



## Accelerating Difference

### Overview

Gender balance is not easily achieved in most organisations, and the causes of imbalance are complex and manifold. This case study shares the approach taken by GSK to improve the gender balance in their Senior roles, by systematically engaging female Leaders, their Line Managers, their Sponsors and the organisation's Executives.

### Challenge

GSK, a global organisation with operations in over 100 countries, required a strong, diverse talent pipeline to take on senior leadership roles. Several studies had shown that having a diverse organisation was good for business, bringing better quality decisions through diversity of thought, experience and style, greater innovation, and a more balanced approach to risk. Companies in the top quartile of executive board diversity report higher earnings before interest and tax (EBIT) than those with less board diversity (McKinsey, 2012). BCG's diversity and innovation survey (2017) showed companies with below-average diversity scores reported an average revenue from innovation of 26%, compared with companies with above-average diversity scores, who reported an average of 45% of revenue from innovation. And reports from a survey conducted by Pew Research Centre (2015) listed several areas where women were stronger in areas of both politics and business. Specifically, women were rated 34% better at working out compromises, 34% more likely to be honest and ethical, 25% more likely to stand up for their beliefs, 30% more likely to provide fair pay and benefits, and 25% better at mentoring.

Whilst 45% of GSK's Leaders were female, and they ranked third in the FTSE 100 for 'women on boards,' most of their 'women leaders' were in junior to mid-level management jobs. Women 'dropped off' the career ladder in large numbers at specific points, meaning less women were reaching the upper echelons of leadership than men. This appeared to be disproportionate to what was known about women's ambitions for leadership. (McKinsey's 2012 "Women Matter" report stated that 81% of men, and similarly 79% of women, 'agreed' or 'strongly agreed' that, over the course of their career, they had a desire to reach a top management position)

In endeavouring to understand these issues, the Leadership Development team at GSK reviewed academic research and conducted significant external consultation with specialists in management consultancies, business schools and other organisations. They also conducted internal focus groups and informal interviews.

Their research confirmed that women entered the workforce in roughly equal numbers to men, and with the same degree of ambition. So, they wanted to discover what was preventing women being appointed to GSK's senior roles. Their research surfaced possible reasons for this, ranging from the management of competing personal and professional demands and inflexible work practices through to the perceptions of senior roles being seen as 'an extreme sport' and 'lacking in flexibility.' Additionally, even though GSK had 'best in class' Human Resources policies around flexible working, women felt that taking time out –

whether for a career break, maternity leave or caring responsibilities – had a detrimental effect on their career progression as it signalled a lack of commitment on their part.

It became clear that gender diversity could not be addressed effectively by focusing purely on women in their workforce. (Multi-year data from their United States Women's Leadership Programme supported this position.) The challenge was complex, systemic and political. It would require a comprehensive response, beyond a typical women's leadership development programme (for which there was no appetite).

Women were making choices and trade-offs about their career progression, and GSK needed, not only find out why, but to find a systemic solution. So they redefined the problem, from being focused on gender and diversity to being focussed on talent optimisation. The proposed response was evidence-based, innovative, pragmatic and business focused. This enabled them to position the challenge, with senior stakeholders and executive teams, as a strategic business issue. In this context they were able to position gender balance as business critical, rather than simply 'nice to do.' And the Presidents of three divisions were keen to implement the proposed solution, responding to the business case for improved performance, profitability and talent management.

## Approach

The Leadership Development team believed a holistic approach – involving female Leaders, their Line Managers, the incumbent Senior Leaders and the broader working environment in GSK – was required. The solution needed to be systemic and sophisticated enough to deal with the inherent complexities of working in multiple countries with different cultural norms surrounding gender. The solution designed, called "Accelerating Difference," comprised three elements:

- Individual and group coaching for female Leaders
- Effective sponsorship for female Leaders
- Hosting innovative dialogue sessions focused on the underlying assumptions between men and women about careers at GSK

### Individual and Group Coaching

A cohort of 118 female Leaders were identified to Participate in the Accelerating Difference Programme. Each Participant had 12 individual and six group coaching sessions. Coaching objectives were identified following a self-assessment and feedback tool called Prism. Objectives for the sessions were agreed by the Participant and their Line Manager, in a tripartite meeting with the Coach.

