

# Women! Rock the Boat and Get Promoted

By Philip Carrigan

I was recently interviewing a female candidate who had a reputation for being among the best in the male-dominated world of pharmaceutical sales in Japan. After quizzing her on her achievements it was quite clear that she was reticent to put forward her accomplishments. I ventured to tell her what I knew of her record and, a little surprised, she smiled and her humility was disarming. Most male candidates in similar circumstances would have puffed out their chests and told me (and the whole world) exactly how impressive they were but after interviewing similar candidates for the past 15 years I guess I shouldn't have been surprised.

It's no secret that there is a promotion gap in Japan. A quick glance at *The Economist's* "Glass-Ceiling Index" sees Japan ranked second worst amongst OECD countries in regards to Gender Inequality in the labor force, but surely the answer isn't as simple as women underrating their abilities?

There is existing research from Jessi L. Smith, professor of Psychology at Montana State University (MSU), that found gender norms regarding modesty can help explain why women don't feel comfortable bragging about their accomplishments and thus are not promoted as often as their male colleagues. I asked a number of women in the pharmaceutical industry across Asia and their feedback echoed that of the MSU study. Several women reported that, in Japan, women were taught to avoid conflict and not to rock the boat. As a female senior manager explained, the tendency to be modest may come from a girl's education, whereby competition is not regarded positively by society.

Another senior manager explained, "It's probably true that women don't want to appear aggressive. To my eyes, males tend to overrate their performances, while females tend to underrate theirs. I feel awkward saying that I'm talented and therefore worthy of getting more money."

Throughout my conversations, feelings of shyness, uneasiness, and anxiety were mentioned again and again. Is it any wonder that many women are not putting their hands up to talk about their performances?

It is probably too simplistic to conclude that not speaking up is the only factor keeping women from holding more senior management roles, and research from Rachel Leng, MA in Regional Studies - East Asia from Harvard University, suggested a number of other factors such as cultural issues, business customs, psychological and societal values. Leng notes, "There really is no umbrella approach to addressing all women in the workplace globally; rather, women's different backgrounds and different employment and industrial systems are important factors to consider."

There's a myriad of potential reasons why there are not more women in leadership positions in Japan. There are no simple answers and no quick fixes to the challenges on gender inequality. Perhaps small changes in incentives may lead to longer-lasting change. Whilst not solving the problem, it may be a step in the right direction. Behavioral economics can possibly provide solutions to the challenge. Behavioral economists have found a variety of psychological or neurological biases cause people to make choices that seem at odds with their best interests. The idea is based on research that shows it is possible to steer people towards better decisions by presenting choices in different ways. Could such nudges help close the promotion gap?

It suggests the right combination of positive reinforcement and indirect suggestions can provide a change in behavior. This may in turn provide the right incentives for managers to recognize talent and to minimize their natural tendency to reward the loudest voices. Leng suggests that "perhaps there needs to be a more culturally-focused change of norms about who can lead and what qualities make a good leader."

The focus should not only be on the behaviors of women; after all, we are all, to a degree, products of our environments. There is a conscious and unconscious bias in the system. The focus, I believe, should be on companies. Organizations should be looking at more accurate evaluation processes and open up more pathways for women to enter management.

Companies may well be overlooking the brightest and most creative and dynamic employees within their organizations.