

SA needs to bridge the female management gap

Around the globe, companies are facing a reckoning - particularly when it comes to female representation at executive management level. South Africa is no exception. A 2019 [report](#) by PWC, for example, found that just 3.31% of chief executives of JSE-listed companies are women, with none present in the JSE top 40.



Kumeshnee West

Other board-level roles tend to be just as male-dominated. According to the PWC report, 87.2% of CFOs are male, and 91% of executive directors are male. This situation hasn't arisen because of a lack of talent either. Look at the level below the C-Suite in most companies and you'll find many women in middle and junior management, many of whom are more than capable of making the leap to executive level.

If South Africa is to bridge this gap, it needs to ensure that women feel empowered to make the step up to senior management and that when they do, they're able to forge their own leadership journeys, says Kumeshnee West, director, executive education at the University of Cape Town's Graduate School of Business (GSB).

"Women often feel like they have to think much more about the potential compromises around work, family, and other relationships when it comes to making the step up. But with the right organisational support and empowerment that doesn't have to be the case," she says.

The GSB's Developing Women Leaders course is designed for women on the management trajectory, the course covers

topics including personal mastery, leadership presence, building relationships for impact, navigating office politics, and understanding and managing the imposter phenomenon.

As Sue von Hirschfeld, leadership development expert and co-convenor of the [Developing Women Leaders](#) programme at the UCT Graduate School of Business explains, these are necessary in a boardroom environment which is still discriminatory towards women.

“What’s happening right now in organisations is second-generation gender bias. It isn’t necessarily overt sexism, but more subtle forms of discrimination. There’s a tendency, for example, to ‘think manager, think male’.”

She says that many women are aware that they face discrimination, but not that it’s targeted and systemic, says Von Hirschfeld. “It can be quite revelatory when they realise it’s happening to a lot of people and not just them.”

While courses like the one run by the GSB can’t necessarily eliminate that kind of discrimination, they can help women address those issues.

“The focus of the course is on helping give women the confidence to have difficult conversations in the workplace, where the structure isn’t always welcoming. It gives women the opportunity to practise being in those situations and find their voice in a safe space,” says Jenny Boxall, a co-convenor of the course

A different kind of leadership

As West points out, the idea isn’t to have women replicate the kind of leadership practised by men in top-level corporate positions, but to play to their own strengths.

“Women often practice a different kind of leadership. They are generally more empathetic and companies with more women on their boards tend to have better returns, a greater focus on employee wellbeing, and exhibit higher levels of collaboration,” she says.

The other difficulty women face, West says, is stepping into male-dominated spaces. That makes it even more important for women in these spaces to support other women entering them.

“Corporate South Africa can still be a bit of an old-boys club. If women are to break that cycle, they need to help other women rather than pulling the ladder up behind them,” she says.

“It’s about being audacious and walking through that door and ensuring it stays open,” course co-convenor Makghati Mokwena says.

Here too, the course has a couple of roles to play. The first is in making women feel comfortable in any space.

“The course reminds women that no space belongs to any one gender. We want women to come out of it feeling like they can step into any world, even when it’s male-dominated,” says Mokwena.

Ongoing support

The second is in providing ongoing support from other women.

“One of the most important outcomes of the course is that it also gives women a strong, ongoing and supportive network which they can draw on long after it’s completed,” says Boxall.

Interestingly, West believes that the drive to remote work brought about by Covid-19 could benefit women’s leadership potential, especially when it comes to training and development.

“Traditional leadership courses require face-to-face interaction, which is still very relevant. However for a woman facing competing demands, such as having to juggle caring for children or elderly parents, being away for a week for a residential course can be incredibly taxing.

“By shifting the content of this course to an online platform, it becomes a lot more accessible and requires fewer sacrifices of the women taking it. This might be a small step in levelling the playing fields when it comes to women in leadership, but it is an important one nonetheless,” she says.

Von Hirschfeld agrees: “Online gives us a much bigger reach. It’s available and accessible.”

She points out, however, that it’s differently structured to most online courses. “Online courses are often very didactic. We’ve made this course more experiential with a lot of small group work, which allows us to replicate many of the things that work best about our face-to-face course.”

It's about balance

With corporations increasingly focusing on transformation, there has never been a better time to nurture and develop women in leadership across industries and economic sectors.

That said, West cautions that it shouldn’t only be a numbers game.

“While it is very important that we increase the number of women at the top, it is equally important that these women are empowered with the skills to take on such roles and have the desired impact. Space needs to be deliberately created at the top for women, support needs to be provided and opportunities to show up and contribute equally as leaders is vital,” she says.

Ultimately, says Mokwena, it’s about balance. “We want to make common ways of being that aren’t often found in business,” she says. “It’s impossible for one gender to hold it all together. For organisations and society to succeed, we have to find ways to collaborate with one another.”

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