

Organizational Influences on Career Advancement of Women Managers

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Abstract

In recent years, there has been a growing realization that better utilization of women's managerial talent and potential can give organizations a competitive advantage. However, there is a marked disparity in progress of women to the highest echelons of power, in comparison with their male counterparts. Explanations for women's relatively low representation in top management positions have been presented both from an individual-centred and organization-centred approach. This research paper presents an overview of the organizational factors which could either serve to promote or constrain the career progression of managerial women. It suggests that organizations that wish to leverage the potential of women managers should adopt a more proactive stance to the issue of supporting women's career development and career success. They should also identify the varying career orientations of women and tailor their developmental approach accordingly, rather than following a uniform approach for all managerial women.

Keywords: Women managers, career advancement of women managers, organizational influences on women's career success, career development of women corporate managers

Introduction

In recent years, there seems to have evolved a fairly widespread belief that women can contribute something essential to business organizations. This can be referred to as the special contribution argument or the "female advantage" (Helgesen, 1990). Changes in society and the business environment are believed to require new styles of leadership which are viewed as more congruent with women's orientations (Fondas, 1997). Many organizations have woken up to the realization that better utilisation of the potential of women would help them to gain a competitive advantage in the contemporary scenario.

However, there is still a disparity in their progress to the highest echelons of management, when compared to their male counterparts. This has highlighted the need for focused enquiry into the reasons that constrain their movement into powerful management positions. The issue of women's relative lack of progress to the corporate pinnacle can be viewed from both a person-centred and organization-centred approach (Riger & Galligan, 1980).

This research paper presents an overview of the organizational factors that can either promote or limit the movement of women into top level management positions. The structural paradigm provides the organizing framework for an exploration into these influences.

The structural paradigm

This paradigm considers the organization rather than the individual as its unit of analysis. Its proponents assert that the way women and men are distributed across organizational structural positions affects their behaviour. They believe that making the requisite structural changes would increase their advancement opportunities and facilitate more productive managerial behaviour.

According to Kanter (1982), three structural characteristics of organizations that are perceived to influence the behaviour of members are:

- a) The structures of opportunity- the possibilities the organization offers for mobility, advancement and growth.
- b) The structures of power- the capacity to mobilize resources and to influence people within a wide organizational context.
- c) The degree of occupational segregation by sex, race or class.

Until recently, within most organizations, women have had, relative to men, fewer opportunities for advancement, little power to influence others within or outside of the wider organizational context, and only token representation in management positions.

This paradigm states that various traits and ineffective managerial behaviours attributed to women are a function of their structural position within organizations rather than gender. The power and opportunity structures which disadvantage women and limit their chances for mobility are likely to generate dysfunctional and non-productive managerial behaviours.

The structural paradigm points to the need for corporations to recognize that apparent differences in managerial behaviour are more a function of organizational position rather than gender and that those differences are likely to disappear once the requisite changes are made in the power structure. This is in keeping with the view that power wipes out sex (Horwitz, 1982).

Organizational Factors Influencing Career Advancement

Organizational factors refer to influences which are rooted in organizational policies, systems, procedures and practices that may impact women's career advancement prospects both favourably and unfavourably. Positive influences may be in the form of supportive interpersonal relationships, mentoring and aspects of organizational culture that support career progression of women. Negative influences may be in the form of gender stereotypes pervading the workplace, overt and covert barriers and biases in recruitment practices, performance appraisal systems and promotional opportunities.

1. Recruitment practices

Patterns of job segregation, both horizontal and vertical, still persist in the labour market and many jobs are still considered as men's or women's jobs and this influences the initial intake of a particular gender to such sex-typed jobs. If initial intakes to the organization for particular career routes are unbalanced, it is likely that this pattern will continue, particularly in organizations with strong internal labour markets and a policy of promotion from within (Rothwell, 1984).

