

“She’s made me think more deeply about the issues women face in business.”



“He’s made me feel confident I can have a fulfilling family life and a successful career.”



Helen Toogood at home with her two sons James and Rudy. Helen now works three days a week. Working for a global organisation means that throughout a 24-hour period, someone is working, so emails, conference calls and instant messaging can

happen at any time, giving new meaning to the term flexible working. On the days she goes in to work, Helen is home by six o'clock to play with her children before bedtime.

How mentoring is helping Unilever's board solve its diversity challenge

Helen Toogood and Rudy Markham are mentors to each other. Rudy is Finance Director of Unilever, one of the world's leading consumer goods companies. Helen is Vice President, IT Academy, in Unilever's global IT department, two levels below Rudy. For the past two years, they have been meeting every couple of months to discuss the challenges that Helen faces as a senior woman working at Unilever and the difficulties Rudy and his fellow directors are having in promoting women onto the board.

Unilever is by most definitions a diverse company. It sells its popular food, home and personal care brands in 150 countries. Its 227,000 staff speak over 100 languages, and its top 164 leaders span 25 nationalities. This cultural diversity, though, has not been matched by gender diversity; at least, not at the most senior level of management. There has been progress but, in the words of Rudy, "progress has not been good enough or fast enough."

In the past 10 years, the proportion of women

managers has grown to over a third, up from 11% in the early 1990s. The number of women in senior management has grown from 2% to 16%. There are women on the boards of Unilever companies in, for example, China, Ghana, Kenya, Indonesia, Israel, UK and Nigeria, and women chair Unilever's operating companies in Pakistan, Eastern Europe and South Africa.

Unilever has one woman on its main board, Baroness Chalker of Wallasey, who is a Non-Executive Director but

so far it has not succeeded in appointing a woman to its executive ranks. It's an issue that greatly concerns Rudy and his colleagues and one that clearly places the company at a disadvantage. So what is the problem?

Unilever has been wrestling with this for some time. It recruits equal numbers of men and women but, for a variety of reasons, women have tended to leave when they reach senior management positions or simply not get promoted. Of those who take career breaks, less than half return and many non-returners

move to other companies to avoid comparison with former male colleagues whose careers have advanced during their absence.

Unilever is by no means alone in grappling with this issue. In the UK, for example, women account for less than 10% of directorships at the UK's 100 largest listed companies, according to the Financial Times Stock Exchange (FTSE) Group, and the 2004 Female FTSE Report shows that out of 110 female directorships at FTSE 100 companies, only 19 are executive positions.

In 2001 Unilever appointed its first ever senior executive for global diversity, Rhodora Palomar-Fresnedi, a former HR Director for Unilever in South East Asia. Her remit covers all aspects of diversity, including nationality, style and age, but her first priority, in discussion with the board, was to help them get to the root of this problem. "Of course diversity is about much more than gender balance but by tackling this issue first, arguably our biggest challenge, it will help us develop the capabilities to address the others."

As an early step, Rhodora persuaded every member of the executive board to develop mentoring relationships with women from two levels below the board. This was to help them understand better the challenges facing senior women in the business, and for those women to understand better the difficulties the board was encountering in promoting women to top positions.

"This is a development issue, not a promotion problem"

"I realised this wasn't just a promotion or retention problem," Rhodora explains. "It is also a development issue. When you get to the top of a company you need to learn how to bring on others in the organisation



"For us diversity is about being inclusive to all those who share our values and goals," says Rhodora Palomar-Fresnedi, who is now Vice President, Talent Management, for Unilever Asia, and a member of Unilever's global diversity board led by Chief Executive Patrick Cescau.

who are different from you, otherwise you will only recruit people who are in the same mould. This isn't particular to Unilever. It applies to all people who reach the top of organisations. Everyone on the board recognises that the next generation of leaders needs to be different from the one that precedes it, which is why every member of the board has voluntarily signed up to the reciprocal mentoring programme."

Unilever has now taken its reciprocal mentoring programme a stage further with a cross-sector mentoring initiative, in which Helena Ganczakowski, Vice President Brand Development in Unilever's Foods business, is mentored by Dame Sue Street, Permanent Secretary at the UK government's Department of Culture, Media and Sport.

So what do mentors talk about and does it make a difference? For Rudy and Helen, the experience has been illuminating and constructive. "We talk about specific themes," says Rudy, "such as how we identify candidates for roles, whether to ensure there is always a female candidate for a position, and whether all jobs can be structured to allow for flexible working."