The individual coaching was tailored to each female Leader, while the group coaching was designed to give Participants the opportunity to build networks, share experiences and develop themselves. Specific areas were identified as being particularly important to female Leaders, and these were addressed. Topics included: self-confidence, self-belief and self-esteem; power, presence and impact; working with conflict, and developing leadership brand and influencing the wider system.

Individual coaching commonly supports the development of self-efficacy – areas such as self-confidence, self-reliance and assertiveness (Leimon, Moscovici & Goodier, 2011). Group coaching, as a communal mechanism, more typically supports development through relationships and interactions with others (Kets de Vries, 2014). The complementarity of the individual and group coaching used on this Programme was innovative.

Tripartite meetings were also held in the middle and at the end of the coaching. Together the Coach, Participant and their Line Manager assessed progress and agreed future development goals. This ensured ongoing engagement from Line Managers.

Evaluation of the Programme, by Participants and Line Managers was built in and covered development achieved, career progress made, and aspects of leadership capability enhanced.

## Sponsorship

Each female (Participant) had a sponsor who played a crucial role in 'pulling them through' the organisation. Sponsors were expected to:

- Advocate for the Participant's next opportunity or career move
- Challenge their thinking and give constructive feedback on skill/experience gaps
- Make connections and introductions to other senior Leaders and key stakeholders
- Positively challenge the Participant's perception of what they could achieve

After the Programme commenced, a key learning for the Leadership Development team, who were facilitating the Programme, was to support Sponsors and Line Managers to sensitise them to the feelings and perceptions of female Leaders in GSK. This was done by including these individuals (usually men) in a Dialogue (see below).

## Dialogues

Dialogues were powerful facilitated conversations, that took place over two half-days, back to back, during which guests were invited to disclose their assumptions and beliefs about careers in GSK. Typically, six men and six women were invited to each Dialogue.

Dialogues were designed to encourage Leaders to be changed by the conversations and disclosures. The desired outcome was not a list of actions but awareness, enabling guests to perceive their potential personal biases.

The implementation of Dialogues was seen internally as innovative and edgy, as they had the potential to unlock issues that had previously not been spoken about openly. Initial concerns – that they posed a risk to the organisation – disappeared after the first one occurred.

## Outcome

### Career Progression

A quantitative analysis of career progression of the female Leaders who participated in the Accelerating Difference Programme, showed:

- 21% were promoted to a higher grade
- 22% were allocated extra responsibilities
- 13% made a developmental move
- 39% remained in the same role
- 2% left GSK
- 3% were on maternity leave when the evaluation was conducted

## Coaching

Both the quantitative and qualitative survey data from Participants were positive, with the majority of Participants feeling their performance and their confidence improved, enabling real progression.

Survey Question To what extent...	To a very great extent	To a great extent	To a moderate extent	To a small extent	Not at all
...did you achieve your defined coaching objectives?	28%	50%	18%	2%	2%
... has your individual coaching experience been effective?	56%	32%	10%	0%	2%
... did you find the group coaching experience valuable?	48%	36%	10%	6%	0%
... has coaching improved your performance in your job?	32%	42%	22%	2%	2%
... did you feel supported by your Line Manager in this Programme?	38%	28%	22%	8%	4%
... did you find being part of the overall Accelerating Difference Programme valuable?	50%	42%	6%	3%	0%

To really understand what was happening, the Practitioners conducted in-depth follow up interviews. Participants told stories of how, in individual coaching, they looked at themselves and re-evaluated their sense of identity and who they were, at work and in the rest of their lives. They took this clarity and self-awareness to the group coaching where they shared their progress, hopes and dreams.

