

December 4, 2006

CANADIAN HR REPORTER

NEWS 7

Emphasizing soft skills helps women climb ranks

BY SHANNON KLIE

TO ENSURE softer leadership skills are given equal weight in selection of senior management positions, and thus ensure more women are in these positions, organizations need to do more than include these skills in recruitment criteria, according to a researcher from Wales.

"Recruiters can disregard the criteria, and unless very strong steps are taken to ensure that won't happen, one should assume that it will happen," said Gloria Moss, a research fellow at the University of Glamorgan's Business School.

Moss, along with colleagues Lyn Dauntun and Roz Gasper, studied the recruitment practices of two public-sector organizations in South Wales, each with about 2,000 employees.

They examined the use of transactional leadership styles (which focuses on control and pointing out faults instead of strengths and identified by research as being favoured by men) and transformational leadership styles (which focuses on co-operation, teamwork

and individual consideration and identified by research as being favoured by women) in job selection.

At the first organization, even though there was a clear recruitment policy that valued both transactional and transformational styles of leadership, recruiters often ignored the transformational criteria.

"Even though the recruitment criteria were written on paper in largely transformational terms, the recruiters were falling back on what they felt comfortable with, which was transactional," said Moss.

The attitudes of these recruiters were apparent in how they talked about the managerial competencies they sought in a successful candidate. In the study, *The Positive Impact of Selection Criteria on Leadership Diversity*, one recruiter was quoted as saying, "Need to see how the guy would get on with other senior managers," while another said "We may be looking for someone with harder skills." Consequently, only 17 per cent of senior level positions were filled by women.

At the second organization, which had anchored the transformational criteria in its HR procedures, this ratio jumped to 47 per cent.

"It wasn't that (the transformational criteria) turned up one day in the recruitment criteria," said Moss. "(Managers) were trained in the benefits of these

Despite the criteria, recruiters were falling back on what they were comfortable with: study

leadership skills."

The organization introduced a new leadership initiative in 2004, one year before the study was conducted, and anchored valued leadership criteria into all parts of the recruitment process, from the job posting to the short-list interview, said Moss.

Also, interview questions were prepared in advance so recruiters had less of a chance to deviate from the policy, as those in the first organization did.

In other studies, transformational leadership plus contin-

gent reward (rewarding employees for results) has been shown to increase productivity by 20 per cent, said Moss. Studies also found this type of leadership is the kind typically practiced by women, she added.

Women leaders also affect profits. A study, *The Bottom Line*, by New York-based research and advisory group Catalyst, found companies with the highest representation of women on the senior management team had a 35-per-cent higher return on equity than those with the lowest representation.

While Deborah Gillis, presi-

And it is these stereotypes that present barriers to women's advancement, according to a study conducted by Catalyst.

The 2005 study, *Women Take Care, Men Take Charge*, found both men and women believe women are better at caretaking skills, such as supporting and rewarding, while men are better at taking charge skills, such as influencing superiors and delegating responsibility.

One difference in perception was women believe they are good problem solvers, while men believe women are poor problem solvers.

Many of these "take charge" skills are considered essential for executive leadership positions, and if women are perceived as lacking in these areas, then their chances of getting promoted lessen.

Organizations need to educate managers and executives about the prevalence and harm of these stereotypes, said Gillis.

"It starts with the buy-in and commitment from the senior leadership in the organization to communicate a message about the important contribution of women to the bottom line," she said. "It requires changes in practices such as succession planning and recruitment and performance evaluation within organizations so they're designed in a way that those stereotypes are removed."