The subjective selection interview is still widely used for selection to managerial positions, despite evidence which shows it to be unreliable and a source of bias. Interviews are frequently poorly conducted and are open to potential prejudice and personal bias, more so if the selection is to a traditionally male-dominated post (Alimo-Metcalfe, 1995). Even other techniques of assessment that are considered more scientific, reliable and objective, such as psychometrics, may contain subtle sources of bias, which are difficult to challenge. As these tests contain items which are modelled on the perceived traits of current job occupants, atypical job applicants may be disadvantaged in the design of these tests (Webb, 1987).

It has also been suggested that many of the intelligence tests generally used by management in the selection process appear to favour the perceived thinking patterns of men. There is

research evidence showing that women score higher than men on verbal tests of intelligence, while men score higher on numerical ability. In this context, Alimo-Metcalf poses a question as to whether verbal ability should be rated lower than numerical ability in the requisite skills to be possessed by managers.

Another popular method adopted in organization for selecting high potential candidates to be groomed for senior managerial positions is the “assessment centre”. Though considered a fairly reliable method for assessment of potential, it is not free from suggestions of possible sex bias. Here, the behaviour of candidates is assessed using behavioural frameworks or guidelines which contain specific examples of indicators denoting above average, average and below average behaviour. It has been pointed out that if these indicators have been developed from a totally male management group, they can be considered a source of potential sex bias.

Adopting more scientific forms of assessment does not always reduce effect of gender bias. It is perceived that as the techniques of assessment become more complex, sources of bias are far less obvious and hence less likely to be challenged.

2. Training and developmental opportunities

Training and development is considered to be a key factor in helping women succeed in corporate management. Managers who have attained remarkable levels of career success, both men and women, point out the role that developmental opportunities have played in helping them to advance their careers. However, women often highlight unequal access to career development or training opportunities when discussing the barriers to career advancement that they perceived to be significant. Training programmes which help women to acquire core management and leadership skills, formal mentoring projects which help to transfer skills such as organizational politics and networking that are difficult to teach in the conventional training programs have been successfully launched by many companies and have been lauded by many women executives as a useful career development initiative. Traditional stereotypes and assumptions about women’s attitudes, interests and career commitment sometimes operate in the workplace to restrict the developmental opportunities made available to women. Misconceptions about women’s abilities to handle international assignments and their willingness to accept these assignments are the issues highlighted as to

why a relatively smaller number of women managers are selected for international assignments (Linehan, 2000).

3. Networking

Inclusion in informal networks is considered to provide organizational members with access to vital resources such as social contact with superiors, networking potential with peers within and outside the organization, and the potential to influence management. However, women appear to be disadvantaged in this regard, as studies have found that women are either excluded, or may have to work harder to be included in informal networks. Many studies have documented that women managers experience lower support throughout their careers in terms of collegiality, acceptance, information, and feedback (Oakley, 2000). Exclusion from informal networks also limits their opportunities for interaction with senior managers who might facilitate transfers into more central roles within the company (Ibarra, 1992). Men are more likely than women with the same education and experience to gain access to the networks of their mentors and to be drawn into key political coalitions (Ibarra, 1993). Women managers are also held back by their attitudes, as many do not positively value networking. They frequently fail to perceive the importance of the informal system of relations and information sharing. Women's lifestyles can also prevent them from taking part in informal networks. Owing to domestic responsibilities, they may tend to keep to official working hours.

4. Mentoring

Mentoring is an important form of organizational support. The literature on careers suggests that mentors play a crucial role in career development and that they may be even more critical to the career success of women than men. Many studies have identified the lack of mentoring relationships to be a significant barrier facing women managers in their transition from middle to senior management (Ragins, 1989).