In the group sessions they gained strength and support to “Go for it!” They formed networks with Participants from different businesses and countries. One woman talked of how, before Accelerating Difference, she was a marketing specialist. And during the coaching she recognised she really wanted to be a General Manager. The individual coaching helped her realise this was what she wanted, and the group coaching gave her the encouragement to do it. By the end of the Programme she was poised to step into a GM role.

## Sponsorship

Sponsorship had been happening in GSK informally, in a limited way, for years before this Programme. As a result of this Programme however, the power and importance of sponsorship was acknowledged. Of Participant respondents who had a Sponsor, 72% felt actively supported in their career progression. So, whilst it had initially been harder to gain engagement on sponsorship in a dedicated and purposeful way, particularly with very senior men sponsoring much more junior women, this began happening more systematically.

## Participant Feedback

Participants’ feedback on the Programme was generally positive. Comments included:

- “It was excellent and I hope that many more women will be afforded the opportunity to benefit from future sessions!!”

- “It was a great experience for me personally and professionally and I thank GSK for allowing me to participate. It was a little clunky at first, but quickly picked up steam and allowed for growth”
- “I think the programme for me personally was an absolute eye opener and I have grown enormously in my inner beliefs and self-confidence. However, I still feel there is a disconnect between Managers supporting the principles of the Programme and actually buying-in to progressing development. In my specific situation, whilst I have received acknowledgement in the change of my approach and ability, I am still “boxed” by my leadership team in terms of role options, so I think there should be a higher level of Manager engagement for the next cohort”
- “I feel privileged to have been selected for the AD Programme. It has been the most interesting and exciting initiative that I have participated in during my 22 years at GSK. As a result of being on this programme my confidence, presence and impact have increased. I have started to use different ways of thinking when faced with challenges. I changed behaviours that were having a negative impact and holding me back. This has benefitted me and will also benefit GSK. I do hope that the programme will continue so that other women can benefit from it as I have”
- “I am very grateful for the time and resources that the company has invested in me during this programme. It will be a challenge to keep it going so it would be useful to have some sort of ongoing support resources/reminders to acts as a conscience”
- “Since this was my first coaching experience, I found it very beneficial. In the future, it has opened my mind to further coaching programmes and built a foundation. It has helped me thinking outside work which was an added benefit to the programme. The group sessions were excellent and allowed sharing of concerns, ideas and solutions”  
[sic]

## Dialogues

The Dialogues were reported as being valuable in uncovering assumptions and biases the attendees had around men and women at work by the 48 Senior Leaders who attended one of the four sessions. Essentially, the Dialogues repositioned gender diversity as an issue that was really about the relationship between men and women in the workplace.

Measures, looking at gender balance, are now reviewed at multiple levels in all businesses, and reported to the GSK Board. That is gender balance at Corporate Executive Team (CET) level, CET-1, CET-2, and CET-3. GSK’s gender diversity data is also published in the annual Corporate Social Responsibility Report. GSK became a member of the 30% Club gender campaign, that aims to achieve 30% female representation in senior management within FTSE 100 companies by 2020. And in 2019 they reported women holding 36% of senior roles (up from 33% in 2018).

The career advancement of Participants on the Accelerating Difference Programme demonstrated improved progression, versus non-participants, which continued to be tracked in the years that followed.

## Overall

Accelerating Difference made progress in addressing a complex, sensitive challenge in a systematic, innovative and rigorous way.

GSK’s Leadership Team reflect, “It is not perfect – we have learned that more attention needs to be paid to the immediate Leaders surrounding the female Participants to ensure things shift and change for them. We also need to continue to educate and provide excellent role models. However, by supporting the female Leaders to achieve their potential, by giving



them organisational support through sponsorship, and by addressing systemic biases through Dialogues, we are making progress towards a gender-balanced organisation.”

They remain focused on sustaining the progress made and questioning what more they could do to further accelerate GSK’s progress towards their ambition of gender balance.

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