

Women in leadership positions can increase profits

According to the Grant Thornton International Business Report 2012, globally only 21% of women are in senior management positions. South Africa does better at 28%, but only 8% of local companies have a female CEO.

"The slow progress of women as leaders tends to be based on entrenched corporate practices and outdated gender stereotypes," says Sandra Burmeister, CEO of the Landelahn Recruitment Group. "As a result, men are frequently promoted on potential, while women are promoted on performance and hence advance more slowly. This can deprive the organisation of leadership talent, at a time when it is in short supply all over the world."

Research shows that diversity of leadership generates better company performance and increased profits. Women can bring a broader set of ideas to the table, leading to more innovative workplaces and better decision making. "Women tend to practise an inclusive style of leadership and value compassion and support," says Burmeister. "This has a positive impact on staff performance and achievements."

Transition training is critical

"In an economic crisis, women tend to come to the fore, since they are less likely than their male counterparts to take high risks. Generally less competitive, women may be less likely to show knee-jerk reactions in high-pressure situations."

"Companies can embark on accelerated career programmes to assist women to make transitions into higher level positions. Moving from an operational to a strategic position is a particularly difficult transition and it can't be rushed. Transition training and a formal coaching programme is critical, yet organisations tend to provide less rather than more support as women move up the leadership ladder," she continues.

"Actively providing opportunities for women, combined with formalised succession planning at all levels of the organisation can provide dividends. The provision of child care is an important element, as are flexible working hours, at this stage provided by only 39% of large corporates in South Africa."

Their own worst enemies

Burmeister believes that women themselves are frequently their own worst enemies. "Women can do a great deal to push back against outdated policies and practices and make the most of opportunities in the workplace."

"It's important for women to get better at building relationships. Connecting with influential people who can provide strategic advice is important in advancing your career. Build networks at the office as well as in your personal life. But keep your work and private life separate - at work and on the internet."

"A crucial element is finding a sponsor several levels above you who can act as a mentor, introduce you to the leadership network, recommend you for projects or promotions you may not otherwise have access to, so you can advance up the corporate ladder. It's also important to understand the politics of the organisation and your place in it. Women who get to the top understand how to pull the top team together and how to lobby for support," she concludes.