

CUBICLE FILES |

Women, stop hobbling yourselves

There's no reason why they can't climb the corporate ladder – all the way up to the boardroom

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LET'S face it: men still call the shots in many workplaces here.

Progress has inched in the right direction, but statistics are clear that women are still a minority when it comes to leadership in both the political and commercial sectors.

Earlier this week, the Diversity Action Committee announced that female representation on the boards of Singapore-listed companies increased to 9.5 per cent in 2015, up 0.7 percentage point from the previous year.

The improvement is heartening, but this still means that out of 10 people in a boardroom, only one voice is female.

Fundamental issues such as flexi-work practices and gender bias are serious points that need to be addressed, but sometimes, the biggest hurdles women face are themselves.

To honour International Women's Day on March 8, BT speaks to female leaders on some ways women hold themselves back in their careers, and how they can break through.

Self-belief

One of the most significant barriers that hinder women from climbing to the top is a lack of self-belief, says Trina Liang-Lin, managing director of Templebridge Investments and president of the Singapore Committee for UN Women.

This often leads to women keeping their heads low in the office when they should be speaking up, or simply drawing attention away from themselves when credit is due.

"Women, particularly Asian women, tend not to bring attention to their achievements," says Ms Liang-Lin.

"Trouble is, men rarely have this same problem. In competitive work environments where the bonus pool is finite, women can end up at the losing end."

To address this, she suggests that women highlight to bosses the good work they have done, particularly during performance reviews.

Keeping a record of the work done is very helpful in such discussions, she says.

Don't play nice

Studies have shown that there is a social penalty for female leaders at work.

The oft-most quoted one is a study done by Columbia Business School in 2003.

In the social experiment, a class was split exactly in half, with one half reviewing a case about a female entrepreneur called Heidi and the other half reviewing the exact same case, with only a change in gender and name to Howard.

The students were asked to poll their impressions of Heidi or Howard. It was then discovered that although both were rated equally competent, Howard was described as likeable, and Heidi described as

selfish and "not the type of person you want to hire or work for".

The study may have been done more than a decade ago, but Helen Duce, managing partner of GreenOcean Group, says that its point of a woman being liked less when she is successful is still relevant today.

As a result, without meaning to, women tend to "play nice" – such as toning down their words and actions at work – rather than risk offending anyone.

Julie Haw, managing director of Frosts Food and Beverage, observes that it is one way women hold themselves back.

"When they are younger, they often hold back expressing their opinions because they do not want to look too aggressive . . . and would rather win the Miss Congeniality award," she notes.

Ms Liang-Lin advises women not to focus too much on likeability as it is subjective.

She suggests that it is best to concentrate their energy on doing their job well, and not compromise on that.

"Firm but friendly manner is the best way to go (when it comes to dealing with people at work)," she says.

Support each other

For young women who are new to the workplace, one way that they can encourage each other is through support groups.

Ms Liang-Lin runs the "Lean In" chapter in Singapore – a global social movement started by Facebook COO Sheryl Sandberg – that meets frequently and consists of diverse women from different nationalities and professions.



'Oh, cool. Our CEO is female too.'

ILLUSTRATION: LUDWIG ILIO

Her group has met monthly for over three years and have mentored each other through career transitions, salary negotiations, job interviews, impossible bosses, and many other issues women face.

There are now 176 members in the Singapore chapter.

"It has been invaluable to all of us," Ms Duce says.

"We practise tough love – working together to set career goals and then holding each other accountable to attaining these."

Ms Liang-Lin suggests that leaders – both male and female – should take up a "sponsorship" position to actively invest in and promote women who do their jobs well.

This should be part of a leader's KPIs (key performance indicators), she says.

Expect nothing, do something

The journey to gender equality is a long and difficult one, but women here can start the change themselves, says Ms Haw.

"As long as you do not expect anyone to cut you any slack while trying to break barriers, most people will not go out of the way to stop you," she says.

Miss Haw recounts a discussion she had with a lady who was upset about how male colleagues would bond over drinks after office hours.

It was asked if the lady was not allowed to join them, and the answer to that was she could, but she did not want to as she wanted to go home to her kids.

Ms Haw says, perhaps controversially, that women should not expect the "rules of the game" to be rewritten.

"If informal bonding happens over drinks and you do not want to sacrifice family time, you cannot think it is a 'boy's club' and it is 'unfair,'" explains the wife and mother of two.

Ms Haw believes that there will be just as many men who are at drinks who secretly want to be having dinner with their families, but choose to stay out to network because they know it helps with their climb up the corporate ladder.

It is understandable if you have no choice but to rush home as a working mother, but she says it is a handicap you have to run the race with.

"However, to feel fulfilled in life, you don't have to go after the same trophy. That is what many women do – they choose to run a different race," she muses.

Miss Duce, however, believes that what is required is change at a social level, and not just at an individual level.

Real change can take place only when both men and women work together, she adds, citing the UN Women's "HeForShe" campaign, which aims to galvanise men to also play their part in the fight for gender equality.

Lastly, and most importantly, women must be prepared to work hard and be the best at what they do. "Not better than the guys – but as good as. This should be the foundation of your success," says Ms Duce.

It may not be enough to level the playing field, but she stresses that women should not give up, and instead "create the change we all want to see".