

The Plain Guide for Leaders: Achieving Gender Diversity Painlessly

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More diverse organisations achieve better commercial results. Different communication, decision making, and problem -solving styles contribute to better performance. Women make up 51% of the adult population but are underrepresented at senior levels, because they are lost along the way. Losing talented women is wasteful and costly. They often go to your competitors who are keen to get their gender balance to a much more modern level. There is increasing pressure through government demands for transparency, quotas and internal balanced scorecards, but good leadership is all it takes to achieve better balance. It can seem like a political - correctness mine field - too dangerous to manoeuvre so best avoided. In fact, just a few good leadership conversations and simple actions will make all the difference.

Recruitment

It is easy for men to appoint those they recognise and understand, usually other men. Women are often wary of appointing women in case it looks like partiality. Both of these views perpetuate gender imbalance.

1. Make the decision that you will lead the way to gender balance one woman at a time Aim to make the next appointment a woman (unless you are already at 50:50 - in which case - well done!)
2. Stamp out unintentional discrimination. Assumptions about strong leadership correlating with widely held beliefs about male behaviour, cause senior executives to fill leadership positions with more men than women. Gender plays a role in skewing performance evaluations at the most senior levels. Women's gender traditionally has been believed to be a relevant issue in performance, and a factor that could interfere with her ability to fit in with other executives. As a result, despite scoring higher on measures of job performance, women lag behind men on ratings of promotability.
3. Ensure that recruiters know that you want them to provide you with a balanced group of both male and female candidates. Don't ever believe that there just aren't any talented women out there. Make them look harder.

4. Search out the women you need on LinkedIn and through other networks. Find mutual contacts. Pursue them directly.
5. Make sure the interviewing panel has solid female representation - not just from HR
6. Check your assessments are free from Unconscious Bias at every stage. E.g. Women do much better when applications have gender removed. (Check out Howard and Heidi research)
7. Analyze letters of recommendation with an understanding that all referees (female and male) use language that tends to underrate women and overrate men.
8. If it comes down to two good candidates, take the woman- until you have reached balance. Otherwise you will never catch up.
9. Research shows that if you can find a way of intimating that a woman could be preferred, the quality of your candidates immediately rises. More mediocre men, who might have taken a punt, assume they won't have a chance and women who don't feel 100% qualified will put themselves forward. So whichever gender you select, you are choosing from a higher talent pool

Talent Management

Women are more considered in their career progression than men. They do not apply till they feel they are ready, while men are more likely to just give it a go, knowing they will learn on the job. As a result women can be overlooked when, in fact, ready for promotion. There is also some evidence of unconscious bias causing leaders to assume it will take longer for women to be 'promotion ready' than their male counterparts.

As a leader you will want to foster talent using a more individualistic approach. Key points:

1. **Women (and millenials) want to build real relationships** - Collaboration, a process that allows for diverse perspectives, and building of relationships to establish robust dialogue are all highly valued and have been shown to produce greater profits, and return on shareholder value.
2. **Ensure that women's opinions and concerns are heard.** Foster an environment of inclusion by quite simply managing meetings better. Stop the bad habits of interrupting, talking over and talking down which disengage women and more introverted men. Ensure

everyone gets their turn. Women need to have a platform for expressing why and how they arrived at their conclusions. This allows for context and relationship building.

3. **Clarity and transparency about how senior leaders are chosen.** If talent management is fair, women rise to the top. Make sure women know exactly what it will take to get them to the next level. Then put everything in place to support them.
4. **Give them breadth of experience.** At the bank, many women develop depth of knowledge but fall short on achieving the same range of experiences that men are included in. Broaden the opportunities that women are offered.
5. **Play to their strengths.** As with any of your direct reports, ensure you know and recognise their strengths and encourage them to play to them. Too many women have been told to 'act like a man', 'talk like a man' etc. It doesn't convince anyone. Encourage all your staff to be authentic and their best selves.

Retention

Women are like the canaries down the mine. They leave if they feel things aren't quite right in the culture. It is usually because a 'straw broke the camel's back'. i.e. a seemingly trivial event that proved just one too many irritations. They also never tell you the truth about why they are leaving. But they are going to a competitor not home to bake cupcakes! It could have been prevented and precious talent retained. Here's how:

1. **Women (like many men and all millenials) want regular feedback.** Traditionally, they have been told to toughen up and not ask for feedback. That's not how people work nowadays. They want to know how well they are doing, what they can do better and where they should seek development. Invest in regular, positive feedback and you will not only get higher performance, you are much more likely to retain both men and women.
2. **Do not accept resignations without exploring what it would take to get them to stay.** Their leaving may not be inevitable. Women feel they are taken for granted and so have to go to a new job to get noticed. Find out what is it they are looking for - which opportunity, how much of a raise, what development, how much more agile working? It is worth the negotiation to retain valuable talent. It is so much cheaper to keep someone than hire someone new.
3. **Organise the right experiences to ensure that women are 'promotion ready' at the same time as their male counterparts.** Currently their progress is often slower due to less exposure to new opportunities, different expectations and just plain old unconscious bias.

4. **Build a reputation as the kind of leader who fosters women.** You will be rewarded with great loyalty and it will be easier to recruit more women when they perceive a female friendly atmosphere. You really do not want the reputation as someone that women just don't want to work for!

Maternity

Women say their bosses don't ask them about their plans during pregnancy. The majority of women want and need to keep working and fail to return only because they cannot see how it is possible to combine child raising and a career. Bosses worry that they are 'not allowed to' talk about any of this or that they should leave it to HR. New parents - both male and female worry about both their infants and their jobs. It is possible for a leader to make it all a much smoother process for both genders- even if they did not have the same options in their careers.

1. **Have the conversation.** Start with how you value them, ask about their vision of their own future, discuss how they are planning the next stage of their life.
2. **Agree what your role is** - what they need you to do, how much you and they will keep in touch (KIT), how they would like to carry out their re-entry.
3. **Provide role models** - if women cannot see anyone like themselves ahead then they assume this is not the place for them. If you already have women combining career and home life successfully, make them visible to women ideally even earlier in their careers so they can begin to see how it could be done.