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Leadership: why gender is back on the agenda

Despite increasing equality, men still dominate many top public sector posts. **Karin Goodwin** reports on a course which helps women recognise their own strengths

THREE years ago Detective Superintendent Angela Wilson, one of Scotland's most senior policewomen, found herself wondering if she really was in the right job. Having recently moved back to Scotland from the south of England to take up a promoted post in Tayside, she had met with a work culture that she found difficult to deal with and was beginning to lose sight of her own leadership abilities.

"The culture at that time was quite adversarial and I felt undermined and sometimes intimidated," she says. "I found I was responding negatively to that. If someone made a smart comment in meetings I would make one back and that wasn't getting us anywhere. It was confrontation and no way to build teamwork. I wasn't doing my leadership role justice."

Unhappy with the developments and unwilling to compromise her values or "sense of self" within her role, Wilson went as far as securing two job offers in the communications sector before deciding to first try a professional development course, an approach she had previously found useful in her career.

The course she selected was to prove transformative. Dancehammer's Living Leadership programme was developed in association with the Scottish Leadership Foundation specifically for women operating at the most senior levels in the public services. Split into four modules delivered over several months, with one-to-one coaching built into the programme, it aims to show that leadership comes from within, helping women to feel calm and confident in their abilities.

The effects, on Wilson at least, have been dramatic. Within a short space of time she discovered a way to adapt her leadership style that increased her confidence, refocused her targets and turned around her working relationships.

The effects, on Wilson at least, have been dramatic. Within a short space of time she discovered a way to adapt her leadership style that increased her confidence, refocused her targets and turned around her working relationships.

She explains: "At the outset it helped me to focus on what was really important to me and to develop goals aligned with my values."

"It led me to see that in order to have maximum impact and to be the most effective transformational leader that I could be, it was me that needed to change – not my environment. I needed to reclaim my self-confidence, take 'command' of my emotions and lead by example."

Some might regard the need for women-only courses as outdated. In general, the gender balance of our labour force is more equal than ever before, with a good mix of men and women in nearly all professions. Not so, says Jane Mudd, deputy director of the Scottish Leadership Foundation, who adds that women are still significantly under-represented in senior and decision-making roles across the public services.

"Overall the trend is positive because there are more women gradually moving into these roles, but progress is slow," she says. "There really is still an issue there and that's when it becomes important to open up as many opportunities as possible to women."

As well as the familiar issues of juggling child-rearing with senior responsibilities, Mudd believes that women are sometimes discouraged by the complex challenges of public service life – juggling public accountability and the media glare with political pressures and funding challenges.

The figures speak for themselves. In politics, while the Scottish parliament has good representation from women – 39% of MSPs are female – only 14% of Scottish constituency MPs are female and in almost all local authorities less than a quarter of councillors are women.

While a little more than half of Scottish Government civil servants are female, that drops to 35% at senior level. In local authorities, just 19% of council leaders are



female and only 13% of chief executives are women.

Women may be well represented in the legal profession but only 12% of high court judges are female. In the NHS, more than three quarters of health service chief executives are male.

In primary schools, the figures look promising – around 80% of headteachers are women – but look less impressive when it is borne in mind that 93% of the teachers are female. At secondary level, men lead four-fifths of schools.

Wilson is also in the minority in the Scottish police force, where just 12% of senior officers are women. And she admits that although she wasn't attracted to the Living Leadership programme specifically because of its focus on women, that aspect proved surprisingly valuable in terms of building trust and support.

"My experience is that when you bring a group of women together they will open up much more quickly than they do in a mixed group," she says. "Men can be intimidated by women talking about emotions. If you work in a male environment you learn not to discuss them because they are not necessarily valued."

She now believes that some of her former difficulties were compounded by the traditionally masculine culture of her workplace. "Very few women in the Scottish service are at the rank of superintendent and above," she says. "You are a woman in a man's world." But she realised it needn't stop her from being herself.

Now, as chair of the force's Women's Development Forum, she has introduced

a version of the leadership course for less senior women across the service, encouraging her female colleagues to seek promotion.

"There are a lot of very capable women who – due to internal factors or some external signals – just lack the belief that they are good enough for promotions or specialist posts," she says. "And I think any organisation needs to have the very best people – men or women. They all need to put themselves forward."

The barriers women face in doing so are often subtle and difficult to define, according to Joey Walter, of Dancehammer, who developed the Living Leadership programme.

She suggests that many public services tend to operate in a traditionally masculine sphere which women find harder to adapt to than many of their male contemporaries. "Traditional kinds of cultures tend to put more emphasis on IQ rather than emotional intelligence and haven't quite realised the importance of building relationships and the benefits to a company that brings," she says.

"Women often find these environments tough and sometimes aren't given the opportunity to express their own values and beliefs. That can feel very limiting." During the course she works with women to help them realise that these "limits" are often self-imposed. A key aim is to help build internal confidence which can help women to adapt as effectively as possible and reach their full potential in their role, while remaining true to their own system of values.

It is, she says, about ensuring that women feel confident in themselves, not simply in the role that they "put on" in the office.

"Women are encouraged to really build on personal strengths," she says. "Self-leadership is all about developing the self-awareness that they need to be less impacted by the pressures they are under. They become more in command of the way that they think and the emotions that they feel."

Most find the process hugely beneficial. Sarah Davidson, head of the Scottish Gov-

ernment's Cabinet secretariat, says that she found step-by-step sessions on how to have "courageous conversations" – difficult exchanges with colleagues that she may previously have shied away from because of their confrontation nature – particularly helpful.

"I've used the technique several times since and shared it with colleagues and other people too," she says.

Meanwhile, Elinor Smith, nurse director of NHS Grampian, found the course boosted her confidence and made her

Joey Walter, centre, leads one of Dancehammer's Living Leadership courses for women, a programme which prevented DS Angela Wilson from turning her back on a promising police career.

Photos: Graeme Hart, David Martin

think laterally about other opportunities within the public service.

"I found the process of re-connecting our leadership role with our personal values very useful," she says. "It gave me the sense of having a strong position, of being able to stand my ground when questioned about my beliefs. I am a confident person anyway but I do now feel more sure of myself."

The course also made her think more about gender issues. She now believes women in senior roles should make themselves more visible to others, and is taking part in a "back to the floor" exercise in her hospital which takes her from the boardroom to the wards once a month. There, she regularly answers queries from nurses and sisters about her current role and hopes to help inspire them to proceed through the ranks.

At Tayside Police, Angela Wilson is also an advocate of female mentoring. She is developing a peer support system which will allow women who have already been through the leadership programme to work with those currently undergoing it.

These days her attitude to her role couldn't be more positive. "I love my job now," she says, "and I love the work I do with the Women's Development Forum because I see people put themselves forward for things who would not previously considered doing that."

However, she admits that there is still some way to go. "I think the situation is far better than it was but we're not there yet," she says. "When I look at people coming up behind me, there is still a dearth of promoted women."

But she is undeterred. She now knows she is staying put. "You can only change something from within," she smiles.

www.dancehammer.co.uk/women.html

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