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Leadership and organisation strategy

Board quotas for women - is this really the gender issue of the day?

Do businesses need quotas to drive up the number of women at Board level? This feels like the gender question 'du jour' with the European Commission pushing again for a 40% quota for female non-executive directors on the Boards of large European companies. Certainly it seems that there is a need for more action given progress to date; the UK only achieved a 3% increase in the number of FTSE 100 female Board members from 2004-2010 despite all the guidelines and good intentions. At this rate of change the Davies Report concluded that it would take over 70 years to achieve gender-balanced Boardrooms in the UK. Clearly we need to think again as current activities aren't moving the needle, but are Boardroom quotas where our focus needs to be?

Surely the more pressing question is 'What is stopping women from occupying more mid and senior levels of leadership – leading our teams, departments and divisions?' When women make up 46% of the economically active workforce in the UK and the number of male to female graduates entering business is roughly equal, why do we see so few women occupying leadership roles? Childcare and flexible working arrangements can't completely explain away this enduring imbalance. Women are still over represented at the bottom of organisations but missing in action when it comes to roles with balance sheet responsibilities. Quotas won't deliver long-term change unless we are simultaneously expanding the pool of emerging female leaders and ensuring they have the right corporate experience to equip them to play senior roles.

The leadership blueprint

One explanation for the paucity of women in key roles is that the blueprint for leadership in business is, well, blue. Organisations have an unconscious male bias factored into how they approach leadership. Their leadership infrastructure; their competency models, assessment tools, development programmes and promotion processes are based on predominantly male behavioural data. More insidiously, this blueprint affects how we talk about successful leaders, what organisations informally encourage and assumptions about what good leadership looks like in practice. In my experience, today's organisations may be less inclined to recruit in the image of their male senior leaders but they still develop them in that mould.

Many of my female clients acknowledge that at some point they have consciously or unconsciously tried to conform to the 'leadership blueprint'. One well respected senior partner at a leading strategy consultancy confided that 'In my late twenties I worked for one of the most successful names in my industry. He was a renowned rainmaker, regularly closing multi-million dollar deals. His reputation was legendary and he would cultivate his CEO relationships to the point where there was an almost unhealthy dependency. While he had his critics, he had many more clients and fans. He was the most successful consultant in my field, so I was out to learn everything I could. I mimicked his language, behaviour and style. It worked pretty well but only up until a point. It never did feel like me and I found it draining to put on an act. Over time, and with the benefit of seeing other role models, I found the confidence to define my own business development approach that was based on my principles and my personality. Finding my own authentic style was the key to my career taking off.'

Of course, it's difficult for women not to fall into the trap of emulating male leaders. Female role models are much thinner on the ground. We tend to learn from those leadership examples we experience first in

our families and communities, through the media and then later at work. The leadership blueprint starts forming early on. Studies of children's films and TV programmes show an alarmingly disproportionate representation of males to females in lead roles. Of course you could argue that it's irrelevant that most of our cartoon superheroes tend to be male. However it serves establish unconscious norms and expectations around leadership that are hard to shake, even when as adults we endorse values or quotas to the contrary.

Check in with the business schools and you will see the same pattern. Leadership theory is written from a male perspective and often informed by a male research base. Academics have struggled to represent a balanced gender view in their work because this balance simply doesn't yet exist in most businesses. HBR case studies can't help but reinforce gender stereotypes if Richard Branson, Jack Welsh and Steve Jobs are our business heroes. This costs women dearly though because it means the language, behaviours and mindsets that underpin our leadership thinking have an inherent gender bias.

So in the workplace, in our business schools and in society generally, our female leaders are accumulating their leadership learning from watching men in action. It's a triple whammy against the development of women leaders and it goes some way to explaining why we are missing women not only at Board level but across the corporate leadership population at large.

Institutionalising gender bias

Your organisation may proudly declare itself to be a meritocracy and have specific policies to promote diversity. However, if its leadership model is founded on traditional Human Resources data, then it makes it harder for other successful 'more female' manifestations of leadership to get the same recognition. In experimental situations where male and female performances are objectively equal, woman are held to higher standards and their competence is rated lower. You can test this out for yourself. Try closing your eyes next time you are part of a talent discussion and listen to how the behaviour and track records of the male candidates are described compared to the female contenders. You won't need to conduct dialogue analysis to see who your leadership criteria serve the best. Businesses need to ask whether they are expecting women to jump through male orientated leadership hoops to make progress.

More recent leadership theories have factored in what are often described as more 'female leadership qualities' such as communication, collaboration and interpersonal skills. Emotional intelligence is a more recent addition to leadership models and generally seen to be an area where women excel. Nonetheless while decisiveness, drive and risk taking continue to be viewed as predominantly masculine attributes, female candidates may be pigeon holed for 'softer' roles. Clearly defining leadership qualities in terms of being male or female isn't constructive and can ostracise individuals of both genders.

Counting the cost for women

Approaching leadership through this male lens creates problems for women in the long run. It leaves them working on a development track that encourages them to gloss over who they naturally are and play down the difference their gender makes to their leadership.

