

Building Role Models

Energising Organisations through Wholesome Leadership

Abstract

There is a need to increase the participation of women in the corporate workforce in India. Currently, the participation is about 6% of the total workforce. There are many reasons that explain the low numbers of women in key leadership positions: some of them being lack of role models, lack of management experience, commitment to family etc. In order to ensure that more women transition to senior leadership positions, organizations need to have gender friendly HR practices, focus on competency development of women, have forums for women to express etc. There is a need to also expand the role of successful women to be mentors to other aspiring women in the organization. A process of well-established mentorship will enable women to build their competencies, enhance their visibility and develop the leadership competencies to become effective leaders in their organizations. Mentorship can be a very effective tool for leadership development.

Developing Women Mentors in Corporate India

In a recent survey conducted by CII (November 2005), on "Understanding the Levels of Women Empowerment in the Workplace", data showed that the ratio of women employees to the total workforce was only 6%!

The largest numbers of women employees are in the Information Technology, ITES and the Financial Services Sector. The reasons are fairly obvious. All these sectors are knowledge driven, offer good working conditions and a friendly environment. The BPO sector in India for example has nearly 50-60% of women as their employees. Many of these are from second and third tier cities.

In a recent interaction with some leading industries in Pune, there was a clear business decision that emerged. They were looking at hiring more women across all the different levels of management. This came from organizations who were predominately manufacturing based. They were not talking about employing women in the support functions but in core functions such as sales, production on the shop floor, supply chain etc. This is certainly a healthy trend with industries finally waking up to the potential of women as a contributory workforce.

Along with the growing number of women contributors in the Industry today, we need to put into place mechanisms, systems and policies that will continue to attract women to join the

workforce and build their careers in the same. In a recent interview, Indira Nooyi of Pepsi Co., said that multinationals have been able to create a conducive atmosphere that has facilitated women employees to take on leadership roles. She felt that Indian companies also need to provide a more inclusive participation of women to boost the growth of the entire country.

The CII study also revealed that the ratio of women employees to total employees is only 4% at senior and middle management levels while it is 16% at junior management levels. Data also showed that only 1% of organizations were led by women across India. In the Western zone of India, this proportion increased to 4% compared to the rest of the country.

In a recent study done on barriers to women's advancement in Europe, stereotypes and pre-conceptions about women's roles and abilities are seen to be the number one barrier to advancement. This is followed by lack of role models, lack of general management experience, commitment to family and personal responsibilities and lack of mentoring.

What do we need to do to ensure that women not only join the corporate sector but also transition into leadership positions in their organizations? My understanding is that some of the following will help a lot:

Having Women-Friendly HR Policies

HR policies in all companies definitely need to be both men and women friendly! However, we need to be more sensitive to the needs of women given the fact that they still walk the tight-rope between managing their homes as well as their work. Companies that have progressive and women-friendly policies are more likely to retain, engage and promote women in leadership positions.

IBM is one of the many organizations that have a successful gender diversity success story. Nearly 26% of its workforce consists of women. IBM follows policies of equal opportunity, affirmative action, cultural awareness and work-life balance.

Similarly, ICICI offers "flexitime" and "buddy systems" at work for its women employees having policies that cater to the family needs of women does ensure that they remain in the organization and therefore can rise to senior positions. These can be related to maternity leave, pick-up and drop facilities, flexi-time options, health-related benefits, day care and rest room facilities, options for going on sabbaticals, security concerns etc.

Investing in the Competency Development of Women

In order to ensure women transition into senior roles, it is important for the organization to invest in the competency development of its key women personnel. This could be through the process of identifying the high-potential employees and investing in a fast track development program for them. This program can look at developing both the functional / role competencies as well as the leadership skill-sets that are critical for women to progress in their career. A well-designed and systematic process which caters to the specific leadership needs of women would significantly enhance their career advancement process. Women need more inputs on networking, strategic thinking, accountability and career advancement as compared to men.

Forums for Women

Organizations need to look at creating forums which can provide an opportunity for women employees to come and express their concerns and challenges and find solutions. The solutions finally have to come from the employees themselves but it is the organization's responsibility to provide opportunities for this. Open Space Technology (OST) could be one such forum which can be provided to the women employees. Open Space is a methodology / process created by Dr. Harrison Owen which provides a "space" for people to come out with what has meaning and passion for them. Open Space works on the twin principles of passion and responsibility. Participants come out with what are their challenges, concerns and post these on the agenda wall. Other people who are also attending, decide which of the agenda items they resonant with and small discussion forums get set up to discuss the concerns and seek solutions for it. OST could be a powerful way in which women can have a "say" in what matters to them and come out with solutions that can be either implemented by them or lobbied for with others.

