

Balance in Business: Who Leads? Who (still) cares?

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When we speak of a person in a particular role in a corporate, we think of the person and the role that person fills. There is another aspect that comes unbidden to the mind- the person's gender. Gender neutrality is a factor that is so key that the listener or reader is left guessing as to the gender of the person.

But gender neutrality isn't about being left guessing- we should not have the concept of gender in our minds in this matter at all. Simply the ability. To find this message or indeed any consistency in the view, that is to be the language and the speaking of it starts at the top. Just like any change in an organisation, this one too, begins at the top.

There is also the importance of building a supply chain of significantly emancipated professionals, apart from placing key personnel today, beginning at the board level. A balance built into the system with accountability and with emotional intelligence, will show the organisational commitment to employee retention rather than just placing a game changer in a key role, who just leaves shortly after.

Most of us appreciate a beautiful single coloured fabric, until we are shown the possibilities of blending in new shades, either of the same colour or different ones. Suddenly the fabric begins to mesmerise and take a life of its own with intricate weaves and new, hitherto unknown blends, woven through it.

Corporations have long sought to achieve high profits and long-term growth and profitability, indeed, all sought after goals for any self-respecting corporate to have, and perhaps to the cost of environmental damage or single mindedness of the organisation itself, leaving it unknown to the flavour of a blended existence.

That was perhaps the need of all stakeholders earlier. The realisation that one can have a hugely profitable conglomerate or individual size company, but with care as to carbon emissions or social needs is fast replacing the traditional approach to business.

As Melissa Swift of Mercer noted that white collar workers in search of a higher purpose will choose a new employer carefully and stay longer. Higher churn rates are here to stay.

Existing hands do provide a cultural ballast and joiners bring fresh skills and perspective. While keeping employees from leaving is vital, people are like water- there is such a thing as too much retention.

It has been proven many a time that invention or innovation comes out of a persistent problem. The mother of three who did not want to take her children into the petrol station to pay for fuel tweaked the model and pay at the pump was born.

When we at Week One of the MBA program at Insead, we had our Outward Bound day. At one stage of the trail we were on, we had to go over a sheer rock surface to the other side to continue the trail. No one could think how to scale the rock. The men were trying all sort of moves to climb including run ups to the rock. I remembered how we built human pyramids for a festival back home to reach a pot that was hung high above the ground. And that's how we went over the sheer rock face. Not only our group, we gave the idea to the next group that was going the same way.

No reliance on gender here. Rather it was a new perspective that took us forward.

Whether it is a board or a team, members feel comfortable enough to ask questions and have a robust discussion when they are unified in their goals and have built relationships with one another. That way they reach for the ability when they need it and from where it is best honed.

When Insead had its 50th year of women at Insead in 2017, the question of how to encourage and build a case for women in business was a strongly debated topic, the Davies Report having been released in 2015.

While the report did say that success of women in different areas of society is interconnected, the success of women in one strata can reinforce success of women in another, creating a virtuous cycle, outdated cultures at workplaces, unconscious biases and a lack of sponsorship were just among a few of the factors preventing women from reaching senior leadership roles.

As Avivah Wittenburg-Cox put it, this isn't a woman's issue or a diversity issue. That how the business world frames it. This is a business imperative.

Florence Hamilton had a unique approach to the problem. Rather than have women in business set up for Insead, she was the innovator, the force behind and the conceptual mind behind the Balance in Business Initiative at Insead UK. The successful impact mentoring programme which is now in its 7th cohort for middle management and the 2nd cohort for young leaders.

In a series of open events, it brings together industry leaders who are the stakeholders in the leading businesses today along with recruitment consultants and senior managements to have panel discussions and open conversations about how to widen the gate to allow access to a more diverse pool of talent at all levels in the businesses, starting at the board level.

These discussions force a rethink on the templates that organisations have, to see if they are the right ones.

One such discussion organised under the Balance in Business initiative was the Balance in Business- Who Leads? Who still cares? The talent perspective, between Loren Shuster of Lego, Milka Kramer of Pinterest, Suki Sandhu of Audeliss and Joelle Warren of Warren Partners and moderated by Mark Spelman, Executive committee member at the World Economic Forum.

