

'Queen Bee syndrome' and how it hampers other women's careers

The 'Queen Bee syndrome' is the reluctance of women executives to promote other women, which hampers other women's career growth.



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“This behaviour is a term used to describe women executives that, after reaching senior positions, alienate other women and hence prevent more junior women from advancing through the ranks,” says Dr Babita Mathur-Helm, senior lecturer in Diversity Management, Leadership and Gender Studies at the University of Stellenbosch Business School (USB).

She says these women in executive positions become very protective of their own power base and jealous of sharing it with others. “The corporate environment is extremely competitive and even hostile. Women do not grow on their own in corporate or other professional jobs. Their careers are dependent on male support. The ‘Queen Bee’ syndrome is something very new in South Africa. It may have been happening but it has not been researched effectively.”

She also identifies two other major challenges that affect gender diversity in the South African workforce:

1. Women face barriers such as social stereotypes and prejudices, which is part of the culture of the organisation, and sometimes creates huge barriers for women to progress in their jobs.
2. Another barrier is the so-called glass ceiling, which is a very structured kind of approach towards women's career progression. It also hampers their growth because glass ceilings do not allow women to progress into senior positions.

“Besides these three challenges, there are other barriers too that women encounter in the world of work. These are related to race, gender, nepotism, legislative support for certain racial groups only, old boys’ clubs and networks, lack of female role models and mentors and personal limitations.”

The best way to empower women in any work environment is giving them chances for career progression and promotions into senior positions. Her advice to overcome this is to:

- get more women into leadership roles, succession planning, talent pools, career development programmes and job shadowing for potential women executives and senior managers would be options to consider;
- create long term, sustainable structures and put systems in place to create conducive work environments for women to progress; and
- focus on specifically preparing women precisely for leadership positions through training and guidance. While climbing the corporate ladder women should be provided with the mentorship and guidance needed to take on the leadership roles, and not just be offered only technical support.

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