Many valuable career and psychological benefits are seen to accrue from the mentoring relationship for women executives. Women who have mentors report greater job satisfaction and career success than women who do not (Dreher & Ash, 1990). Mentors stimulate personal motivation, set high performance standards for their protégés and publicize their achievements (Missirian, 1982). Women's lack of confidence in achievement situations may be alleviated by positive feedback from their mentors. If a mentor is available to act as a role

model, it may have the effect of increasing women's aspiration levels and self-efficacy in traditionally male jobs. Mentors are found to provide their protégés with key contacts, give useful information in specific areas and teach them valued skills (Kotter, 1985). It has been asserted that a valuable benefit that results from the mentoring process is learning how power is gained and wielded within a company and understanding how to handle both peers and subordinates (Vinnicombe & Colwill, 1995).

Lack of women in senior management positions may increase the possibility of women having male mentors. The fact that men tend to hold more centralized positions which give them access to valuable information concerning job openings and managerial decisions also increases the likelihood of women having male mentors (Ragins & Cotton, 1991). A male mentor may have a wider power base and also provide greater visibility to important organizational members. However, female mentors may have a better understanding of the stress and problems which managerial women face.

Although mentors are critical to the career success of women, research evidence also suggests that there is a smaller supply of mentors available to women than men. Six potential barriers have been identified which apply to mentoring relationships involving women (Noe, 1988). These include lack of contact with potential mentors, high visibility of women as protégés due to their small numbers (tokenism), negative stereotypes making women unattractive as protégés, behavioural differences between men and women, women's use of non-male influence strategies, and cultural and organizational biases with respect to cross-gender relationships. Research has found that although resentment of co-workers was a problem in cross-gender mentoring relationships, both mentors and protégés felt that the positive benefits more than offset the problem (Bowen, 1985).

Research studies also suggest that in addition to their role in career success, mentoring relationships may play a special role in improving the quality of organizational life for women (Burke & McKeen, 1994). The literature suggests that mentoring has the potential to alleviate the career stress of professional women by increasing the protégé's self-confidence and suggesting ways of dealing with stress. In addition, it is found that female mentors provide unique role models for female protégés because they can more easily relate to the stresses that women face in the form of discrimination, stereotyping, work/family interface, and social isolation (Nelson & Quick, 1985).

5. Gender stereotypes prevailing in organizations

Gender stereotypes are organised consensual beliefs and opinions about the characteristics of women and men, and about the purported qualities of masculinity and femininity. These stereotyped attributes that people associate with men and women are both descriptive and prescriptive.

A large number of studies provide evidence of stereotyped thinking about women and suggests that this reduces their opportunities for attaining senior management positions. Stereotypes do not only influence recruitment and selection to a particular position; they also affect ongoing career development and performance evaluation.

The basic assumption that a good manager is inherently masculine may act as a powerful barrier to the career progression of women managers. Research has highlighted that male managers persist in viewing women in general as far more deficient in the attributes necessary for success (Baack, Carr-Ruffino & Felletier, 1993). A study done among women CEOs in the USA revealed that 80 per cent of them felt that stereotyping and preconceptions of women managers were the main reasons for women's inability to gain top managerial positions (Fagenson & Jackson, 1993). It has also been argued that the chief reason for lack of progress in attainment of top leadership positions by women is uncertainty by senior directors about female executives' ability to perform at this level due to perceived lack of business experience and requisite criteria for appointment (Burke & Nelson, 2002).

6. Promotional opportunities

Promotional opportunities available to women may be influenced by the gender stereotypes prevalent in organizations. The stereotyped belief that women are more suitable for nurturing functions may result in their placement in staff functions such as personnel or training, public relations or customer care, at the junior or middle level, rather than in operating or commercial functions. Later, they may be considered unsuitable for a broader management appointment on account of their narrow range of experience. Such functional barriers at work may be termed as "glass walls" (McRae, 1995). There also tend to be certain patterns or tracks of appointments which lead to senior management positions. If these career tracks include jobs which have never or seldom been occupied by women, it would mean that women are disadvantaged in their progress to high level positions.

A major obstacle to promotion is that women are generally perceived to be less career committed, i.e., they may leave the organization on account of maternity and other family obligations. Studies have shown that women's promotional opportunities are often constrained by assumptions made about their career aspirations and career commitment.

