

femail

Do sex scams
women more

All the men in the recent sex scandals have bounced back and are doing very well for themselves

by Sobha Menon

A MONTH after Mark Hurd was sacked from Hewlett Packard in the wake of a sex scam, Oracle opened its doors to him and offered him the position of co-president. A similar scandal cost David Davidar his job as president of Penguin, Canada — but within months, he too has landed himself a fabulous book deal with McClelland and Stewart. He will be writing his new novel, *Ithaca*.

Despite having hit the headlines for all the wrong reasons this year, the two have bounced back and seem to be none the worse for the disgrace that seemed to have hounded them just a few months back. In fact, their very high profile sexual harassment cases are being discussed with a different kind of concern in the US press.

RISKS INVOLVED

Economist and columnist Sylvia Ann Hewlett writes about how a C-suite male she talked to sympathised with Hurd and said he would try to ensure he was never alone with a junior female colleague. Hewlett feels such scams will hurt women the most — especially the high-achieving female executive, who's worked hard to arrive at her level of competence and seeks male mentoring and support to find herself a suitable position in the top rungs of the corporate ladder.

Sure, women do admit that their careers can get stalled at the middle management level if they do not have the support and sponsorship of C-suite executives — an overwhelmingly male-dominated set. And Hewlett's observation is that helping a high-potential woman executive gain visibility, win plum assignments and ultimately get promoted is "serious commitment" and isn't possible without "significant one-on-one time".

But in the current scenario will a high-flying male risk his reputation to help a female employee

even if she's worth it, is competent and shows high potential? We find out what the scene is like in India.

According to senior HR professionals, mentoring is still nascent in India and practised mostly in MNCs which have introduced their international best practices in their India offices too. Other global Indian companies have followed suit, and those which haven't yet are being persuaded by their woman executives to do so. Going by the way it is described by some senior HR professionals, one would get an idea of the position of esteem that mentors

and mentees attain when they enter that rather exclusive club of the chosen ones. "It is such a giving relationship — there is something very pious about it and that's getting complicated by the use of gender issues," says Aparna Sharma, a senior HR professional in a foreign bank. There's also the acknowledgment that the mentor needs to have the inclination and the time for the exercise.

Guess what?

A recent US-based study says many woman executives and C-suite males feel they are not comfortable with one on one mentoring

is without doubt looking for a mentor who has a certain level of



MAGAZINE

at work hit
than men?

seniority, competence and influence and who will at some point of time be able to get her a good position in the company," says Sharma.

Rohit Thakur, vice president — HR, GE Capital, speaks in similar vein: "There's a great deal of sanctity attached to mentoring — and it's not just the mentee who benefits. Often, it's a catalyst for mentee and mentor in developing behaviour because the mentor too is far more aware of the challenges faced by the mentee."

MENTORING THREATENED

WHAT ABOUT the worries that male mentors might back off? Or that the relationship will be exploited? Research done by New York-based Centre for Work-Life Policy says indeed there is a back-

lash. More and more women admit they don't feel so comfortable anymore with one on one mentoring, while high-flying male executives feel reluctant to go out of their way to promote a female executive, no matter how competent she is, for fear of inviting salacious gossip.

Thakur allays these fears by saying that mentoring is institutionalised in companies and is "gender agnostic". High potential employees are identified for mentoring and mentors too are identified and trained.

After undergoing mentoring programmes, mentees know what to expect from mentoring and have the option to continue with it or ask for a different mentor who will help them in training for something different. The process can

be undertaken even over email.

NOT LIKE THE WEST

Sharma feels that while there's no denying that "the sour grapes situation" exists and women on the fast track are eyed with some derision, she admits there are those too who exploit sexuality and use it as a double-edged sword — as a result of which some "good practices get tarnished".

But by and large, there's more of a sense of maturity among both men and women in the corporate place in India. They realise that competence is what matters in the long term and these short term measures may boomerang in a big way and wreak havoc to their reputation. Agrees Sunita Thawani, chief legal officer with a Tata group company: "Maybe, we'll see a similar scenario in the next decade or so, but right now one's reputation is still important for most women in India. Things are still very different here, compared to the West." And hopefully, it remains that way.

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