



# Motivating leaders to champion gender equity

Across different arenas, ranging from the world of film to our classrooms at University, from boardrooms to newsrooms across the globe, an important conversation about gender equality has taken center stage. A new generation of leaders is coming forward and has raised this issue high in the global consciousness.


**F**irst let me make a distinction between the terms gender equality and gender equity. They are related terms and sound similar but have different meanings. Related to gender and the workplace, equity sets the stage for equality. Gender equality means that the rights of women and men, their responsibilities and opportunities do not depend on whether they were born female or male. Gender equity, on the other hand means “fairness of treatment for men and women according to their respective needs. This may include equal treatment or treatment that is different but which is considered equivalent in terms of rights, benefits, obligations, and opportunities” (United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organisation – UNESDOC).

If equality is the end goal, equity is the means to get there. A first important step however, is that we need to move away from deficit thinking – an ideology that blames victims of oppression

for their own situation. Several metaphors have been used to depict how we should deal with inequality and inequity – from the three people watching a baseball game over the top of the fence being provided with different sized boxes to manage to see over the fence; to different animals having to climb a tree; to people picking fruit. But in all of them the core metaphor speaks of deficits in the actors.

Another metaphor that could challenge this deficit thinking and address more systemic inequalities is that of runners on an oval racing track. The outer tracks are longer than the inner lanes, so starting everyone at the same place would make some run farther than others. That is why runners start at different places along the track. The Canadian Association for the Advancement of Women and Sport (CAAWS) uses the same sporting terms to explain the difference between equality and equity. Yet it is an allegory that fits very well in the business world too. “Equality





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The initial impetus behind efforts to provide equitable opportunities is often a sense of social justice. Yet, companies have increasingly begun to regard inclusion and diversity as a source of competitive advantage, and specifically as a key enabler of growth. The business case for gender equality in the workplace is well established.

Research carried out by Hunt, Yea, Prince and Dixon-Fyle (2018), and reported in a McKinsey and Company report *“Delivering through Diversity”*, reinforces the link between gender diversity and company financial performance. Companies in the top quartile for gender diversity on their executive teams were 21 percent more likely to experience above-average profitability than companies in the fourth quartile. This in itself should be a good-enough motivator for leaders to champion gender equity. Hunt et al’s research (2018) confirms that gender, ethnic, and cultural diversity, particularly within executive teams, continues to be correlated to financial performance across multiple countries worldwide.

They have shown that more diverse companies are better able to attract top talent, and to improve their customer orientation, employee satisfaction and decision-making. Diverse teams are also associated with greater innovative capacity in an organisation. Gender diversity brings together varied perspectives, produces a more holistic analysis of the company issues and spurs greater effort, leading to improved decision-making.

Yet women remain underrepresented at every level of the workforce — and while most companies want to do the right thing and shift this dynamic, it is tricky to know what steps to take in order to effect real change.

Let’s be clear: changes in companies and organisations are only part of the solution. Women still bear disproportionate family and household burdens, and pressures stemming from social and cultural norms often rob them of the chance to retain positions at work or advance in their careers. Men who work long hours and are never home are hailed as heroes, women as selfish. It may sound foolish but offering paternity leave – offering men time off can help women stay. Parental leave should be generous with both men and women if we want that the obligations of parenthood be shared equitably. By encouraging men to take parental leave it would lessen the stigma of taking time off and would help eradicate the motherhood bias.

There are other things and practices that organisations can adopt to bring about change, and ensure that gender equity becomes the route through which gender equality is reached.

One important step that Jennifer Brown, a diversity and inclusion consultant, author and speaker suggests is that of creating a culture within the workplace that offers the safety and sense of belonging that allows teams to cultivate a deeper sense of connection and belonging. Within such a culture, people could find the courage to tell their “diversity story”. Sensitizing leaders to such stories, allows them to come in touch with lived experiences of women in their teams who have been excluded or not given opportunities, simply because of the fact that they are women. It may also lead them to acknowledge their own experiences of exclusion, providing a springboard for empathizing and understanding what being left out means. This experience could appeal to leaders’ sense of social justice and could drive them towards the change necessary for the fair treatment of women in the workplace. Leaders also need to have conversations and discussions that make them question their behaviour and spur them to change it. Leaders must constantly scrutinise their own behaviours and actions, big and small, and remain constantly aware of how they impact those around them at the workplace.

Therefore a major driver of change is buy-in from the top. We need CEOs who make it a priority to build diverse teams and put women in key leadership positions. The rest of the organisation will follow suit. Organisations need to make a public commitment to build a diverse and inclusive workforce. This provides the opportunity for the measure of progress, accountability and transparency.

Mentors can have an important role in advancing women in the workplace. These would create a safe space wherein women may be challenged to grow in confidence and self-assurance in worlds often dominated by men. Men and women in senior positions can partner and play complementary roles that lead to gender change.

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« create a level playing field where merit will win out. Instead we need to embrace a broader range of leadership behaviours whoever they are displayed by. Stereotypes of managerialist leadership need to be challenged and moulds broken. Instead of expecting women to align with one stereotype or another, organisations need to establish a corporate culture where women can simply be themselves. This complementarity is core to a more complete leadership in any organisation.

Attracting diverse candidates means nothing in the long-run if they do not stay. Companies need to develop a culture that supports and cultivates female talent. This means implementing programmes that help women not only stay in the workforce but thrive too. Practical measures like breastfeeding facilities for mothers of infants, return-to-work programmes and parental leave provisions could all contribute towards the retention of women in the workforce. One very effective measure I have seen working in different organisations, and which costs nothing extra is remote-working. These measures allow women to stay with the company and to reach decision-making positions and

contribute to the success of any organization. It is always such a pity to see women being stalled in their career progression because of family and caring commitments. It is not rocket science to acknowledge that high staff turnover is associated with the loss of specialist knowledge and productivity. Hiring and training new employees could be very costly. Women would remain if workplace policies support gender equality, if an organisation is viewed as fair and where there is a proactive diversity climate.

It is evident that significant drivers of inclusion involve clearly defined paths for promotion, a flexible work culture and mentorship. While acknowledging that change is hard, it is often a question of stopping current practices and doing something new. Incentivising and rewarding change works. Gender equity can be championed if we focus on changing the system, for all genders.

*(The list of references is available from the editor on request)*



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