7. Influence of organizational culture

There appear to be a number of gender based norms that pervade organizational life and managerial practice. Gender refers to patterned, socially produced distinctions between male and female, masculine and feminine. It is perceived that gender may be deeply hidden in organizational processes and decisions that appear to have nothing to do with gender (Acker, 1992). These deeply hidden aspects of gender have been referred to as "the masculine substructure of organization" and as "corporate masculinity"(Maier, 1999) Although it is generally accepted that organizational culture can affect the productivity and work satisfaction of employees by being either stressful or reinforcing for them, the gendered nature of organizational culture is less discussed. Gender cultures which are firmly rooted in patriarchal relations may create psychological barriers for women and negatively impact their career advancement. They may damage and distort communication in organizations, which in turn may affect performance and productivity and ultimately result in wastage of women's managerial talent and potential(Maddock &Parkin, 1993) However, in organizations where there is less prevalence of gender based stereotypical norms, there is likely to be more acceptance of women's right to career advancement.

8. Sexual harassment

Sexual harassment in the workplace refers to unwanted and offensive sex-related behaviour in the working environment. Such experiences are emotionally distressing, anxiety producing and psychologically disturbing to those who experience them. Organizations numerically dominated by men, in which job duties are traditionally masculine and that communicate a lack of interest or seriousness with regard to dealing with the issue of sexual harassment are seen to experience this problem more severely. It is found that harassment is more common and targets have worse outcomes in settings tolerant of such behaviour. Tolerance of sexual harassment can be defined as the general perception of employees that the issue is not taken seriously, that there is high risk for complaining, and that there is little chance of action being taken against perpetrators of harassment. Other aspects of tolerance include the lack of strong

policies and clear procedures for dealing with sexual harassment and normative behaviour that appears to tolerate harassment. Being in an environment where other women are being harassed has been termed as ambient harassment or bystander stress, and is reported to produce psychological distress equivalent to that of being directly harassed.

One explanation proposed for sexual harassment derives from the analysis of power differentials in organizations. This perspective emphasizes that the structure of organizational hierarchy invests power in certain individuals over others, and that such power is likely to be abused. It is historically the case that men have held the organizational power inherent in managerial positions, whereas women are more likely to be employed in subordinate positions. It is this imbalance of power that is felt to lead to sexual harassment of women, according to the power theory of sexual harassment. According to this theory, as women gain organizational power, the problem of sexual harassment of women will begin to disappear.

9. Organizational initiatives for promoting career advancement of women

In recent years, globally there has been increased research interest regarding the desirability and usefulness of organizational initiatives for promoting career advancement of women in corporate management. Approaches that several companies have experimented with to promote women's career growth are leadership development programmes, cross-functional training, succession planning, mentoring programs, women's networks, work/life balance, and flexibility initiatives (Mattis, 1994). Incorporating the concept of diversity in succession planning is another effective way to ensure greater representation of women in the ranks of senior management. Designing formal programmes for identifying and developing managerial talent, which though not exclusively for women, ensure that women are well represented among participants, would also help in facilitating movement of high potential women into top management positions.

Conclusion

The organization-centred approach to women's career development is undertaken from the perspective that women's low representation in the ranks of senior management may be due to constraints faced in the context of organizational factors such as organizational practices and policies, unsupportive aspects of organizational culture, and gender stereotypes prevalent in the organization.

Organizations that wish to leverage the managerial talent and skills of women can make a concerted effort to develop the capabilities of women through suitable leadership development initiatives and also help them to build up organizational power at an early stage of their career by placing them in more central roles, providing them with line experience and assignments that entail more challenge, visibility and risk.

Organizations should assess the specific training needs of their women managers and match them with suitable developmental opportunities. They should refrain from following a uniform approach for all women in respect to the opportunities made available to them to assist them in their career advancement. Instead, an attempt should be made to identify the varying career orientations of women managers and tailor the developmental approach of organizations accordingly.

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