Positive Psychology – How to Build Your Signature Strengths

Women & Leadership: Inspiration and Empowerment Conference

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Setting the Scene

・Review the relevant context for women in leadership
・Share some recent research findings
・Handover to Dr Suzy Green for Strengths in detail
Key Assumption 1

- You understand the business case - this is an opportunity to realise the talent of the entire organisation

- Over representation of men in senior roles/under representation of women (the 90/10 challenge)
Key Assumption 2

- You recognise it’s about inclusive leadership

- Inclusion is “truly valuing different perspectives, and establishing environments where everyone can contribute authentically without leaving “parts of themselves” at home” Adapted from April and Shockley (2007)

- Inclusive workplaces outperform others
Key Assumption 3

- You recognise that sustainable change requires both strategic and individual change
- You are aware and may be part of organisational initiatives designed to encourage and support a better balance:
  - Executive team sponsorship
  - Gender audits
  - Review of recruitment and promotion processes
  - Workplace training programs
  - Voluntary targets and so much more
Individual Strengths

- Strengths focus on what’s right with people – rather than their deficits
- They refer to your natural talents and apply to everyone!
- Do you have the opportunity to do what you do best everyday?
- Gallup research shows that having a manager who focuses on your strengths means that you have less than 1% likelihood of being disengaged in your job
“I’m wondering whether part of our issue is stuff that’s really quite deep and we can go to (courses on) how to speak calmly, lower your tone of voice, till the cows come home. But if you’re not dealing with that inner stuff, you’re definitely walking up hill” (PB)
And these?

“When I took on this senior role, this is where I had the debate (with myself): Do I have to change my essential self to be successful?” (P1)

“I knew I could do things well but I certainly didn’t think that I would be persuasive enough to actually have people want to follow my lead and to abide by the decisions that I made. It’s an interesting process of self discovery” (P2)
New Research

• Qualitative research project
• Sponsored by the Institute of Coaching, Harvard University/McLean Hospital, Boston
• Series of in-depth interviews with 11 senior women who had worked with an executive coach
• Industries: IT, Hospitality, Law, Finance, Pharmaceutical, TV and Media
• Applied a recognised research methodology

Key Objective:

Provide a deeper insight into the professional development needs of senior women
Key Finding:

Constructing their professional identity was a core theme across all interviews:

- Defined as: “the attributes, beliefs, values, motives, and experiences in terms of which people define themselves in a professional role” (Ibarra et al 2008 p.4).
- Includes the importance of the organisations social context and answers the question: who am I at work?
- Researchers have found that having a clear and consistent professional identity is fundamental to career success (Dutton et al 2010, Ibarra 1999)
Professional Identity

“I think one of the biggest things has been developing my sense of self. I have a pretty good idea of who I am personally but developing my professional self has been a really interesting exercise” (P4)

· Research confirms this process unfolds over our entire career
· Process of moving from a ‘way of doing’ to a ‘way of being’ at work
· How can I bring more of myself to work?
Potential Derailers

- Navigating male dominated organisational cultures – “the glass labyrinth”
- Life, family and home issues
- Embedded institutional mindsets - “gendered roles”
- Self limiting beliefs
How is Professional Identity Developed?

- Having a well defined professional identity is a strength
- Process of ongoing reflection and feedback
- 4 key facilitating factors for constructing a professional identity
1. Social Resource Strategy

*Kaleidoscope* of Role Models, Sponsors, Peer support, Guiding Figures

Strategies employed included:

- Translating behaviours from both genders
- Imitation
- Adaptation & provisional selves

**Benefit:**

Wider repertoire of behaviours and skills to choose from
2. Confidence in Leading

- Questioning leadership abilities (not abilities to do the job)
- Proactively sought leadership opportunities: project leads, committee leads

**Benefit:**

*Build greater self efficacy through doing and consciously reflecting on these activities*
3. Personal Motivation

Belonging: Is this environment supportive of me – including my peers and superiors? Do my values fit?

Competence: Is the role meaningful and challenging enough?

Autonomy: What are my career possibilities? What are my choices?

Benefits:

Perseverance with the ups and downs of work! Increased resilience and motivation
4. Being Authentic

• Authenticity means knowing who you are, having a sense of being true to yourself at work

• It includes understanding your personal strengths, playing to your these and taking pride in delivering results by being yourself

“I think playing to our strengths makes the difference. I’m pretty passionate about that being the better way to go rather than trying to fit in too much with the traditional male way of doing things. I don’t think you should try and play by the male rules” (PS)

Benefit: Increase positive feelings of self worth and enhanced wellbeing
Have you...

- Clarified your own, unique professional identity?
- Put strategies in place to help you develop and refine this?

“The thing that rings true to me is about women deciding on what they want and deciding they want to be a leader - that is probably the biggest thing of all.” (P11)

- How can your organisation support your professional identity development?
Summary: Leverage your Strengths

- A clear and consistent professional identity helps to ensure long term career success.
- Having a social resource strategy, exposure to a variety of leadership experiences, a (psychologically) supportive environment and an authentic approach to your work will help you to build and finesse this.
- Developing your professional identity using all of your personal strengths is a great way to showcase who you are!
Thank You

“She discovered that she was the one she’d been waiting for” (K. Yamada 2006)

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