

TAYLOR OSBORNE

Executive Research



Gender diversity, as a governance issue, is a hotly-debated topic that has attracted the attention of all organisations. The re-evaluation and re-assimilation of the senior executive pipeline with a key priority for diversity by our corporate clients at Taylor Osborne Executive Research, especially from the Financial Services, Pharmaceuticals, and Fast Moving Consumer Goods (FMCGs) industries, has been increasingly evident in more recent years. It is particularly noteworthy that the development of this imperative has progressed beyond the dimension of gender, to bring in an array of other demographic qualities, including cultural and geographical distinctions, to create the finest value of their organisational output and for their community. Conceivably, companies have evolved their intent behind pursuing the diversity endeavor to represent an international strategy given the business and economic case for a more diverse leadership pool (e.g. Campbell & Minguez-Vera, 2008; Carter, Simkins, & Simpson, 2003), as opposed to a mere obligatory box that needs to be ticked to comply with a certain quota, which has undeniably accelerated the diversity movement. Still, it remains crucial to judiciously manage a diverse workforce by creating an environment that promotes inclusion and makes provision for its optimum benefits.

The issue of gender diversity

A notable but slow progression for gender diversity has been evident over the last 20 years. The UK has witnessed a twofold increase in the presence of women on corporate boards since 2011 to reach 23.5% and the abolition of all-male boards in FTSE 100 companies (Vinnicombe et al., 2015). When compared by industry, the Power and Utilities, Media and Entertainment, Telecommunications, and Retail sectors account for markedly higher levels of gender diversification in their corporate boardrooms and executive C-suites (e.g. EY, 2013). This disparity, however, could be consequential of the shortage of women in certain fields, such as Technology, Oil and Gas, and Real Estate. Still, women remain conspicuously underrepresented in the top echelons of organisations, across all industries and countries. Several explanations for this phenomenon, at their core, are grounded in the gendered societal mindset and founded on the postulation that women are ill-suited to be successful leaders.

The problematic definition of leadership

Although there is a lack of consensus for a single, universal definition of what effective leadership denotes, the prevailing collaborative emphasis of the function is reflected in Yukl's (2006) definition: "the process of influencing others to understand and agree about what needs to be done and how to do it, and the process of facilitating individual and collective efforts to accomplish the shared objectives." Yet, leadership predominantly remains a fuzzy category in that there are no definite characteristics or qualities that firmly and objectively distinguish all

leaders from all non-leaders (Cantor & Mischel, 1979). As a result, there is a propensity to abstract and employ the leadership prototype, transmitted through our culture and learned from socialisation experiences with others, to prescribe what a leader should look like and who could be a leader. However, within society, and more specifically the leadership context, gender operates as a deeply engrained and powerful status cue whereby men are perceived as more competent in leadership roles, relative to women. In contrast, in the majority of societal arenas, the feminine gender role is ascribed more communal competences, of being interpersonally dependent, exhibiting a nurturing and sensitive nature, and retaining a concern for the well-being of others. This gender-typed cultural expectation is patently incongruent with the more agentic 'masculine' qualities that typify the implicit leadership theory, such as being independent, self-confident, ambitious, dominant, and aggressive, purportedly required to be a successful leader (Heilman, Block, Martell, & Simon, 1989). Thus, women find themselves trapped in a double bind – a woman is perceived as weak and incompetent if she manifests a communal, theory Y leadership style, and as competent albeit cold and unlikeable if she engages in more agentic, confident behaviours by reason of the incongruence with the conventional feminine character.

The dissonance between leadership stereotypes and the traditional female gender role propagates a succession of obstacles and atypical passages fabricated exclusively around women to navigate for their professional achievement, which Kark and Eagly (2010) refer to as the organisational labyrinth. These structural barriers are: 1) underlined by the tendency to draw a parallel between managerial advancement and the ability to work long hours or inclination to relocate, 2) embedded within a male-dominated culture that disseminates masculine-biased values and expectations, 3) reflected in the comparatively less leverageable professional networks women build in the workplace, and 4) bolstered by the continuous sidetracking of women in staff or support functions such as human resources or administrative services, – all operating to restrict the career progression of women. Furthermore, within a selection context, there is a latent bias that permeates through the job criterion and recruitment process itself, revealing the upper hierarchies of the workplace as male-typical and unsuitable for women.

The Solution

Notwithstanding, there are several managerial interventions that can and should collectively be implemented at all levels of the organisational pipeline, to eradicate the roots of this multifaceted problem and create a more gender inclusive workspace. First and foremost, organisations must advocate gender equitable procedures that moderate the adverse impact of decision-making biases and support the ability to remain objective in human resource practices. A comprehensive option would entail introducing gender-blind screening processes, explicitly stating the selection and promotion criterion, and providing formal programs that promote awareness of and propose to weaken the psychological forces driving an ingrained 'think-leader-think-male' mindset (Sczesny, 2003). Second, Eagly and Carli (2007) recommend for this diversity commitment to extend to the goal of accumulating a critical mass of women in senior-level positions, and within teams, to circumvent 'pigeonholing' them in conventional roles or a narrow set of positions. Furthermore, the authors also underline the importance of stimulating the influx of women into line management jobs to afford them the access to developmental opportunities for indispensable managerial experience, facilitating women to build supportive and powerful mentoring relationships, and initiating more flexible work arrangements to support work-life balance (e.g. flextime, work sharing, child-care and elder-care programs).

In sum, organisations must fortify their efforts in creating a gender-inclusive work environment that welcomes women in leadership positions and with a view to unlock the full potential of diversity, leveraging a tangible competitive advantage.

References:

- Campbell, K., & Minguez-Vera, A. (2008). Gender diversity in the boardroom and firm financial performance. *Journal of Business Ethics, 83*, 435-451.
- Cantor, N., & Mischel, W. (1979). Prototypes in person perception. In L. Berkowitz (Ed.), *Advances in experimental social psychology* (Vol. 12, pp. 3-52). New York: Academic Press.
- Eagly, A. H., & Carli, L. L. (2007). *Through the labyrinth: the truth about how women become leaders*. Boston: Harvard Business School Press.
- EY (2013). Diversity drives diversity: from the boardroom to the C-suite. Retrieved November 13, 2015 from [http://www.ey.com/Publication/vwLUAssets/EY-Diversity-drives-diversity/\\$FILE/EY-Diversity-drives-diversity.pdf](http://www.ey.com/Publication/vwLUAssets/EY-Diversity-drives-diversity/$FILE/EY-Diversity-drives-diversity.pdf).
- Heilman, M. E., Block, C. J., Martell, R. F., & Simon, M. C. (1989). Has anything changed? Current characterizations of men, women, and managers. *Journal of Applied Psychology, 74*, 935-942.
- Kark, R., & Eagly, A. (2010). Gender and leadership: negotiating the labyrinth. In J. C. Chrisler & D. R. McCreary (Eds.), *Handbook of gender research in psychology*. New York: Springer.
- Sczesny, S. (2003). A closer look beneath the surface: various facets of the think-manager-think-male stereotype. *Sex Roles, 49*, 353-363.
- Vinnicombe, S., Doldor, E., Sealy, R., Pryce, P., & Turner, C. (2015). *The Female FTSE Board Report 2015*. Cranfield School of Management.
- Yukl, G. (2006). *Leadership in organizations* (6th ed.). Upper Saddle River, NJ: Pearson-Prentice Hall.