

**WORKING AT SENIOR MANAGEMENT AND BOARD LEVELS:**

**SOME OF THE ISSUES FOR WOMEN**

by

Judi Marshall  
Professor of Organizational Behaviour  
Centre for Action Research in Professional Practice  
School of Management  
University of Bath  
Bath BA2 7AY, UK

email: [mnsjm@management.bath.ac.uk](mailto:mnsjm@management.bath.ac.uk)

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## **WORKING AT SENIOR MANAGEMENT AND BOARD LEVELS: SOME OF THE ISSUES FOR WOMEN**

### **Abstract**

This article draws on material from a qualitative research inquiry with women who had reached middle and senior level management positions and then left or contemplated leaving employment. It charts six dimensions of organizational life at senior levels, as experienced by these women. Issues of living in and seeking to be effective in 'male-dominated' organizational cultures predominate. Some of the challenges and pressures faced are reported, as are experiences of productive working relationships. This mapping offers a tentative framework for considering career, management and organizational development issues.

### **Introduction**

The material in this paper is drawn from a qualitative research inquiry with women who had reached middle and senior level management positions and had then decided to leave employment, been forced to leave or contemplated leaving but eventually stayed. Other publications give more preliminary details of this study (Marshall, 1991; Marshall, 1994). It will be described in full in a forthcoming book (mid 1995) with Routledge Press (Marshall, in press).

(It is important to note that by the end of the study most of the research participants had either re-entered employment or were self-employed.)

For this paper I shall focus on the experiences of twelve people who had worked at Chief Executive level (one), Director level (five - all Executive), as part of Senior Management Teams (four) or as senior managers (two). I shall collect together themes in their stories of life in senior management. This mapping of potentially significant issues is necessarily tentative for at least three reasons:

- i) it is an interim and selective analysis of a wider body of data;
- ii) most of the participants were describing environments which they had left or intended to leave rather than ones in which they wanted to continue working; and
- iii) the study was designed to explore why women left, not to document fully their experiences in post.

The data can, however, suggest some of the issues which senior women may currently address. In some cases gender - or perceptions of people as 'different' from the prevailing norm - appears to be a significant factor, but this is not always the case. Some of the factors are, therefore, likely to affect women or men.

The people discussed here ranged in age from mid thirties to early fifties, with a slight concentration in the early to mid forties. They came from various employment sectors

(local government, service industries, health-care, financial services, electronics and construction) and from various occupational areas (general management, nursing, organizational development, personnel (four) and public relations. Approximately three quarters were married or living with partners; and a quarter were single or divorced. Half had children, all of whom were late teenage or older.

### **Themes in women's stories about life at senior levels**

The themes emerging from the data can be portrayed as bipolar dimensions. The study participants generally had more to say about the pressures of operating at senior levels than about the delights. But the dimensions can be seen as mapping a range of possibilities. Whilst the array is doubtless incomplete and open to development, it provides a tentative frame for considering career, management and organizational development issues.

#### **Relating to other powerful people: friction and bullying vs generative relationships**

Participants discussed their relationships with other powerful people, particularly Chief Executives and Chairmen, almost all of whom were men, in some detail. Many of these people were reported as difficult to work with, engaging in power-plays and personality conflicts. Some behaved in bullying ways to men and women alike. This behaviour was accentuated if they were newly appointed and targeting people of the old regime to leave. Several women interviewees thought that they had felt more undermined by this behaviour than their male colleagues had seemed to. One looked back and realised that the attacks she thought were personal were more because her 'face didn't fit', the new Chief Executive wanted to put his own team in place. Sometimes, however, the hostility does seem to have been directed at women, from men who were seen as unable to cope with senior women, who openly stated that women are unsuited to the business world or who preferred working with men.

Several women talked about bullying and hostility as characteristic of relationships at these management levels. Others described apparently amicable exchanges which later appeared patronising or deceptive because they were not then affirmed in public. Several women felt placed in especially difficult circumstances early in their time with their organizations. They were recruited by people who soon left, leaving them feeling 'orphaned'. This put their right to position in potential doubt; their new bosses may not have chosen to work with a woman.

Often these underlying tensions made their relationships with their bosses and colleagues difficult to manage. Some women felt silenced, on guard or forced into a position of continual fight. A few thought there were unspoken hints of sexuality involved. The systemic tensions often became personalised in the particular relationship between male boss and female subordinate.

In contrast to the above picture a few women talked about Chief Executives who were 'great', 'on the same wavelength', or held no prejudices against women. They enjoyed working with such people, felt both comfortable and stretched to achieve the complex objectives of their roles. Established sound relationships could be placed in jeopardy, however, if the organization was bought out by another company. Two of the women interviewed had found their bases of credibility and power severely undermined when this happened.

## **Isolation and being tested out in aggressive, male-dominated cultures vs diversity and potential relationships**

Participants discussed this theme at great length and with relatively widespread consistency. In the space available I shall therefore provide a summary.

