

Confidence the magic ingredient to boost the numbers of women in business

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As the amended Employment Equity Act takes effect, the pressure on business to increase the percentage of women in leadership is on. One way to achieve this, research suggests, is to invest in ways to develop confidence in women.

It's official, if you are a woman in leadership you are much more likely to feel like you are not doing your job properly than the man who sits across the boardroom table.

"Research shows that one of the biggest issues for women leaders is confidence," says Liz de Wet, convenor of the University of Cape Town Graduate School of Business (UCT GSB) Women in Leadership programme.

According to a recent survey of British managers, half the women - but less than a third of the men - admitted to feeling insecure about their job performance. And a study of Hewlett-Packard employees found that women applied for promotion only when they met 100% of the job requirements, whereas men were comfortable putting themselves up for promotion if they met just 60%.

The studies are chronicled in the controversial 2014 book by Claire Shipman and Katty Kay, [The Confidence Code: The Science And Art Of Self-Assurance - What Women Should Know](#), which suggests that this lack of confidence in putting themselves forward may be one of the reasons why women are still in the minority when it comes to occupying leadership positions globally.

The numbers tell a grim story. According to auditing firm [Grant Thornton's 2014 International Business Report's](#) (IBR) women in business research, the number of senior business positions filled by women in SA actually declined by 2% to 26% in 2014. It also stated that 21% of local businesses had no women in senior management positions. This is putting significant pressure on organisations that urgently need to increase the numbers of women in management and leadership roles. The amended Employment Equity Act, which came into effect in August 2014, significantly increases penalties for non compliance.

De Wet says that one way to achieve greater representation of women at the top would be to focus more mentorship and training opportunities to enable women to develop that all important missing ingredient: confidence. Yet, she points out, the Grant Thornton report made specific mention of the fact that 79% of SA businesses did not have a specific programme to support or mentor women.

These organisations are missing a trick, says De Wet, especially as there is also more to investing in women than compliance. "There is a lot research that shows that gender diversity at board level correlates to better business performance across a wide range of success indicators. Boosting the confidence of women, boosts the bottom line," she says.

According to a recent worldwide survey, conducted by human resources consulting firm DDI together with The Conference Board, the top 20% of companies - as measured by financial performance - have, on average, 27% of leadership roles filled by women. Among the bottom 20% of financial performers, only 19% of leaders are women. A new [Gallup report](#) has also found that female managers are more likely than male managers to be engaged in their work. Their employees also tend to be more dedicated to their jobs - which translates into high productivity and better business performance.

While South African organisations can definitely do more to promote the appointment of women to senior leadership positions and support them in these roles, De Wet says that women could also do much for their own careers by learning

how to tap into their own power and fully realise themselves as people and leaders.

"The Women in Leadership programme looks at developing women as leaders but in their own way, focusing on the skills and qualities that they bring to the job and how this can be developed into a very particular signature that is authentic. In this way the programme builds confidence and helps women to learn how to stand up - and out," says De Wet. "There are many reasons why women succeed in business, but one thing that they appear to have in common is confidence. We give women the tools to build their confidence and so, increase their impact and influence as a leader."

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