Top of the world

Is climbing the corporate ladder really that difficult, or are we just too afraid to go for what we really want? Averlyn Lim asks four women at the top of their game to unveil their secrets of success and whether there’s more that we can do to reach for the stars.

We’ve recently discovered that despite more women achieving degrees and securing positions in the workforce, the actual number of women who are sitting at board levels is less than a handful. Gasp! Shocking? We think so too. The statistics just gets more worrying as we continue to climb up the management ladder.

According to World Bank research, only 46 per cent of women in Malaysia enter the workforce even though more than 60 per cent of students who graduated from tertiary education are females. While a study by McKinsey & Company shows 53 per cent of entry-level professionals are women, by the time they get to mid-senior management level, they represent only 11 per cent of the workforce. What about Chief Executive Officer (CEO) and board levels? The number then shrinks to just seven per cent.

A survey jointly conducted by Association of Chartered Certified Accountants (ACCA) and Talent Corp unveils just why there is a lack of women in top positions in this country. One thing’s for sure – it’s not because we lack the skill, talent or quality. In fact, the main reason that hinder women from reaching their highest potential are family commitments, maternity benefits, non-existent career flexibility and the lack of practice of equal opportunity in the workforce. However, we shouldn’t let it stop us from aspiring to achieve greatness. Take it from these women on how they beat the odds to get to the top.

65% OF WOMEN LEAVE THE WORKFORCE TO RAISE A FAMILY

Source: Talent Corp and ACCA

Q: WHY DO YOU THINK THERE ARE SO FEW WOMEN IN LEADERSHIP POSITIONS IN MALAYSIA?
A: Employers don’t recognise the importance of championing women’s advancement, viewing it merely as a gender issue instead of a business opportunity. Think about it: female consumers have more spending power these days. It makes good economic sense to put them in decision-making roles as they know what will appeal to their own brethren in the marketplace. Plus, Malaysian women tend to have many self-imposed barriers. This includes lack of self-confidence in profiling their achievements and being modest about asking for well-deserved promotions; not to mention the ‘guilt’ factor, where they feel they have to be perfect wives, mothers, and career women.

Q: DO YOU THINK WOMEN CAN HAVE IT ALL?
A: “My personal view is that women can have it all, just not at the same time. A woman’s career is never linear – it’s ‘M’ shaped. She has different priorities at different stages of her life. Her career pattern evolves to accommodate these values. She may start out strongly, decide to focus on family commitments in her 30s, which may cause her career progression to dip, and then pick up again as her children grow older.”

Q: HOW CAN WE ENCOURAGE YOUNG WOMEN TO REACH FOR THE STARS?
A: “We need to empower strong women who are successful in juggling their careers and family life to step up as role models for young women, and share their stories. It helps to organise women’s networking events where young women can exchange stories with successful women who are at a different stage in their career.”

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KATE GUTMANN, PRESIDENT OF UPS UNITED PARCEL SERVICE) ADVISES WOMEN TO MAKE SURE THE DECISION-MAKERS KNOW THEIR NAMES AND WHAT THEY DO.
“I’d already moved up two or three times at that point, and was hoping to get promoted to a Vice President position. But the person making the decision didn’t know me at all, which can happen in a big company. So I wrote a memo: ‘Why Kate Gutmann?’, explaining who I was and why I should at least get an interview. It was a little courageous and scary at the time, but it worked. I got the interview and eventually landed the job.”

THE IRON LADY

Chin Soot Fong, mid-50s, has two children and is the Senior Executive Director of Pricewaterhouse Coopers (PwC). She started off as an audit assistant and has been in the industry for 30 years.

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