Most of the managers had become more aware of organizations as 'male-dominated' when they entered senior management. By this they meant descriptively that there were few women at these levels, but also that interactions tended to fit negative stereotypes of men's behaviour and that there was considerable evidence of men banding together in reacting to individual women.

Interpersonal behaviour at Board and senior levels was described as often very aggressive, rude and hostile, with conflict, personality clashes and politicking as common features. Consciousness of hierarchic power prevailed. People used various phrases - such as 'an atmosphere of potential punishment and fear' and 'the rough play of big boys' - to describe behaviours with which they were uncomfortable and which they saw as highly ineffective organizationally. Some research participants were disappointed that senior managers seemed to them inadequate, ordinary men in big jobs, or childish (acting like young teenage boys); this had undermined their aspirations to advance further themselves.

Some participants found that strong relationships of respect within their own departments acted as counters to the more hostile terrain of senior management. Others felt separated from people below them, as the latter became more guarded in their attitudes, and so lost the sense of team they had enjoyed at earlier career stages.

In such environments the women often felt isolated and alone. Several seemed different in too many ways to their colleagues (for example being a woman *and* nurse, or in personnel, a woman, young *and* from Head Office) to build strong relationships. Several spoke about the 'sense of kin' men seemed to maintain even when they were fighting each other. Several reported how entering executive dining rooms, which until their appearance had been men-only, had seemed a testing out of the culture. In one case permission had been sought to allow the woman to enter, in others conversation had stopped or become stilted. These women felt they had interrupted 'normal life' for the men involved and that there was no willingness to develop a culture in which they could be more equally included.

Many of the women reported being tested out in these cultures. They were in the spotlight, judged against gender stereotypes. People seemed to step back and see how (or if) they would manage without support. Sometimes issues were inappropriately personalised and the manager would feel under attack. One described meetings she chaired as opportunities for people to 'bait' her rather than being debates. People tried to trip them up, setting traps. One woman was sexually harassed by her immediate boss.

The interviewees felt that men had often banded together, bypassed them in communication, or publicly blocked initiatives to which they had agreed in private. Performing effectively was thus made more difficult. Sometimes an early supporter or mentor had drawn back at this stage of the woman's career, accentuating her sense of isolation. How to relate to women in cultures which may contain many habits of male bonding is a challenge for individual men. The interviewees gave the impression that most senior men kept communication with them at a relatively superficial level, that very few reached out to form relationships.

It seemed that the men with whom these women were now dealing had no positive or suitably powerful images of women to draw on. They could not treat fellow Directors or senior managers as secretaries. One research participant said that she had been the one management woman they could not recognise as she was not 'a flirty tart, bitter spinster' and so on. A few women felt that people would know them more for their physical appearance or attractiveness than for their competence, and that this undermined their professional position. Some became confidantes or counsellors to senior men. But such roles have their complications. The men involved can be wary of the power the women subsequently have to make them vulnerable; the women can feel used.

How to exert power can become a double challenge. One interviewee explained how she had tried to realise the power in a somewhat elusive personnel role and at the same time not be seen to be threatening men (who in her experience then became defensive). The managers therefore faced the dilemma of how 'outspoken' they could risk being, especially in ways which could be interpreted as gender-related, in these environments. How they resolved this dilemma seemed likely to affect their further career opportunities.

As they dealt with such 'male-dominated' environments the women reported becoming tougher, more astute, more aware of how to protect themselves. But some also regretted the hardening of self this involved.

Above I have portrayed the weight of the dominant picture from my data on this dimension. A few managers did report different experiences: one of a pleasant atmosphere amongst Board members in her new company which was a welcome relief from her earlier experiences; another of diversity amongst senior men which meant more potential interests in common, a freer building of alliances; and several of strong relationships with male allies or colleagues.

### **Relating to other women: separation vs relationship**

The research participants' relationships with other women were also sometimes strained. Some reported hostility from women lower down the organization, against which they had learnt to defend themselves. Some interviewees had not related to other women at earlier stages of their career and so had no available support of this kind when they later became isolated. Several commented that - contrary to popular belief - other women are not necessarily instant allies, or people with whom they will have an affinity. There were sometimes tensions with the few other women at their organizational level, each of whom had developed individual ways of managing themselves in male-dominated cultures. Interviewees gave examples of feeling uncomfortable and undermined by being in the same team as women who were 'over-adaptive' or used a sexualised self-presentation. A few interviewees had felt particularly wounded at how women they felt were allies had pulled away from them or failed to give them support when they met difficulties.

Some people did have very supportive relationships with other women, mostly outside their own organizations. These networks of friends were highly significant reference groups for discussing career aspirations and work challenges, and gaining a more distanced perspective on them. One participant has now moved to a company which has more women at senior levels and feels this is associated with a generally more open, and pleasant, culture.