One high flyer in a prestigious asset management business was negatively judged for her tenacity and competitiveness; essential characteristics for her environment. She commented, 'I never wanted to be written off as someone who couldn't take the heat in business so made sure I adopted the same 'in your face' tactics as my male colleagues when it came to competing for resources or opportunities. However, the continuum between assertive and aggressive is a tricky one for women to tread. I've seen men laugh off seriously fierce exchanges as simply 'getting carried away in the heat of the moment'. Being labelled as an assertive woman attracts a lot of negative judgement here and allows people to dismiss you as being too emotional. My mentor was very honest in saying that I would never be promoted while people described me as a 'challenging woman'. Since then I have learned to hold my ground but in an understated steely

fashion, which is actually much more like me. I generally win the business argument or the client, but you will never hear me raise my voice.'

A recent overview of more than 100 studies, confirmed that women were rated lower when they adopted stereotypically masculine authoritative leadership styles. This is sobering news given how many women spend time trying to fake the male leadership behaviours they believe their organisation will reward.

Another successful executive in a global pharmaceutical reflected on how she used to try to mimic the 'one of the boys' locker room talk when engaging her team and peers. This was the only example she had seen for inspiring a team. 'Finding my own leadership voice required me to forge a more personal communication approach that was based on my values and motivations. Previously I had felt invisible as a mid level female leader and was tempted to settle for the 'Mommy track'. Equally, I believed I had much more I could give and achieve if I could channel my own strengths and establish my own distinctive point of view. Recent feedback confirms that colleagues now have a better sense of who I am, what I stand for as a leader and my view on the key issues facing this business. I am no longer trying to borrow someone else's leadership voice. Today I am proud to provide an alternative leadership example to the white American male norm that prevails in this business.'

Less dramatically, many women report that they simply get tired of trying to be the leader their organisation wants them to be because it feels like borrowing a male voice, set of behaviours or style. More worryingly this can drive talented women to opt out of the corporate race and switch their ambitions from the professional to the personal. Again the research supports this need for authenticity, not just from an energy point of view but from a performance one. The data behind Bill George's book, 'True North' highlights that it may be possible to produce short-term outcomes without being authentic but long-term consistent results require authentic leadership. Women won't be successful leaders by trying to imitate their male counterparts. Before organisations adopt quotas, they need to take the more elementary step to check they aren't unconsciously working to a gender biased leadership model.

Break points

Individually, there comes a point when senior women are brought face to face with the limits of the business's accepted leadership mantra and are prompted to think again. For some of my clients the turning point comes when they have the track record, confidence or seniority to flex their company's leadership norms with impunity. Others press the pause button when they experience alternative leadership styles and their eyes are opened to new options. Others hit a performance wall and realise that pushing harder with the same leadership approach isn't going to change anything.

Whatever prompts a leader to pause and take stock of their leadership impact is both individual and complex. But it is at this point that many women realise that they have been trying to live up to a generic leadership blueprint that doesn't really work for them. This realisation, if acted on, can act as a rite of passage enabling women to make a step change in their leadership impact and confidence.

Taking action

Whatever our gender, we need to guard against adopting a development approach that isn't tailored to our personal needs, aspirations and realities. If we believe that gender is a formative part of identity, then it must also be a formative part of how we approach leadership.

Some organisations are taking brave steps in this field. They are actively nurturing more diverse leadership styles and identifying where gender bias might unconsciously be part of their leadership processes or inherent to how their managers are using these tools.

From an individual perspective, a regular 'leadership health check' can help you stay alert to your true development needs. If it's been some time since you took stock or you feel frustrated by your lack of traction, then it could be timely to ask yourself the following questions.

1. What's not in play when it comes to your leadership?

There may be aspects of your personality and character that you have deliberately filtered out of your professional persona. We all make efforts to tone down particular behaviours, but often what you selected out in your twenties may have a mature and valuable application at forty five. For example, tapping into your genuine personal frustration around an issue in a deliberate and balanced manner may be just the way to 'raise the heat' and force action.

2. Where is the generic approach not working for you?

We can go along with 'good enough' for too long without stopping to question whether it truly works for us. Look at your development plan, the quality and regularity of your feedback, the career conversations you have with your manager, your executive education to date and your career goals. If they are working and tailored to propel you to where you want to go, then leave well alone. If not, then how do you take them up a notch?

3. What's your next leadership risk?

Sometimes what we need to propel us forward is a step into the unknown. Being in the same area for too long may reduce your development options. While there is undoubtedly a time and a place for taking risks in a career, we can generally be more strategic about this. Many leaders have never taken the time to identify those specific experiences or challenges that would help equip them for their next leadership role, whether their sights are on the Board or something else. Do you know what these experiences are for you? Simply articulating them will help you to spot potential opportunities. It will also keep you questioning whether now is the time to make your next developmental move.

Taking the opportunity to pause, take stock, ditch those 'borrowed' leadership behaviours can be incredibly cathartic. It may be a rite of passage that you never forget or a 10-20% realignment that helps you apply your leadership energy and strengths in a far more powerful and rewarding way. Recalibrating your leadership approach to one that fits you is a personal prescription for long-term success. As Warren Bennis said, 'Becoming a leader is synonymous with becoming yourself. It is precisely that simple, and it is also that difficult.'

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