

Negotiating through the glass ceiling

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There are fewer women than men involved in high-profile international business deals. But that may change with the results of a new Tel Aviv University study on the role of gender in management, which found that women may be more skilled at business negotiations than their masculine counterparts.

Dr. Yael Itzhaki of Tel Aviv University's Faculty of Management at the Leon Recanati Graduate School of Business Administration carried out simulations of business negotiations among 554 Israeli and American management students at Ohio State University, in New York City, and in Israel.

Her findings? "Women are more generous negotiators, better co-operators and are motivated to create win-win situations," says Itzhaki. The results of her Ph.D. thesis project indicated that in certain groupings, women offered better terms than men to reach an agreement. And women were good at facilitating interaction between the parties, she says.

Men Are Emulating Women

The simulations involved negotiating the terms of a joint venture, including the division of shares. The point of the simulations was to examine how women behave in business situations requiring cooperation and competition.

Itzhaki also discovered that men have begun to incorporate feminine

strategies into their negotiating styles. "Women in mid-management positions are criticized for being too 'cooperative' and 'compassionate,' so they don't get promoted. Then men come in and use the same tactics women are criticized for."

The Female Handshake

Although both men and women can be good negotiators, Itzhaki emphasizes that there should be more women in top management jobs. Women have unique skills to offer, Itzhaki says: They're great listeners, they care about the concerns of the other side, and they're generally more interested in finding a win-win situation to the benefit of both parties than male negotiators.

These are especially desirable traits in today's business world, which is calling for service improvements for customers and clients. Women today are earning more top positions in banking because of this trend, says Itzhaki.

In part, women don't reach CEO positions because they lack the right professional experience for the job and never enter the pool from which top positions are drawn. Managers commonly choose successors and colleagues who are most similar to themselves, explains Itzhaki – men are more likely to promote men.

Women in Management Bring New Competitive Edge

Itzhaki is currently advising Israeli companies on how to take action. Enforcing equal opportunities law is one concern, but her advice responds to concerns beyond the law. Are women being heard in corporate boardrooms? Does the company have policies that measure the amount of work accomplished, and not merely hours on the job?

A lot of women don't care to "fight" to be recognized, she says, preferring cooperation over competition. But more women in management can translate to a healthier bottom line, Itzhaki says. "Businesses need to develop an organizational culture where everyone is heard, because women's opinions and skills can give businesses a competitive edge."

Source: American Friends of Tel Aviv University

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