

GLASS CEILING AND A SHATTERING OF MYTHS



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however, is whether there are any issues that are specific to women in higher education management that cannot be dealt with in terms of general management forms of development.

The interest expressed in this group by women in itself seems to demonstrate that women managers do not feel that all their concerns are addressed through general management development and training. Over 80 women had expressed an interest in attending the meetings – 40 had attended the first and a further 20 had managed to make the second meeting. And as Professor Christine King, the dynamic organizer of the group, and newly appointed assistant director at Staffordshire Polytechnic, made clear, the group was set up only for those in positions of head of department and above – albeit covering both academic and non-academic posts. She considered that there were about a hundred such women who might be interested in belonging to the mailing list.

The aims of the newly formed group are widely drawn to encompass a range of interests and concerns and, in particular, to establish a formal network of contacts between women working in such senior levels in higher education. It is also intended to address issues of management development and culture, recognizing that as women enter the higher echelons of higher education management they move into a predominantly male world and may find themselves operating

in a radically different culture, with different perceptions and assumptions and excluded from all sorts of male networks.

On the assumption that women can and do bring clear and different skills to management such as, for example, working in teams, sharing credit, high social and interpersonal skills as well as the more traditional professional skills this needs to be communicated and developed. Another aim of the group, therefore, is to provide opportunities to monitor and share good practice and also to develop training in equal opportunities. In addition the group aims to encourage other women, through training and development to enter the world of educational management.

My own institution is no longer unique in that it is now not the only

polytechnic to be run by a woman. I gathered from the meeting that another polytechnic had just appointed a woman as its director. However, my institution does seem to remain relatively unusual, from the accounts at the meeting, of the rarity of many women at one institution in senior management positions.

We do not have any other women in the directorate, unlike some other polytechnics, who have either a female deputy or assistant director, but we do have two out of four deans who are women and a significant number of female heads of department. In my faculty, three out of six heads of department are women and we all have two female bosses – a female dean and a female director. My institution certainly does not feel particularly male dominated, although I do feel that the general ethos is of a traditional style male culture.

Our director has been particularly assiduous in trying to develop a new managerial culture to meet the challenges of the 1990s. I have just returned from our now annual heads of department conference. For me and several other heads, this was the fourth such annual meeting, the first being etched on our memories since it started on the day of the general election, three years ago. Each year we go away to a sort of retreat – a hotel in a town not too distant from London to think about the key policy issues and management questions for the year ahead. We have tried a range of resorts –

from Oxford to Bournemouth to Luton and back again to Bournemouth, this time to a slightly more salubrious hotel.

This one did not compare with the delights of our Oxford venue. However, the location is far from significant since we spend the whole of the full two-day event with a metaphorical towel over our heads in earnest discussion of issues, such as setting the budget for the next year, how to develop our links and courses with Europe, how to improve our course offer and quality to ensure excellent HMI ratings, and how to make and save money for the polytechnic.

It is a good way of ensuring our collective involvement in the key issues of managing the polytechnic. More important, perhaps, is the fact that it does build up a collective managerial culture – and I think we all begin to feel a tremendous collective responsibility for the future of the institution. It is particularly helpful because there are few or no other opportunities in the year for such a get together – formally speaking – and we are all spread about different sites of the polytechnic.

At one stage we did have a series of management training events which had a similar effect, albeit that they were very traditionally male forms of management development. The annual event is a most useful innovation given the fact that for the foreseeable future it is likely that change, if not expansion, growth and merger, are to be the constant issues of the 1990s in higher education. The one issue, though, that still needs to be addressed is how women as managers can address this, given that many if not a majority of our students in the 1990s are likely to be mature students and women at that.

A couple of weeks ago, I attended a most exciting meeting of women senior managers in higher education. I had not, unfortunately, been able to attend the inaugural meeting of the group because of pressures of work. I was determined to get to this meeting if I possibly could as I was keen to belong to such an intriguing new venture.

And so it proved to be. The organizers had thought of a most inventive name for the group – the Glass Ceiling – and had decided to stick with the name until a more formal one could be found. It seems to me that this name is entirely appropriate for a group of women managers especially in higher education where the possibilities for success and achievement are on occasion more apparent than entirely realistic.

Of course, a lot of that is now changing, as the membership of the group demonstrates. There are now a handful of women who are in the directorates of polytechnics, as well as senior academics and administrators in universities. But the current membership, perhaps rather curiously and somewhat sadly, of this Glass Ceiling group drew more from the traditional public sector of higher education than across the whole of higher education – and I gather there is a separate group of senior women academics in universities.

There are rather different concerns for women as managers in universities than in polytechnics and colleges. But increasingly it seems to me as funding practices in higher education change and become more and more market oriented and based upon student fees, the concerns across the whole sector of higher education will become similar. The main question,