### **Operating as change agents: isolated battles vs power and alliances**

Almost all of the women I interviewed had been change agents in one form or another in their organizations. Most had been appointed to these roles. A few had been 'self-appointed', trying to help the organization understand and address fundamental conflicts or issues, and using the discretion available in their positions as influence.

Most people had been successful in their change intentions. Change had been particularly effective when there had been organizational readiness and support, when the research participants were placed centrally in relation to power, and when their visions and styles were congruent with their organizational contexts. In some cases changes had been introduced covertly, so that prevailing culture norms were not overtly challenged. In others change was supported because its benefits were visible and acknowledged.

Four people, however, became involved in less propitious circumstances. Their roles eventually proved difficult and were major contributing factors in their leaving. These women had been involved in initiatives which had been welcomed by some groups but had also been seen as potentially threatening to the established culture by significant power-holders. A recurrent theme in these managers' stories was of spear-heading change which was contentious and contested, and of receiving limited support from their Chief Executives or colleagues. Often the overall change initiative seemed ill-founded or weak. The woman appeared as the official figurehead of change, but seemed in a compromised and therefore vulnerable power position. Typically they would be supported in private, but not in public, despite their requests for more backing. One woman talked about repeatedly feeling that she was 'being hung out to dry' in public meetings: 'I had a lot of support, but always covert. They would never openly come up front.' Another spoke of going off to address difficult issues and 'coming back bleeding'. Another theme in these stories was how the authority given to the interviewees made them women 'out of place', too powerful officially for some male colleagues to accept.

In these cases the change initiatives seemed to be having effects, but there was then a mobilisation of resistance by men whose power was therefore threatened. One interviewee described how her initial allies had then withdrawn, losing faith in the potential culture change. She therefore felt doubly abandoned. Often it was this withdrawal by the groups on whose behalf they had been operating which seemed particularly wounding.

This material reveals factors which enhance or undermine the potential effectiveness of people taking on change roles, and suggests that gender issues can sometimes play a part in change dynamics.

### **Experiencing constraints vs enjoying power and influence**

It is little surprise that research participants had enjoyed positions in which they had direct power and influence and felt able to use these freely. They gave examples of their achievements and professional development in such situations. The factors above obviously often restricted their freedom and potential impact. Another way in which their power had been undermined had been by coping with anomalous organizational positions. For example, a few were left in unclear authority relations vis a vis predecessors so that male members of staff's feelings 'would not be hurt'.

Two interviewees were able to look back on leaving their posts as Directors, doing other things for a while and then being head-hunted into Chief Executive posts. They much preferred the latter to being Directors. They felt they had been chosen for who they were, that they did not have to adapt or be on guard, and that they then had a mandate to pursue their vision of organizational life.

### **Managing self: isolation in hostile environments vs alliances and support**

An issue discussed by all research participants was how to manage and maintain themselves in the challenging environments described above. Many experienced tiredness and stress. These resulted less from their demanding senior roles and more from managing themselves and the images they presented as women in male-dominated environments, and from avoiding the minefield of negative stereotypes available to them. Some felt their senses of self and integrity were threatened as a consequence.

Participants varied in their strategies for managing these situations. Some emphasised their professionalism, and so were able to judge how well they thought they were performing even when no-one else was affirming them. Some deliberately did not play politics. This was usually because they held a vision of a different organizational possibility, a culture of openness and mutual respect. But it was also sometimes because their isolation in the male-dominated culture meant that they did not feel men were available for them to build political alliances with, they were not colleagues in this way. When the women tried this strategy their attempts would either be rebuffed or apparent private agreements would be contradicted in public settings.

Some other participants had developed political strategies of their own, mainly by creating networks and alliances. One, for example, built an image and credibility outside her organization to compensate for, and subsequently improve, her initially weak internal position. Another found her networking approach usually highly effective as a way of pursuing change without placing herself in the direct line of fire. Just occasionally, however, her willingness to respect different parties' viewpoints left her caught in the middle of conflict, a 'collector' for the emotions involved.

Most research participants looked for support outside work to compensate for lack of support inside. More than half, however, described themselves as over-working and over-committed. They had little life outside their jobs to provide the balance and sense of perspective they needed. For some, additional tension - and ultimately opportunity - came from reviewing their lives and values in mid-life and wanting to change and experiment. They did not feel that their organizations had room either for their change processes or for their potentially renewed selves. For several this lack of space and licence was a major factor in their decisions to leave.

### **In conclusion**

This material provides insights into some of the potential issues for senior women managers. It must be treated with caution for the reasons given in the Introduction. It does, however, suggest that creating a viable and self-congruent identity and finding ways to exercise power are significant challenges for many women. Their right to membership is not yet firmly or widely established at senior management and Board levels. It seems that the dilemmas of how adaptive to the prevailing culture to be, and how much to work for its transformation into more open, diversity-inclusive forms, face women anew as they reach these apparent landmarks of career success.

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