Mark urged corporates to not only have the insights but also takeaway and apply them in their organisations and roles as leaders. He said the mid tiers within corporates were buying into the idea so how to was the next step to communicate, perhaps?

Speaking on the talent perspective, Loren stressed the need to inspire the children of tomorrow. The previously privileged middle management talent, now has new competitors for the roles, so their buy-in is much needed if this widening gate is to succeed.

Building the pipeline as it were, so that the thinking reaches even children and is inclusive to all communities which is the key to making the difference. A 50:50 representation between men and women is the desirable goal, where inherent biases are broken and hiring and retention of best talent happens.

It is common even at a board level, as was said in the Davies report, that one person of another gender hired and introduced to the organisation is usually a cause for a sudden gender awareness and much comment even, many times. But the next and the one after that bring about the fresh perspective to effect the change in the organisational culture, making it that much richer, stronger and more capable.

The key to the success here is the support the new person gets as well as the support the existing managers or senior management or workers have to deal with the changing work environment. The lack of support can cause the best game changers to leave shortly after.

Building the support systems is a long-term affair. The first steps being introducing women members to the company, at the board level. They could be from industry as well as non-industry. The argument that our industry is an all-male one is no longer valid. It never was earlier too.

I have long been the only non-male member of large, small and medium size teams across my investment banking career and across continents and countries. Bring a woman on board and organisational cultural stagnation was breathed fresh air into, given a churn and a new avatar. All for the benefit of the organisations. Companies that have never seen women in other than secretarial or assistant capacities were raring to pick brains of a woman, for no other reason than that she was capable and she had earned her seat at the top table. Companies then begin to recommend a non-male candidate, as worthy and appropriate one, to other companies too. This is true even in places where culture is overwhelmingly against non-white male employees at all managerial levels. Being gender neutral is a learning in the mind.

That's something worth fighting for and making and being the change, even one company at a time. There is nothing better or more satisfying than people seek your help, guidance, offhand conversational advice or whatever you call it- because it's the right thing to do. That is respect for your capability.

Bias recognition or suppression cannot be done really, Suki put it. This is something we have grown up with so all we can do is try and work around the value systems we have, and tweak those towards the right ones. Which ones are right? Clearly ones that allow the gate to be wide and the talent pool to flow through it with no blocks for certain groups.

As the Davies report also pointed out, setting quotas for percentage participations at board level in the UK, was not considered the right way, rather a voluntary approach was permitted for companies to work towards, within an overall desirable level. As we see, some companies have achieved the said 25% and more and some are still struggling to not begin, so to speak. It may be a case of everyone being on the road so, companies will be questioned and made accountable for not having the soon to be commonly required non-gender based hiring techniques, and perhaps by even their own shareholders.

The FTSE chairman was firm, "I profoundly feel that companies have to be grounded in society in a way that they sometimes forget, and maybe this is part of that. Where companies and society part company you have got a very perilous state for business, and capitalism if you like, so that maybe you've just got to stand."

Women have not only created a strong academic achievement platform from which they have been able to launch and progress their careers, they will also have benefited from being able to build highly- prized social capital connections connected with attendance at world-renowned academic institutions, such as Insead.

Women from the outside corporate mainstream coming onto boards as NEDs will be another as yet untapped talent pod of entrepreneurs, academics, researchers or senior women who have done so much of hands-on problem solving and hence bring a whole new perspective to look at organisational issues.

Milke spoke of building support systems for women taking up these or any other roles in companies especially with allocation of resources to sponsorship and mentorship for them, whenever and in whatever form they may need the support.

Joelle described how her firm is getting organisations to look at people with unusual career paths as part of building the diversity in the company as well as secures a pipeline regardless of background. Looking beyond the concerned once the process has been worked on can bring the right candidate forward.

It sounds so much like business schools bringing in potential business school students from diverse backgrounds to further enrich the learning experience for the students. It is what Insead looks at.

So, there is an excellent case for taking this learning into the corporate world and seeking diversity rather than homogeneity. While organisations need to be reasonably homogeneous, they need the diverse crew with hands on deck to steer the organisation to achieve better, the goals that are considered desirable today. And those certainly include being socially conscious and a responsible corporate citizen.

