

KEY RECOMMENDATIONS FOR WOMEN REACHING THE BOARDROOM

Following a lively debate between Criticaleye Members at law firm Eversheds on the topical issue of 'Women on Boards', **Jacqui Grey** and **Denise Jagger** build on their respective articles, [Bringing Women on Board](#) and [Women on Boards: Progress in Sight](#) by offering recommendations for what must change in order that more female executives reach the boardroom.

Top Tip 1: Support of the Chair and CEO is critical to success

Engagement of the Chair and the CEO is critical to more women being given the opportunity to obtain executive/non-executive board positions.

Top Tip 2: Shift in thinking at the top is required

Whilst, in the past, there was perceived to be conscious bias against women in organisations, this is no longer the case. It is regarded as an unconscious bias; women are just not 'in the frame' when conversations take place about who would be potential promotion material. A shift in thinking must occur at the top of organisations and women must be prepared to put their heads above the parapet and be noticed. Self promotion, networking and 'playing the game' are key.

Top Tip 3: Targets or Quotas?

The question of targets and quotas has been raised frequently recently and the majority around the table agreed that, whilst targets are a good thing, quotas are 'a step too far' – a view consistent with the findings of the recent Davies Report. However, there is some sympathy with quotas if things do not start to improve soon. The debate is seen to have gone on long enough. The main reason for not having quotas seems to be that women might be seen as getting there by default, rather than on merit.

Top Tip 4: Headhunters must bear some responsibility

In our discussions, it is clear that headhunters should be more persuasive with reluctant Chairmen in the introduction of women candidates to short lists and that they should be more creative in their searches.

Top Tip 5: Once on the board, women should promote others

Existing and newly engaged/promoted women should actively promote the appointment of more women to their boards. They have the opportunity to provide exposure and profile for female talent and should use this actively in support. It is important to go beyond a lone female board member as there is a risk that her male colleagues will assume that she is representative of female views and behaviours.

Top Tip 6: The 80/20 Rule

Women still suffer from the 80/20 confidence rule. Men with 80% of the required skills for a job will see themselves as perfect for the role whereas a woman may focus on the 20% she doesn't have and be (too) open about any lack of experience.

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Top Tip 7: Dare to be Authentic

Whilst our colleagues at this discussion acknowledged that, in some organisations, it is necessary to ‘play the game’ to some degree on the way up, it is also vital that we have more executive role models on boards who are not women trying to be men. This was seen as promoting valuable diversity which has been shown through numerous studies to lead to greater profitability. Both the McKinsey report in 2007 and the recent Eversheds’ report on board composition, support this. See the article, [The Board Report: the composition of the board & its impact on company success](#), for more information on this report.

Top Tip 8: Recommend women for NED positions

When any senior person (male or female) is asked for recommendations for NED positions, they should actively promote women and be prepared to take a risk. There was some discussion at this event around ‘the same old names’ being mentioned, as no-one wants to take a risk with a new person that no-one has heard of. The consequence of this is that women, who are largely new, are consistently being overlooked.

Top Tip 9: Women need to network more

Women still don’t network in the same way as men. They rarely prioritise a drink with colleagues after work and few play golf or attend sporting events. Organisations need to recognise this and provide opportunities for women to socialise and network by building on each others’ experiences. Moreover, women need to recognise that networking and raising their profile is vital to commercial effectiveness. Membership of an organisation such as Criticaleye is a good way to start.

Top Tip 10: Women want more flexibility

The issue of flexibility, particularly as women are still often primary carers for children and older relatives, is still seen as a major barrier. How can they do it all and still function at board level?

Top Tip 11: Mentoring and Development Programmes

Mentoring programmes are phenomenally successful at helping women get ahead. A large proportion of the group at this event had benefitted from (mainly male) mentors. The lack of female role models at the top of organisations, even when the workforce is predominantly female, is still a problem. Organisations should set aside budget for this if they are serious about gender diversity at the top and women should not wait for formal mentoring programmes but rather seek out mentors for themselves - even on an informal basis.

Development Programmes including Coaching are also essential to women making the leap onto the board. A lack of confidence and self belief is still seen to be a problem. Women need specialist programmes to help them get ahead. Womens’ networking organisations have started to offer programmes (for example, Jacqui’s programme for ‘the Pearls’ part of the Two Percent Club) as are forward thinking FTSE 100 organisations.

Finally, despite comprehensive research by government bodies, business schools and thought leaders over the past 20 years, change has been painfully slow. However, following the publicity surrounding the Davies Report, the environment is now conducive and it is time for organisations and women themselves to step up.

Government bodies, large organisations, business schools and lobby groups should continue to share knowledge in this area as we achieve greater organisational diversity and change. Organisations should identify budgets and programmes to work towards greater diversity in the boardroom and individuals at the top (of both genders) must be prepared to think more creatively about skills, expertise and personal chemistry in their leadership teams. If all this happens, we ought to witness a real shift in numbers.

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Jacqui is MD of Transition Ltd, a transformational change management, leadership, executive coaching and coach training business. Prior to her current role, Jacqui was First Vice President HR EMEA for Merrill Lynch. She has also worked globally for many blue chip companies on innovative development programmes, including BT Vodafone, eBay, Cisco, Standard Chartered, GSK and top business schools on MBA programmes. Jacqui has a special interest in the development of top female executives (she was previously a board member of Opportunity Now), has a doctorate in Executive Anxiety and a Masters in Change Management.



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Denise has extensive experience of operating at board level both as a lawyer and in a general management capacity. Denise joined ASDA as part of its recovery team in the early 1990s as Company Secretary and General Counsel. At ASDA she championed Diversity and was responsible for a number of the company’s successful employment policies. She has held a number of non-executive appointments in the retail, financial services, construction, health and education sectors. She is currently Non-executive Director of the British Olympic Association, Chairman of the York Museums Trust and a Non-executive Director of the Northern Ballet.

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