"It has definitely made a difference," says Helen. "In

"We all find it difficult to work with people who are different from us"

the past, I would have had a bit of blame going on in my mind and thought 'What's the problem? It's not really that difficult to promote women, just get on with it.' But I have come to realise that the board is a group of human beings who have tried and tested ways of doing things and a natural tendency to appoint people who are like them. We all find it difficult to work with people who are different from us and to promote someone who is not like you into a role that you really need to be successful is quite scary."

For Rudy, a key learning has been "developing a more profound understanding of where the issues lie and how important they are to solve. A lot of the issues revolve around the signals that male managers send out – usually, but not always, through thoughtlessness – that can undermine women. For example women have told me they thought working part-time damaged their management credibility. Clearly if that is the perception, then that is what we have to address."

Not long after Rudy's and Helen's meetings got going, this very issue was put to the test when Helen went on maternity leave. "You feel very vulnerable after you have your first child and I seriously thought about not returning. While I was on maternity leave I continued to meet Rudy every two months and his support was key to me coming back. I now have two children, work part time and feel more confident about flexible working and focusing on my output rather than how many hours I do or where I do them."

One of the outcomes of this reciprocal mentoring initiative has been the decision by the board that

all jobs in the company should be capable of being structured in a way that allows flexible working. Other benefits may be less tangible in the short term but the building of relationships between the board and women two levels below has helped to reassure directors that the company has a cadre of women rising up the career ladder in whom they can feel confident. As importantly, it is also giving the women the confidence that they can take time out from work without jeopardising their careers, return to work part time, and still be in the running for a top job.



Helen felt very vulnerable after she had her first child and thought about not returning. The support of Rudy – who she continued to mentor on maternity leave – was key to her returning.

"Mentoring shows we are serious about this as an issue"

So when will women join the board? "This isn't about numbers," says Rudy. "It is about spotting our most talented senior women, and training, developing and building them so they are candidates for these roles. How long will this take? Longer perhaps than we want but shorter than we fear! It is key that we see sustained progress towards this goal. What this mentoring initiative has done is show that we are serious about this as an issue and that we are genuine about wanting to make it happen."



Women Directors on Boards



Unilever has taken its reciprocal mentoring programme a stage further with a cross-sector initiative in which Helena Ganczakowski, Vice President Brand Development in Unilever's Foods business, is mentored by Dame Sue Street, (above left), Permanent Secretary at the UK government's Department of Culture, Media and Sport. Unilever also participates in the FTSE 100 mentoring programme being run by the UK consortium Women Directors on Boards (WDoB). This is a cross-sector initiative, championed by the UK's Department of Trade and Industry, in which chairmen and CEOs of FTSE companies

– including Unilever Chief Executive Patrick Cescau – mentor women at other FTSE companies who are one or two levels below the board. Picture shows WDoB founder members (left to right) Hilary Samson-Barry, previously head of the Women and Equality Unit at the DTI; Jacey Graham, Brook Graham LLP; Professor Susan Vinnicombe, OBE, Centre for Developing Women Business Leaders, Cranfield School of Management; Peninah Thomson, Praesta Partners LLP; and Sarah Churchman, head of Student Recruitment & Diversity, PricewaterhouseCoopers in the UK.

Unilever believes that one of the best and most sustainable ways it can help to address global social and environmental concerns is through the very business of doing business in a socially aware and responsible manner.

This is one in a series of occasional articles called **Global Challenges – Local Actions** that looks at how Unilever companies are tackling global social and environmental concerns by working in partnership with local, national and international agencies, governments, business organisations and NGOs.

If you would like to know more about Unilever's approach to diversity see www.unilever.com/ourvalues/people. For more details of the Women Directors on Boards initiative, visit www.womendirectorsonboards.co.uk.

For more about Unilever's social and environmental activities, please visit www.unilever.com/ourvalues/environmentandsociety. There you will find copies of our latest environmental and social reports and copies of previous articles in this series. Subjects of other articles include:

- Global Challenges – Local Actions**
- Micronutrient deficiency in Africa
 - River pollution in Indonesia
 - Climate change/refrigeration in Europe
 - Rural micro-entrepreneurs in India
 - Sustainable fishing off Africa
 - Tackling diarrhoeal disease in Asia through hygiene education
 - Saving water in Latin America
 - Combating HIV/AIDS in Africa

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Or write to:
Corporate Relations
Unilever PLC
PO Box 68
London
EC4P 4BQ
United Kingdom

Corporate Relations
Unilever N.V.
PO Box 760
3000 DK Rotterdam
The Netherlands

