only increase on those organisations doing the least.

53%

of women believe their employer values men and women equally in mid-level roles.

36%

of women have experienced workplace prejudice and discrimination.

12%

of women do not believe their employer values men and women equally at any level.

7. I didn't need this

I'm a senior woman and I didn't need any of this stuff to make it to the top. What's behind it: A feeling that because they needed to fight to get where they are, why should it be any different now?"

Research shows that many women are currently at a career crossroads⁵, facing significant career challenges and needing support to progress in a way that is authentic to them. It is difficult for organisations to become truly diverse if women feel they have to act like men in order to reach the top.

Sadly there is a real lack of role models for women, especially working parents, and so authentic progression can feel out of reach. Often as women look up the organisational ladder they don't see men or women displaying the personality traits or behaviours that are appealing to them, leaving many to decide that "if that's what it takes, this isn't the place for me".

The coaching is also geared towards enabling women to stay true to themselves as they progress, finding different ways to succeed without having to 'fight' or to assume masculine personality traits or behaviours. Not only does this drive authentic career progression that is sustainable over time, but it is also a significant step towards creating new role models for the future who are committed to supporting other women within the pipeline.

WOMEN ONLY?

The growing body of evidence around the success of Talking Talent's female Progression Coaching programmes supports what others, notably EY, have recently released to the external market around women-only programmes. Women feel valued, empowered by the new network they have entered, and more focused on their career paths and how to achieve them. Success in retention and progression terms will follow in due course and it's crucial that all these benefits are captured and measured. In doing so the discussion around further rollout of the coaching becomes a straightforward exercise.

Launching a coaching programme to nurture key female talent is a crucial step in recognising the importance of the female talent within an organisation. The programmes themselves then play a significant role in building a more gender balanced organisation. The organisations that are making such an investment are standing out already as employers of choice for women in their industry and the gap between those that do, and those that don't, is ever widening.

"It was great to be able to share experiences and issues encountered with others in the same position, and who want the same things you do."

8. Five golden rules

Begin by explaining what the programme is...and what it is not! This is not just about the male stakeholders. Often the initial challenge when launching our coaching programme comes from women who don't want to be singled out as female, or who assume the coaching messages mean that they need fixing. Every single one changes their mind once the programme is fully explained and they have attended the coaching.

Put the commercial case at the core of your communication. Bring your response down to a strong rationale and solid evidence. Know in advance what the business objections will be and use a commercial based rationale to overcome them.

Send clear, consistent messages. This is not positive discrimination, but positive action. It's not about promoting more women than men, or accelerating their progress above men. Nor is it tokenism. We have a real problem and we're doing something positive about it – and this will give us an edge over our competitors.

Consider running the first programme under the radar. Gain momentum, and gather feedback and evidence of the impact, before you communicate broadly. Celebrate it as a positive step, and share stories from participants and their managers. The delegates become the most powerful of internal advocates.

Pick the right person to deliver the programme launch message. The CEO, a Partner, CFO, COO...all would demonstrate the right level of commitment, especially if they're male – but they have to truly believe in what is being done. The wrong opening messaging can be disastrous.

CASE STUDY: LLOYDS BANKING GROUP

Whilst women are well represented at junior and middle management levels, this decreases at senior levels. As a result, we launched a coaching programme to build robust succession pipelines, aimed at women who are ready for the next role. These moves include stretch and sideways as well as upwards. Participants were identified through Lloyds' talent management processes, working in partnership with business areas and HR recommendations. There were 10 cohorts per year. Clear success measures are in place, around promotions, retention, project assignments, lateral moves and overall programme evaluation, which formed part of the programme design. These are tracked by the D&I team.

Results to date: 99% of participants rated the programme 4 or 5 out of 5; 90% of 2014 cohorts have since moved to new roles and/or taken on increased responsibility. In 2014 Lloyds was awarded the Corporate Company of the Year at the Women of the Future Awards, to recognise its support for and nurturing of young women in UK business. It was also Overall Winner at the Breaking the Mould awards, celebrating forward-looking companies with schemes to ensure women are well represented on boards. Talking Talent's Women in Leadership coaching programme is seen as a key contributor to these award successes.

“Our coaching programme with Talking Talent plays a crucial role in increasing female representation within our senior management population. It is fundamental in realising the potential of our women, enabling them to progress. The coaching is of the highest quality and the team are a pleasure to partner with.”

**Wendy McGuinness,
D&I Manager,
Lloyds Banking
Group**



UK Head office

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

T +44 (0)1491 821850

www.talking-talent.com