



Female headteachers - reflections on the glass ceiling

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The debate around why women are over-represented in teaching yet under-represented at headship or senior leadership level is not new. However, it is a real issue and now, more than at any other time, we need to confront it. We must reflect critically on what we can do to ensure that we enable the very best leaders, regardless of gender, to succeed in our schools.

In writing this I do so with the following beliefs:

1. Leadership matters – it is *the* determining factor in whether our schools succeed or fail, particularly in times of change and uncertainty.
2. Men and women lead differently – there is nothing wrong in stating this and there is no value judgement attached to it. Each is socialised and behaves differently but both have

strengths, so it is wrong that one is unintentionally excluded.

3. Effective leadership is, in my view, about understanding three things: people, influence and context. What limited research there is on female leadership tells us that these things are particular strengths for women, which makes the issue more pressing than ever. In the middle of an unprecedented period of turbulence in education we need the very best leaders at the helm. At the moment we are not utilising the skills of a group who have much to offer in such a climate – women – and we may find the journey more difficult as a result.

During my formative years in the education profession, I was privileged to be led by strong, positive female role models. It was natural for me to see women as leaders in education. I did not consider that my journey into headship would be any tougher than anyone else's and as far as I am aware it was not. Reflecting on this now, I know that my own role models subconsciously

inspired me to strive for leadership positions. Without them, the thought of becoming a principal would not have crossed my mind. For women who don't have these positive role models, the leadership journey is perceived to be a tough one – some find the thought of such a journey exciting, many however do not. Leadership, and headship in particular, are simply not on their radar because of this and that is potentially a great loss.

The education landscape has changed beyond recognition over the past 20 years and with it so too have the skills required of its leaders. In the current climate, and in the years that follow, these skills need to evolve yet further.

We are entering a six-year transition period as new accountability measures and a new curriculum are phased in. While the changes are potentially exciting, our system is vulnerable. Now more than ever we need the very best leaders to steer us. We cannot afford to inadvertently close the door on half of them.



Some research undertaken in this area points to women's significant leadership strengths. Indeed, Zenger and Folkman (2012), in a study of over 7000 leaders of both genders, found that women were rated better than men in 15 of 16 leadership traits, significantly so in 12 of them. Even in the traditionally male preserves of 'taking the initiative' and 'driving for results', women outscored men in this study. Sherwin (2014) has built further on this research, arguing that it is women's ability to self-reflect and work collaboratively that makes them most effective when they reach the age of 40.

We have a responsibility as education leaders – both men and women – to take such research seriously, reflect on it and commit to actively developing our female leaders. This is no easy task and

I offer no solution, just thoughts to start a debate. We must first acknowledge that a challenge exists, and then work consciously to ensure that there are no barriers for women in accepting an invitation to sit at the leadership table in our own schools.

Encourage confidence

We must find ways to help women exercise their 'confidence muscle' – it can be developed and we need to pay attention to it. I am not convinced that women lack confidence per se but rather that women do not feel as able to express their confidence as readily as men. As a result they are often reluctant to put themselves forward for opportunities – they may need to be encouraged to do so.

Tackle recruitment barriers

In our schools we should investigate whether there are any recruitment barriers for women and, if there are, we should commit to removing them. Those who make a decision not to apply for a post sometimes do so because they have a misguided perception of the hiring process, not because they don't think they can fulfil a role. Girls are generally socialised to 'follow the rules' and women will therefore follow the exact rules of the recruitment process, paying particular attention to the required qualifications. During the last century formal qualifications were a woman's ticket into the professional world, a way of proving she could do a job without having had experience of it. Women had no 'old boys' network' to rely on for a helping hand. Instead, argues Tara Mohr ►►

(2014), they put their faith in formal training – overestimating its importance.

Added to this, a McKinsey Report (2007) found that men are generally promoted on the basis of their perceived potential but women for their experience and track record. It is no wonder that women feel they have to prove themselves first. If they see this in their own workplace they will only apply for a post if they meet the qualifications in full. As a result women tend to remain in a post for longer – which leads to a perceived lack of drive or ambition. This may mean that they do not even make the long list.

Avoid discriminating against mothers

We need to ensure that our workplace systems enable mothers to succeed in leadership roles. Flexible working in schools is difficult to manage, no matter how much you want to accommodate a request. Education is not a ‘work from home’ profession and not a naturally flexible one so there is no easy solution to this and we often find ourselves having to say

no. We need to be prepared to be more creative. The same is true in achieving a work-life balance. This is a significant issue for teachers at the moment and is unlikely to go away. For working mothers it will be an even greater one.

Unintended consequences

Our senior team carry the burden of command and must act accordingly – that is why they are paid more and have more non-contact time – but how do we model our expectations of them? Do we insist on an early arrival for a morning briefing or a catch-up at the end of the day? What are the unintended consequences of this for some of our team? Are our expectations easier for some to meet than others, for reasons other than capability? When does the informal ‘power networking’ happen? Are all invited? We can inadvertently alienate some members of our team simply by how and when we hold our informal interactions.

Public speaking

Once at the table women face the challenge of public speaking. They are often interrupted (yes they are!) and also accused of being

aggressive or emotional when in fact they are being assertive and passionate (Sandberg and Grant 2014). They tend to stay silent for fear of a backlash and they believe, sometimes correctly, that having a lot to say counts against them, yet it gives men credibility when they do the same. All of this leads women to be reluctant to contribute publicly and as such it deprives teams of valuable ideas and suggestions. Make sure we offer women the floor.

Education is one of the most important functions of our society. It is critical that we have highly effective education leaders to ensure that this function is the best that it can be. We want our very best leaders at the fore. Many of these are women. As the number of headship vacancies increases and times become more turbulent, this becomes a national imperative. All of us should own the challenge of ensuring our female leaders take their place at the table.

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