A way forward that may work for reluctant suitors is setting up a shadow board with non-executive employees, who work with senior executives to help leverage younger groups' insights and diversify perspectives. Their effectiveness would, for sure, depend on how much real power and influence they are given.

And that drives change. The shadow boards meeting regularly with senior management and help companies get back on their feet.

There is much made of complying, while appointing friends and family to boards, to meet the diversity criteria so much in the conversation today.

But this isn't the right thing to do- it isn't the thing to do even.

If the younger generation is to take charge and care of companies in future, exposing promising staff to strategic decision making would be the way to shape the boards of the future.

Helen Pitcher spoke as a Chair on board subcommittees, pointing out that organisations need to do what looks like taking a risk, and supporting people through that. It looks like a risk but in fact if it is managed correctly, it can be an organisational culture change that encourages people to look broadly for talent. The much-needed support needs to be at hand to help with integration into the organisation.

The future of the changing face of management and boards is becoming clearly the norm across companies when Loren said individuals can no longer be assessed in isolation away from the team goals or role at Lego.

Formal and informal teams are the new normal and evaluations on multiple and frequent data points with upward feedback surveys plus 360 degree and other formal reviews, are all part of the process and here to stay. Creating an environment where everyone has an opportunity to play a leadership role while working in a non-hierarchical organisation. What could be a better opportunity than that, for individuals to grow themselves and make that difference. One has the opportunity to!

Perhaps the paradigm of who is a leader in the present context is shifting too.

For women in organisations their work tends to be undervalued perhaps due to organisational biases. The fact remains, women tend to be over mentored and under sponsored. It is also true that at game changing moments in their careers, women also have their social or biological pressures to deal with. Biological clocks ticking and relationships that demand calling time on alpha career paths.

While there is no scientific introspection yet into whether the child bearing can be done by the male partner, the woman needs the necessary support so she can go through the child bearing, if she so wishes to do so, without fear, resistance or being shunned when she chooses to continue her career where she left off.

These are the pivotal moments of support for something that is solely not her own – a child. Yet most women spend their pregnancies hiding their state and after giving birth never mention their children until they are sufficiently senior in the organisation and reasonably secure therefore. No question yet of taking time off for children's illnesses.

A strong sponsor can help easily smooth over these difficulties. A strong sponsor is one who stands up for her when she isn't in the room. There has been no reduction in her capabilities, if that were the worry. She is still the superbly capable woman she was before she also became a mother.

This is a question I, as a woman, have faced time and again, as if a sure-fire way of getting me off the competitor list was to have me go off and have a child. It is no wonder many immensely qualified women don't want to think of coming back. The lack of empathy, if that is the right word, is pretty much gender neutral.

Another point of focus for the future generations. Women don't usually back up other women at workplaces.

Nor do men. So, it is that much harder for gender minorities to come back, even if they are, have been and will be the most capable and best qualified for that role. C'est la vie? I don't think so.

She can rock that cradle and she can rock that boardroom. All she needs is a supportive sponsor. She certainly has the skills she needs, to re-enter the workplace.

As Suki put it, empathy, vulnerability and inclusion are the key tenets going forward. Focusing on what people want with relatability to senior management.

Tiger Tyagarajan, CEO Genpact, emphasised that the requirement for leadership has become heart and mind today. While digital transformation has compressed from five years to eighteen months, the need for balance has become now.

Maintaining the newly evolved culture is a key in this new world where teams learn from engaging with apprenticeships and role models. Tiger spoke of an experiment they were trying at GE, where they opened 100 operating centres in 30 countries to replace teams elsewhere, running those countries. Country specific teams based in campuses may become redundant soon.

What can one takeaway from this?

Post covid and post COP-26, talent is right at the top so companies need to be bold and pick up this talent. There is no risk like they imagine. Companies of the future will be building pipelines to the succession of CEOs and CFOs with accountability for inclusive agendas. Sponsorship of senior women must be up and coming as well as pervading all sectors of industry and the rewards will be rich as corporates grow as well as be responsible citizens doing the right thing!