

Getting women into politics

Women continue to be underrepresented in many occupational domains, particularly those that have been historically male dominated, such as senior management, manufacturing and trades. Politics is another sphere where women are underrepresented. Women make up just 18% of MPs (Members of Parliament) in the UK, compared to 44% in Sweden, 32% in Germany and 28% in Spain (Silvester, 2003).

A number of explanations have been put forward to account for this situation. One of the most dominant is that women come to be disadvantaged due to stereotypes of MPs that are based on masculine characteristics. Because men have historically held positions as MPs, people have come to perceive that successful MPs possess characteristics that are more typical, on the whole, of men. So for example, leadership is perceived to be a characteristic that men are more likely to possess than women. Such stereotyping means that women are judged to be less effective leaders than men, simply on the basis that they are women.

Silvester (2003) argues that one of the ways to combat these problems is through objective and fair job analyses that enable the identification of those characteristics that are actually essential for successful performance as an MP. This process, she argues, will enable women to compete for parliamentary roles on a more even playing field. Using a competency analysis, whereby job incumbents are interviewed in order to find out both what they typically have to do, and how best to carry out these tasks, Silvester

identified a number of core competencies: communication skills; intellectual skills, relating to people; political conviction; leading and motivating; resilience and drive. Each competency was defined in behavioural terms. For example, communication skills were defined as the capacity to communicate clearly and persuasively across different audiences and media contexts; and the ability to listen and respond creatively by generating opportunities for communication both for self and others.

These competencies were used to design an assessment centre, which was then implemented as part of the MP selection process for the Conservative party. During the assessment centre, candidates were asked to perform a number of tasks designed to measure each competence, and a number of trained assessors judged each candidate's performance according to the competence criteria. According to Silvester (2003), more than 400 candidates have taken part in the assessment centre, and analysis of the outcomes of this process has revealed that there are no systematic differences in the way that women are judged relative to men. This suggests that when assessors have to judge people based on what they do, rather than relying on more subjective assessments (such as whether they *think* the candidate may be a persuasive communicator), women are judged more fairly.

While we should welcome the more fair and systematic approach to MP selection that Silvester advocates and acknowledge the clear advantages that such an approach can bring, there are, nevertheless, a number of issues that are not addressed by the approach and that are quite fundamental to the

position of women in parliament. The first of these is that the number of women that is attracted to a parliamentary career remains relatively small. So matter how fair and objective the assessment process is made, the position of women relative to men will be difficult to balance because women are simply not recruited in sufficient numbers. Second, one of the key problems for women with children is that MPs have to work very long and unsociable hours. It can thus be very difficult for a woman to balance her home-life and her career in such circumstances.

Questions

How might social identity theory be used to explain the fact that women are not attracted to careers in parliament?

How might more women be persuaded to follow a career in politics? What specific measures might be taken?

In what ways might women's psychological contracts with their employing organizations differ from men's? What can organizations do to better manage women's psychological contracts so as to secure their loyalty and retain their skills?

Reference

Silvester, J. (2003) A Natural Selection. *People Management*, January, 36-39.

To accompany Introduction to Organizational Behaviour, 3rd Edition
By Penny Dick and Steve Ellis