



OPINION



SUBSCRIBE | LOG IN



<http://www.businesstimes.com.sg/opinion/collective-will-needed-to-clear-womens-path-to-leadership>

COMMENTARY

Collective will needed to clear women's path to leadership

🕒 WED, MAY 29, 2019 - 5:50 AM

MARN WONG
FOO MAW-DER

WHAT gives when a working woman in Singapore has difficulty juggling personal well-being, career, friends and family? It seems that "women are putting family first and themselves last", said the 2019 Cigna 360 Well-Being Survey.

The survey also found that Singaporean women are less able to manage stress and that a larger number feel that they work in an "always on" corporate culture compared with their male counterparts.

The pressure on women at work has longer-term ramifications for economic competitiveness. Already, women are under-represented among the senior echelons of management. If they continue to find it a struggle to meet competing demands, this situation can only get worse. This will impact negatively on organisational success, as a diverse leadership contributes to better decision-making and business strategies and is the best line of organisational defence against group-think.

A recent study published by the Human Capital Leadership Institute (HCLI) identified "Burdened Me" - the tussle between work and women's traditional familial role - as a major barrier to their career advancement. The study gleaned insights from interviews with 30 Singapore-based female executives working in multinational corporations, from the most senior to middle-management levels, across a range of industries.

Burdened women are more likely to turn down overseas assignments, which are crucial for career growth. Those who take time away from work to raise their family face challenges in reintegrating into the workforce and find that their career has stagnated. Some feel guilty about not spending enough time with their family and volitionally stop climbing the corporate ladder midway or step off altogether. This is particularly so if they perceive that their organisations are unsupportive and expect to be penalised if they draw on pro-family policies.

SEE ALSO: Singapore has highest rate of discrepancies in job applications in Asia-Pacific: study

ADVERTISEMENT



Burdened women are also both less motivated and have less time to attend after-work networking functions, which adds to their difficulty in surmounting yet another major roadblock to their career progression.

The HCLI study has termed this "Isolated Me". Women, unlike men, often lack a concerted strategy in building their professional networks. They tend to leave networking opportunities to chance, but this is not enough.

HARD WORK ALONE NOT ENOUGH

"Hard work alone is not going to get one to a senior management role. It is important to establish one's networks to build up influence, gain invaluable intelligence and to develop the confidence to navigate the dynamics associated with a senior role. You need to be hardworking and have a good network. " - This was the forceful remark of a C-suite executive of an international property group in one of the interviews.

What can working women do to cross the hurdles posed by burden and isolation? For one, they can set clear boundaries between work and family. They should not be worried about letting their colleagues know that certain times of the day or week are out of bounds. They can also initiate candid conversations with their managers on how to use pro-family policies in the organisation such as flexi-arrangements without negatively affecting work flow. They can be more vocal in requesting for customised wellness programmes.

To increase their corporate visibility, women can assist in the organisation's events or sit on task forces. They can up their political savvy by knowing who the influencers are in their organisations and get their buy-in to get things done. They should also expand their networks by joining groups and events beyond their workplace. This will enable them to keep up with broader developments and ideas that might be useful for their projects.

Recognising that the support and experiences from fellow women are particularly relevant, the Nanyang Business School has a quarterly "NBS Women Series" where alumnae share how they became leaders in their industries.

Women helping themselves is half the story. Organisations must do their part too. Those that already have a pro-family stance can review and refine their policies and execute these well, to counter any impression that they are just paying lip service. Many more can look to the examples of organisations that have received accolades for being family-friendly and supportive of female employees, such as DBS Bank, K K Women's and Children's Hospital, OCBC Bank and Procter & Gamble. Some of the measures that these organisations have implemented include flexible work arrangements and employee support schemes tailored to women at different stages of their lives, and in-house childcare facilities.

To develop female talent, a long-term view is required in an organisation's approach to promotion and career development. Executives who go on maternity leave can be rotated out of their existing roles and placed back on the leadership track when they return. Instead of mandatory overseas postings, similar competencies can be built through

alternatives such as short overseas assignments or remotely managing multi-country work teams. Organisations should focus on overall competencies, leadership qualities and performance as the basis for promotion.

Channels for early- to mid-career women to get stronger support at work and forge closer connections with senior management can be created through mentoring programmes and arranging for them to present their projects to top executives. Organisations can also systematically plan networking events that allow women to interact with senior management.

Another essential form of support that organisations can offer to working women in an always-on culture is mindfulness training. Mindfulness training has gained great traction in both the private and public sectors over the last few years in the US, Europe, Australia and New Zealand but as yet does not seem widespread among organisations in Singapore.

Mindfulness practice - by enabling the cultivation of a more focused, calm and clear mind - has been shown by neuroscience and a growing number of research studies to enhance wellbeing and performance, not only at the personal but also the interpersonal and organisational levels.

TALENT-SCARCE SINGAPORE

In a talent-scarce economy like Singapore's, it is imperative to harness the full contribution of women to the workforce and at the same time not compromise on their other fulfilments in life. Various solutions, drawn from both the HCLI study and our experiences, are suggested above. If working women remain burdened and isolated, it will not be for a lack of ways but rather, for a lack of will. For both individuals and organisations, it is time to take an immediate, concrete step towards establishing a smoother pathway to leadership for women.

- **Marn Wong is senior consultant and trainer at Potential Project. She was formerly an assistant professor and assistant dean at National University of Singapore.**
Foo Maw-Der is an associate professor at Nanyang Business School, Nanyang Technological University. The HCLI study was co-authored with Don J Q Chen from HCLI and Amy Ou, Angeline Lim and Yang Guo from NUS.

WOMEN EMPOWERMENT WORK SINGAPORE