

EXECUTIVEINSIGHTS



Fair enough strategies from the fairer sex

The Centre for Creative Leadership looks at how the high-achieving female executive copes with a different set of challenges

AS WOMEN EXECUTIVES continue to achieve success in the corporate and business worlds, they can expect to face new and different challenges, not necessarily related to the old familiar problems of sexual harassment, isolation and glass ceilings.

Today there are more choices and opportunities for building fulfilling careers.

But there are also more trade-offs, so women aiming to reach the top must have clear strategies and understand the forces at work when confronted with important decisions.

The Centre for Creative Leadership studied the experiences of dozens of high-achieving women. Most were middle-level or senior managers working for Fortune 500 companies. The research identified five main themes in their approach to career and the way the women organised their lives. These themes were:

1 AUTHENTICITY, which, in this context, means having a good understanding of one's priorities and emotions. It is the ability to sense what is important to you and, when dealing with other people, to behave in a way that consistently reflects your inner values and beliefs.

For example, the study turned up the case of Maria, who had earned a lot in an executive role with a manufacturing company, but had no sense of job satisfaction. She wanted to do something that had greater meaning and involved helping others. Therefore, she quit and took a lower-paid university teaching job. Giving up a certain amount of prestige and money allowed her to focus on a long-held dream of helping people develop their potential. This is authenticity in action.

2 CONNECTION refers to a fundamental human drive to be close to others. The desire for friendships and family ties was behind many of the goals, choices and decisions of the women surveyed.

One respondent said that her career benefited when she decided to take occasional half-days off work to spend more time with her children.

Even though it meant juggling her busy work schedule, the chance to be involved in more family activities made the extra effort well worth it. She was happier and developed a new perspective on work priorities.

WEEK 11 | Developing women leaders in the workplace

3 AGENCY is the basic psychological need to control one's own destiny. More specifically, it relates to taking deliberate actions to achieve a desired goal. In the workplace, this might involve learning to exercise authority more effectively or becoming more politically astute within the organisation.

One of the women interviewed said she was very frustrated with the level of conflict in her company and the impact it had on employee morale. Her initial approach was to hold back from the fray and put less effort into her job. However, after further reflection, she decided to take a lead in fixing the situation.

She identified and addressed the main areas of dispute and set about resolving them. The result was that her own attitude improved and, before long, so did the company's financial performance.

4 WHOLENESS emerged as the dominant theme and represents the desire to unite different roles in life into an integrated whole. Some women in the study were concerned that their lives were not integrated.

Others felt continually torn between their work responsibilities and external commitments. For example, Karen's job at a major bank kept her working seven days a week and meant she had no time for other interests such as tennis, reading or cooking.

When she reached the point of being disillusioned with work and life in general, she knew it was time to make a move. She left the bank, found a new job, which left time for personal pursuits, and never looked back.

5 SELF-CLARITY is the desire to have a better understanding of one's own strengths and weaknesses, preferences,

FAREWELL

This is the last article in our current series from the Centre for Creative Leadership. Next week, we begin a series from renowned speaker, consultant, author and coach, Kerry Larkin.

priorities and values. It also extends to wanting to know more about how we fit into an organisation and with society in general.

The search for self-clarity was what motivated many women in the study to keep learning and developing as leaders. For example, one MBA graduate had joined an investment bank and seemed destined for great things in the world of finance.

However, feeling that her creativity was stifled, she considered her options and moved to an art auction house where both her creative and finance skills could be put to good use.

These five themes are intertwined and they change in relative importance over the course of a woman's life, depending on age, experience and the way different choices work out.

While individual women should give due consideration to all these factors, organisations can also do their bit to develop high-achieving women executives. Generally, employers do too little to map out career paths for women and fail to take into account different needs and concerns.

Many high-achieving women feel they have to make big compromises to achieve their targets or reach milestones in their career.

Often, these compromises are based on stereotype male expectations which, in part, account for the high turnover among female managers. This translates into further investment in recruitment and training and, in the meantime, slows progress and limits the company's overall effectiveness.

Given the increasing demand for diverse leadership talent, employers cannot afford to misunderstand or underestimate these issues. They should help their female employees cultivate their skills based on the five themes identified as key to evolving as successful and effective managers and leaders. To start with, companies can take the following steps:

Increase the opportunities for informal assessment: encourage the development of employee associations or networks for

particular groups, such as women of ethnic minorities. These allow people to share common experiences and concerns and form close relationships, which make it easier to ask for advice, support, feedback and ideas about different strengths and weaknesses.

Encourage women to take advantage of formal reviews: structured assessments and 360-degree feedback from colleagues can be part of a larger development programme. One well-known industry association now arranges for nearly all its women managers to participate in feedback-intensive programmes and sponsors an initiative for firms in the same industry to do something similar.

Help decision makers develop and create challenging assignments; such assignments should be relevant to the day-to-day business and be designed to treat specific skills. If there is no challenge, there is little chance for personal development; if the assignment is too tough, no one learns or benefits. In the case of a female executive who lacks assertiveness, the company should come up with tasks that require decisive action. With the proper guidance, anyone can pick up new skills and learn to change. To reinforce the process, allow time for lessons to sink in and, perhaps, recommend keeping notes to record impressions of new experiences and what has been learned.

Examine the formal developmental relationships in your organisation; there may already be mentoring programmes and peer discussion groups, but consider if they really meet the needs of up-and-coming women executives. Such programmes should provide appropriate learning opportunities and support for everyone involved, and recognise that not all employees face exactly the same kind of challenges.

