

Empowering the *female leaders* of tomorrow

Balanced gender leadership can have a direct impact on business performance. Research conducted into Fortune 500 companies showed that those companies with more women board directors outperformed those with the least by 42 percent in delivering return on sales. How is the UK hospitality industry responding to this challenge? **Lara Eade** reports on one programme aimed at inspiring women to realise their potential

Given that 56 percent of the hospitality, leisure, travel and tourism sector's workforce is female, it is surprising that only six percent of hospitality company directors are women. For an industry that champions diversity, the representation of women at the top is poor – standing at only half the average of all UK sectors.

After uncovering this statistic through its own research last year, People 1st secured government funding to establish Women 1st – a programme of mentoring and training to support the development of women in the sector. Its long term aim is to raise the number of female board-level executives to 10 percent by 2015, and to double that by 2025.

Now, following a successful pilot year which saw 100 women go through the programme, the sector skills council has secured funding for a further 225 individuals to benefit from its subsidised development opportunities.

The initiative has captured a number of high profile supporters, including Cherie Blair, who officially launched the programme last year, TV chef Lesley Waters and 2009 Catey Manager of the Year, Carrie Wicks, both of whom have shared their experiences at Women 1st networking events.

The programme includes four key elements – a continuous professional

development (CPD) programme called 'Step Up', a mentor/ mentee network, regional connect networking events, and, new for 2010, the Female Chefs' Development Programme.

The 'Step Up' programme includes six one-day CPD sessions, and covers topics like planning and recognising strengths and weaknesses, communication skills, presentation skills, dress and body language, assertiveness and confidence, networking, influencing and negotiation. The sessions are designed to take participants through a sustainable, long-term transformation in their leadership abilities, enabling them to fully contribute at the highest level.

The programme has received glowing feedback from those who have taken part in it so far. Andrea Hamer, events manager at ABode Hotels feels the experience enabled her to take her career to the next level: "The Step Up programme has completely changed my life," she says. "Before, I felt like I was standing still and

not going anywhere. Now, I feel confident, and my career has really evolved.

"I have recently been promoted from events co-ordinator to events manager and now take on a more operational role, with an assistant to train and delegate to."

Sarah Chegwidan, operations manager at Ramada Jarvis Hotels, also feels that the programme has helped improve her skills. "My team respects me, they talk to me, and we succeed," she says. "We are open and honest and make decisions together. Women 1st has given me more confidence and direction in my personal and work life."

Women 1st also aims to establish a strong mentoring network which supports women in their careers, including one-to-one mentoring with the sector's highest performers. With many women in industry citing a lack of role models as one of the barriers to progression, the mentor/mentee network enables them to benefit first-hand from the knowledge and experience of those who have built a successful career.

People 1st's diversity manager, Dan Power, comments: "The response to the mentoring network has been fantastic – having someone to draw experience from has really helped our mentees in preparing to take the next step in their careers.

"We are really keen to hear from more women in the sector who would like to offer their support as mentors – their contribution really is invaluable."

The offer will continue to grow over the next year. The most recent addition to its

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portfolio is the Female Chefs' Development Programme, established after People 1st's State of the Nation 2010 report found that almost two-thirds (61 percent) of chefs are male.

The programme will develop, design and deliver bespoke chef training for women, helping them to move from the areas that they currently work in to more skilled positions. Its overall aim is to support career progression within the industry and to retain skilled women chefs.

Michelin-starred chef, Michael Caines, is championing the new programme, and will be officially launching it at an event in August. Michael, who created the concept of ABode Hotels along with business partner Andrew Brownsword, was keen to offer his support after seeing the positive effect the Women 1st programme had on female managers within his business.

In addition to the mentoring and training programmes, locally hosted 'regional connect' events not only give women the opportunity to meet other

female managers and build their network, but also feature inspirational speakers – such as Lesley Waters and Carrie Wicks – sharing their success stories.

Women 1st is keen to demonstrate that with confidence, support and determination, women can bring a fresh perspective to management in the sector. Avril Owton MBE, owner of The Cloud Hotel in the New Forest, is testament to this philosophy.

A former Tiller Girl, Avril took over the running of the hotel when her husband died unexpectedly at the age of 45. The discipline of her dance training together with the show business mantra 'the show must go on' enabled Avril to take on, with no business experience at all, an ailing, country hotel and turn it into a prosperous and successful business. She undertook a much needed update of the hotel's décor and facilities. With the belief that if a hotel has staff who feel valued, part of the team and involved in the decision-making processes, the employees are likely to be

happy and deliver great customer service, Avril saw the volume and frequency of guest visits increase dramatically.

An avid reader of motivational and business books, Avril is today regarded as one of the country's most accomplished businesswomen. In 2006, she was awarded the Shine Awards Woman of the Year and was voted Hampshire Businesswoman of the Year. She was also awarded an MBE in 2008 for her services to charity and in recognition of her outstanding business skills.

Avril says that the initiative is exactly what the industry needs. "As I attend quite a lot of conferences, I see first-hand the lack of women in senior positions," she explains. "This glass ceiling needs to be shattered and Women 1st can help a lot of women in the industry to aim higher.

"It is an initiative that enables women to share and discuss their experiences so they can solve problems with helpful input from like-minded men and women."

People 1st recognises that the underrepresentation of women at the top level is a far from simple problem. Issues such as flexibility around childcare, perceptions of a 'male culture' within business and a lack of female role models are among the factors cited by women in the industry. It does not claim to have an easy solution to these issues, but seeks to give motivated women the support, guidance and training that they need to overcome these barriers.

Dan Power comments: "Women 1st is not about undermining male managers or positive discrimination – it simply aims to help the brightest female junior managers, who are committed to building a career within our vibrant sector, to fulfil their potential.

"Achieving a healthy balance of male and female leaders means that the sector stands to benefit from a wider range of skills and experience. Our customer base is so diverse, and women are responsible for many of the spending decisions – having more women at the top can only be a positive thing."

Dan is confident in the programme's potential: "We have been delighted with the response that it has received so far, and we are committed to creating a sustainable network that will inspire the next generation of successful women in our sector."

With the continued success of Women 1st, it is hoped that exceptional female leaders will be able to fulfil their potential, enabling employers to benefit from the increased creativity, performance and income they can bring. Perhaps then, the industry can truly begin to reflect the diversity of its customer base. ●



Carrie Wicks, operations director, Firmedale Hotels has been guest speaker at a Women 1st networking event

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