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Gender Equality Is Everyone's Business



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The U.S. Senate did not have a ladies' room until 1992. Worse yet, the House of Representatives first had one installed in 2011—when there were 76 Congresswomen. While these facts may seem shocking, they expose how both organizations thought about who was expected to come to work. I am fairly certain the restroom issue has been resolved in all of your workplaces, but wonder: are you creating an environment in which women can truly succeed—not just use the facilities?

When I began my career in banking, diversity initiatives were in their nascent stages, and human resources departments around the country instituted language to promote what they christened a “culture of tolerance.” I remember thinking, what a peculiar word choice—that one group of people might “tolerate” another, and that in so doing, the issue would be resolved. The very notion of this is demeaning—no one wants to be tolerated.

Language is a tricky thing. Well-intentioned attempts at wordsmithing a company's focus on creating a level playing field often stumble. For example, “female empowerment” imparts a superior standing to the giver and implies a company is conferring rights to women they otherwise would not have. That's nonsensical; women don't need to be empowered with rights they already have. What they need is a fair chance to prosper. Nearly every company today has diversity initiatives targeting women, and, despite countless hours and dollars thrown at the issue over the past 30 years, nearly 95 percent of Fortune 500 CEOs today are men.

This status quo seems hard to change, despite the fact that half the population and more than half of the college graduates in the U.S. are female. While many studies focus on what women can do to rise to the senior-most ranks, maybe we need to also consider the root causes of how children come to understand the roles of both genders.

Before birth, many parents paint nurseries in shades of pink and blue, as if colors are somehow infused with gender at their core. Even as you read those words, you immediately knew that pink was for girls and blue for boys, including all the presuppositions you have about what makes someone a girl or boy, and what type of activities, jobs, and clothing typically belong to each. Your list may be different than mine, but in this context, it's fairly easy to see the unconscious biases that infiltrate our workplaces.

Gender stereotyping becomes hardwired early on, reinforced by play. Traditional boys' games tend to have good guys and bad guys with winners and losers; girls' games tend to be more social and collaborative. Those well-honed behaviors don't just turn off when one enters the workforce, and data consistently suggests leveraging both sets of skills makes companies more successful. Creating opportunities for men and women to be equally recognized and rewarded can be a significant challenge when existing performance appraisal and promotion paradigms grew from corporate structures which are largely white, straight, and male.

What can corporate leaders do?

Stop tasking just women with solving an issue they did not create. Many organizations don't even realize that this is what affinity groups and the like tend to do, but decades of trying proves these are not all that helpful. Men must take part in this conversation.

Get diversity and inclusion initiatives out of the human resources department.

There is a business imperative to respond to the needs and talents of women, and these efforts need to be embedded front and center. Half the talent pool, customer base, and competitors are women; companies wed to a male-dominated model will fall behind. Make business line managers accountable for specific targets and reduce or reward their compensation accordingly.

Rethink the language you use to talk about gender—and talk about gender.

Senior managers should have frank, in-depth conversations and ask directly "what is it like as a woman working at this company?" That might be scary, but the only way to get to the truth is to ask, listen, and act upon the answers.

Anonymize resumes. At the Milken Institute, our HR director previews resumes we receive and removes names and any gender-identifying language before passing it along to the hiring manager. This allows talents and experience to shine without any bias of gender.

Stop treating parenting as a women's issue. Treat employees of both genders as co-parents and respond with policies, benefits, and language to end the perception of "mommy-tracking."

There is no quick fix—or perfect mix—of initiatives that will produce a business environment that supports success for every employee, regardless of race, creed, color, gender, or orientation. But every small, deliberate step your company takes can help tackle this critical issue.