To create a truly diverse company environment, HR policies should be flexible and reflect the various development needs and career expectations of women executives.

Contributed by Marian Ruderman, a group director of the Center for Creative Leadership, an educational institution dedicated to leadership training and research worldwide

HRTRENDS

Managing the Japanese way

Food chain Watami, which has 13 outlets in Hong Kong, builds loyalty by treating its staff as clients

Mary Luk

IMPARTING TRADITIONAL Japanese management culture to young Hong Kong people is not an easy task. The Japanese tend to commit themselves to an employer for life, while Hongkongers frequently change jobs for extra money or a better location.

Japanese food chain Watami (China), which operates in Hong Kong, believes in loyalty and strives to keep its employees. Its recipe for staff retention, which is directly linked to its recruitment strategy, centres on offering adequate relaxation activities, fostering a good work environment and providing structural training.

Care and learning opportunities are its top priorities for encouraging workers to stay.

The company pioneered the development of the "casual restaurant" market in Japan, operating about 500 outlets. Its popularity inspired it to expand overseas.

Since 2001, 13 restaurants have opened in Hong Kong, employing a young workforce of about 500 full-time and 200 part-time staff.

"To retain staff you must first treat them as your clients and understand their needs," said Sam Chiu, human resources and training manager for Watami.

"There are different ways of retaining staff, depending on the level of the job. When managing a young workforce one needs to adopt a completely different attitude.

"To these people, paying them more may not be the only way of holding on to them. Since most are still single, they do not have a family financial burden. What they are more concerned with is getting along with their colleagues and being happy during and after work," Mr Chiu said.

Realising this, the management organises many activities, such as soccer and basketball games, singing contests or visits to Ocean Park to allow employees to relax and mix with their peers. In turn, this increases an employee's sense of belonging to the company.

The firm believes that only by offering quality training can it retain staff and create better career prospects. New frontline staff, known as "crew" to the company, undergo a two-day orientation course, learning the corporate culture, some simple Japanese words and service procedures. After that, they will be taught by a trainer on a one-on-one basis for two weeks.

Within the three-month training period, one day is set aside to teach team building and how to handle people problems, and another to review mistakes made during the

course. Promotion to the job of trainer depends on the employee's aggressiveness.

The company offers a comprehensive range of courses for staff selection. They include knowledge of the food and beverage field as well as language and supervisory skills.

A crew member must successfully complete all the courses required to qualify for advancement.

"Because of the long working hours, it is not possible for most staff to take courses after work. Therefore, many courses are held during their rest hours between 3pm and 6pm," Mr Chiu said.

"The courses taught are voluntary and it is up to the staff to decide how many they want to attend. But the number of courses they complete is pegged to promotion.

"Young people care about their importance, so senior executives, including our chairman and general manager, always

HOW TO RETAIN STAFF

- Treat employees as clients and service their needs
- Organise activities for staff to relax and share fun with colleagues
- Provide learning opportunities and solid training to enhance employee career development
- Recognise staff's importance by arranging senior executives to directly communicate with them

communicate with them to address their needs. When problems occur, we counsel them," he said.

Mr Chiu said problems encountered by trainers were noted by management and considered for action during budget reviews. Seasonal meetings were also held for all staff to discuss company developments.

"All these policies help to retain staff and project a positive image for the company, strengthening our recruitment strategy and attracting more interested and ambitious people to join us," he said.

Like any Japanese work culture, Watami does not classify employees according to ranks. They are all treated on the same level and work as a team.

Another distinct feature of the company's culture is its policy of rarely terminating staff for wrongdoing or incompetence. Instead, the employee will be retrained until the individual is up to the required standard.



Sam Chiu says managing a young workforce calls for a different attitude. Photo: Jonathan Wong

QUICKFIXES

Q Several times we have hired people who could not keep up with the fast pace of the company. How can I recruit the right staff members?

A It is a straightforward process to find people with the right experience and skills, but it is far more difficult to assess their personalities and whether they have the right "fit" for your company.

The first step is to have a clear view of your company's culture. Often, employees cannot clearly articulate their company's culture and the values that management is trying to foster. Once you have defined the culture, you will have a better idea of the personality traits you are looking for.

A wide range of assessment tools are available to help you recruit the right staff. They provide information about candidates that may not be apparent from resumés or interviews.

In many cases it is not an issue of obtaining right or wrong answers, but of understanding how candidates will probably fit in.

Preference-based assessment is designed to help employers understand an individual's workplace and work style preferences, personality, energy and drive, and decision-making and social styles. This tool measures people's work preferences and not their abilities.

Motivational assessment tools provide insight into an individual's career motivation. What is the key motive behind a job application? Possibilities include money, interest, status and ambition.

Motivational assessments use a questionnaire to garner responses from the candidate to create a profile. Again, there are no right or wrong answers to these questions – the objective is to get a reading on candidates' reactions to certain circumstances and how they are likely to work in certain teams.

To obtain team buy-in for a potential new hire, many companies will ask team members to interview the candidate and provide feedback. The purpose of these interviews is not just to focus on the candidate's experience and skills, but to assess the candidate's working style. It is important to obtain feedback from the team on whether the candidate is the right hire. This will increase team spirit and help with the quick acceptance of a new team member.

The last step before making the offer to a new hire is to check references thoroughly with previous direct managers and peers. The purpose is to obtain feedback on the candidate's work experience and skills, and on working style and the preferred method of interacting with the team, other departments and managers.

Article contributed by Kency Sy on behalf of Hudson, which delivers specialised professional recruiting, outsourcing and human resource solutions worldwide