Beyond providing a forum for surfacing concerns / issues, it also provides a forum for sharing of feelings, emotions that otherwise are ignored at the work-front. Providing the space for emotional expression helps to bond people and give a feeling that the company cares for them. When people feel "cared "for, they are likely to remain and be engaged with the organization.

Awareness and Education of Male Employees

As Corporate India is getting set to increase the number of women in its workforce, there is a need to pay attention to the education and orientation of the male employees in the organizations to the dynamics of the changing situation. We all would have observed that

with talented and ambitious women coming into the work-front, there is a need to ensure that their male colleagues see them as equals and as their peers and are as supportive as they are with their other colleagues. It is often seen that in male dominated domains (like sales teams, production functions etc.), male employees are unfamiliar with how to work with women colleagues. Male employees at shop-floors as well as at supervisory and managerial positions may also need to undergo some kind of orientation programs that will help them to get used to having female colleagues at work. They need to be educated on the company's policies of being an equal opportunity employer, policies on sexual harassment and ways of interaction. This will ensure a more friendly work-environment.

Similarly, organizations may also have to invest in the education of the families of their women employees so that they support them in their growth in the company. Very often, parents or husbands put a lot of pressure on women to ignore their responsibilities at work and be more focused on their role as daughters, wives, mothers etc. This creates a low focus at work. Education/ orientation of families to the new enhanced role of women could be of help.

While we can do many more things to enhance the leadership development of women, one of the most important ways could be through creating a mentorship program/process for women in organizations.

The word "mentor" is widely understood to be a guide, wise friend, counselor etc. The word mentor has its origin in Greek philosophy - Mentor was a friend of Odysseus who entrusted his son to be him while he went to war. Mentor looked after both, his son and his home in his absence.

Mentorship therefore denotes a process in which a person provides guidance, advice to her mentee. The mentor encourages her mentee to explore options, take risks, deploy their full potential at work, overcome perceived and real hurdles etc. The mentor also provides a role-model and sounding board for aspiring women employees.

Institutionalizing a process of mentorship for women in organizations can be a powerful way to ensure that we create a pipeline of women leaders in the organization. The mentoring process is one which is cost-effective and also uses the capacity of the internal leaders in the organization to develop people.

Organizations can do this up by setting up a mentoring co-coordinating team whose prime responsibilities would be to manage this project. Successful women in the organizations who

could be the mentors need to be trained in how to mentor younger women. The mentoring process can help the younger women employees learn how to build their careers, get valuable tips from the more successful women on how to manage their careers, handle any emotional issues, and build a successful career. Having a woman mentor would make it easier for the younger women to discuss both personal and professional issues.

The entire process will need good coordination and management. Both the mentees and mentors need to see how this process is of benefit to them. Measurement criteria would also need to be set up to measure the effectiveness of the project.

Organizations can do a lot of things to ensure that they have a good representation of women at all levels of leadership in the organization. Women too need to look at their own career growth in the organization with equal interest and passion.

I would like to end this article with this famous poem, quoted by Nelson Mandela in his inaugural speech in 1994. This is dedicated to all women in India and the planet.

***"Our deepest fear is not that we are inadequate
Our deepest fear is that we are powerful beyond measure
It is our light, not our darkness that frightens us
We ask ourselves, who am I to be brilliant, gorgeous, talented and fabulous?
Actually, who are we not to be?
You are a child of God. Your playing small doesn't serve the world
There is nothing enlightened about shrinking so that other people
Won't feel insecure around you
We were born to make manifest the glory of God that is within us
It's not just in some of us
It's in everyone
And as we let our own light shine
We unconsciously give other people permission to do the same
As we are liberated from our own fears,
our presence automatically liberates others."***

About The Author

Anu Wakhlu is the founder Director of the Pune-based Management Consulting Firm "Pragati Leadership Institute (P) Ltd." Her key responsibilities include facilitation of senior leadership programs, capacity enhancement of the team in Pragati and forging strategic alliances. Anu has worked on a number of national and international assignments with leading corporates in India and globally on topics of leadership, facilitation, team building, open space etc. Anu is passionate about issues related to women leadership and has written a number of papers on it.

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