

A woman's place is in the boardroom: the roadmap

Peninah Thomson and Jacey Graham (Palgrave Macmillan, 2008)

Three years on after their first book, *A Woman's Place is in the Boardroom* (reviewed in September 2007), the authors revisit their theme. This book is thus a follow-up, though it does not depend on having read the earlier book. Its aim, as the subtitle suggests, is to give more of the 'how-to' for women wanting to advance to a boardroom position. Thus much of the book focuses on what women need to know in order to enter the still-alien world of the male-dominated boardroom.

The chapter titles reflect this focus: 'the written rules of engagement', 'the unwritten rules', 'and board games'. The book also adds to what was covered in the earlier book in terms of what companies can do to attract women and to remove the obstacles to appointing women to boards.

So what have boardroom 'rules of engagement' got to do with leadership in the Church? More than one might think! While at £25 this book is not cheap (accessible through libraries?), I found it as fascinating as the earlier title, and I found many parallels between the world of boardrooms and the still male-dominated world of church hierarchy.

The cartoons are very perceptive, as well as being sheer fun. There is one, for example, entitled 'hats in the ring', showing a women's hat being thrown into a ring along with a collection of male-looking headgear. The authors suggest that 'unlike women, men are naturally hierarchy climbers. It may take a deliberate and painful act of will for an able and hitherto successful man to withdraw voluntarily from the competition for leadership positions'. For women, it's usually the other way round. It's an act of will to throw one's hat into the ring.

I dislike gender stereotypes, but I have to concede that there is at least some truth in this. I hear of many women thinking of their next post where they want to use their gifts to the full, but deterred because it requires too great an emotional effort to play the necessary games, to suffer the put-downs and illegitimate questions, and at the end of the process to face yet another rejection. Thankfully, the book does not suggest that women have to become like men in order to succeed, but it does remind us that the expectations of 'woman' and 'leader' still create a disjunction in many people's minds.

'If you fail to plan, you plan to fail': one chapter covers how to 'set out your stall.' While the example of a 'power CV' may not be obviously transferable to a church context, the idea that it should be well written and laid out, with an element of focus on one's accomplishments, is one from which some church leaders could learn. So is the reminder that one needs a new form and a new CV for each application – again, this is basic information, but not always understood by those applying for posts.

The book includes some great anecdotes. One concerns Lady Astor, the first woman MP. Having referred to the experience of being 'first', she told of how Winston Churchill had remarked on the fact that she was still there. 'We hoped to freeze you out', he said, adding, 'When you entered the House of Commons I felt as if a woman had entered my bathroom and I'd nothing to protect myself with, except a sponge.' Do similar feelings lie behind some opposition to women priests?

One of the wider conclusions of the book is that the issue of women on company boards is 'now firmly established as a business issue, rather than a social equality issue.' The presence of women on boards has been demonstrated to improve corporate performance. While the Church is not a business, surely we should be even more concerned to make sure that gifted people can contribute at every level of leadership.

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