

Ask Izzy



"We have a number of women in our company who are very good at what they do but who don't have the confidence or bravado of some of their male colleagues. What do you suggest to help them be more confident – very often they have great ideas but lack the presentation skills and influencing skills to put these forward.."

The latest series of The Apprentice has been fascinating: 5 people in the final round – 4 of whom were women - leaving 2 women to get "that job" with Siralan. One of the 4 spent the last 10 years out of the work market bringing up her children. After she was "fired" it was clear that what she lacked was *current* business experience and, more importantly, the *confidence and conviction* to carry her ideas through. And she's not alone.

Women are making progress in the workplace – but at a snail's pace. Take a look at the facts:

- It will take women *200 years* to be equally represented in Parliament at the current rate of progress.
- Women make up a mere *19%* of MPs in the UK, making it *70th* in the world equality rankings
- Women Directors represent only *11%* of Boards in the FTSE 100

A recent McKinsey study found that.... " ... company performance increases significantly once a certain critical mass is attained: namely at least three women on management committees for an average membership of 10 people." So there is a real business benefit to increasing the number of women at all levels of organisations.

So what's the problem? The pressures of home life? Another study showed that women spend an average of *4 hours and 30 minutes* a day on domestic tasks compared to 2 hours and 18 minutes for men. But maybe women are not helping themselves either.

Women are reluctant to assert themselves and promote their own performance. A European report showed that *70%* of women

rated their own performance as equivalent to that of their co-workers while *70%* of men rated themselves higher.

It's much harder for women to find mentors in the workplace and with such a lack of women in senior positions, far fewer role models to associate with.

In terms of "skills" or "techniques" there are, in my experience, a number of practical things you can do to help. Personal presentation, image and impact are extremely important. Knowing that you look your best gives an inner confidence that women often lack. Knowing how to walk into a room, how to take up your place at the Board table, how to maintain good eye contact, how to

be more charismatic and influence others are skills women need to learn and develop. You can run very effective short sessions – a couple of hours or a half day seminar. Focus first on the non verbal aspects – body language, posture, how people walk, eye contact, how we use space, gestures, facial expressions, handshakes, handling nerves and get women using these skills confidently.

Then look at personal image. Don't dismiss this as trivial or just a "Trinny and Suzannah jolly". Looking good is key to confidence and particularly for women who underestimate their potential. In half a day, you can teach women about best use of colour, what their body shape is and how to choose clothing styles to suit, how to accessorise properly, how to apply makeup and how to put a proper "business image" together. If you're worried about cost – get them to contribute to the session. I've used this approach many times – the company pays for my time and the women pay for their colour swatches and materials.

If budgets permit have an image consultant take them shopping. On one assignment I took a prospective parliamentary candidate (now an MP) to buy her campaign "capsule wardrobe". On a budget of £350 we created 5 different outfits – suitable for town, country and those awkward in between moments when you don't know what the weather's going to do. And she's still looking good 3 years on – only the other week she was on Question Time in one of the jackets we chose.

You can then move onto influencing and assertiveness skills. Work with a facilitator or trainer who can encourage individuals and get them practising the skills. Feedback, video playback and working in small groups means that participants feel secure and can try out new and different ways.

To suggest that the women in your organisation lack confidence or "underwhelm" their colleagues is a sensitive subject. If someone is already fragile, telling them they lack charisma isn't going to help. So be creative, position the training and development as part of a bigger initiative.

Try creating a different name – one client calls their programme "Developing Internal & External Client Relationships" – and there's a waiting list of delegates every time!

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