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Your Company Doesn't Need a Women's Network

by Avivah Wittenberg-Cox | 9:00 AM June 12, 2013

Another women's conference finds another predominantly female group of HR Directors seeking to improve the gender balance in their firms. In reality, women are working far too hard at an issue actually beyond their power to solve. Corporate leaders must recognize that additional women-dominated efforts are not the way to get companies to take the gender issue seriously. Rather, the solution requires action by those in leadership positions, still frustratingly rare, as hundreds of women at the recent JUMP Conference in Paris acknowledged.

How much longer must we witness the following scenario repeat itself?

A group of men who decide (or are told by government) that they need more women in their teams turn to the few women in senior roles and task them with finding a solution. The women, delighted with this glimmer of interest in their fate, duly throw themselves (in their free time, on top of their day jobs) into launching usually unfunded corporate women's networks and draft a business case on the corporate advantages of gender balance. A senior woman is put in charge and sent to every external conference as a corporate representative. This results in a women's conference with lots of motivational speakers and a few male 'champions' to encourage the girls. Sound familiar?

At first, everyone is happy. The women are delighted to have some time to themselves. As one senior woman in a Magic Circle law firm told me, "It's the only place where we can, just momentarily, be ourselves." The men are delighted that they are 'doing something' for women.

But after a few years, the ladies grow embittered, pointing out how little progress has been made in the actual balance of leadership. The gentlemen reaffirm that, despite 'all that they have done for women', the ladies still aren't able to make it.

This sidesteps the real issue: that the men currently in power may not actually have the skills and knowledge to effectively manage across genders (not to mention across nationalities, the other global elephant in the room). Women's networks and activities end up as politically savvy deflectors for blame. At the JUMP Conference, the lead on Accenture's global women's networks had the courage to agree with me that women's networks were used more to placate women than to promote them.

This was also the consensus view of my three male co-panelists. There was vociferous agreement that until today's male-dominated and masculine-normed leadership teams decide to proactively change the balance by pulling women into power, most corporate women's networks will remain nice places to hang out — and a noose for the gender-balance effort to hang itself on.

Different results require different actions:

1. Use existing women's networks to lobby for real change. Get each woman in the network to sign a petition requesting that the Executive Team accept accountability for gender balance - with targets, KPIs and a budget, like any other business initiative. Evaluate managers on their performance in building more balanced teams. (So, for example, at Facebook, Sandberg wouldn't be tasking women to 'lean in', but rather evaluating the majority of men on their ability to promote balanced teams. The focus should be on the management skills of developing balance, not on the candidates in an unconsciously biased system).

2. Redefine women's networks as 'balance networks' that include both men and women. Their goal becomes skill- and bridge-building around gender understanding rather than segregation. HSBC bank in London was converted at its first meeting. Their 'Balance network' inclusively involves 100% of employees in learning about the differences between male and female employees, customers and careers.

3. Get men to lead the charge, as some are starting to sound ready. Identify male leaders brave enough to confront other men with the need for balance - and perceptive enough to understand the skills necessary to do so. Some of them are even starting to go public, like Warren Buffett (<http://money.cnn.com/2013/05/02/leadership/warren-buffett-women.pr.fortune/index.html>) , John Chambers (<http://www.businessinsider.com/all-cisco-managers-must-read-lean-in-2013-3>) at CISCO or Paul Polman (<http://www.unilever.com/mediacentre/newsandfeatures/unilever-sponsors-15th-annual-win-conference.aspx>) at Unilever.

I'm not against women's networks per se. In fact, I founded one of Europe's largest (www.EuropeanPWN.net) . External women's networks serve many vital purposes including lobbying, information sharing, education, and mentoring. It's just that internally, they inadvertently (or manipulatively, depending on the company) marginalize women into a separate group from the one currently in power. And keep them there.