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5 Tips on Removing Blind Spots and Institutional Barriers to Gender Equality

By Rayona Sharpnack

Having worked on the issue of women's equality in the workplace for more than 25 years, I can tell you without hesitation that there are three powerful leverage points that must be addressed before we can achieve full gender partnership:

- Empowering and supporting women leaders
- Engaging men to advance women
- Identifying and transforming institutional blind spots and systemic barriers

We are definitely making progress on the first two. Today I want to address how to make progress on the third (and possibly the most resistant to change).

1. Insist on transparency of data – Do you know how many women vs. men hold management positions at your company? As Google said last May when they were the first high tech company to release data like this: "We've always been reluctant to publish numbers about the diversity of our workforce at Google. We now realize we were wrong, and that it's time to be candid about the issues. Put simply…it's hard to address these kinds of challenges if you're not prepared to discuss them openly, and with the facts."

For Google, the facts are that only 17% of their engineers are female, and only 21% of the company's leadership. Only one of the company's top 12 executives -- YouTube chief Susan Wojcicki -- is a woman. With data transparency, the facts speak for themselves. No more claims that women have equal opportunity as they advance up the management ladder or try for high-paying tech jobs. The bonus for companies who bite the transparency bullet? Transparency builds trust.

2. Conduct rigorous exit interviews – Many supervisors think they know why women are leaving their company. "She wants to stay home with her kids." "She isn't up to the pressure." And so on. They're wrong. Let's take high tech as an example – a field that desperately needs more talent to meet its projections for innovation and growth.

A study by the National Bureau of Economic Research found that that "the women who leave tech go into other industries, and the single most important reason they give for leaving tech is dissatisfaction with their pay and promotion opportunities" – not family needs or work-life balance.

A secondary but compelling reason women leave is a hostile and unwelcoming environment. This isn't limited to high tech, either. Demeaning jokes and comments, being excluded from guy-only staff bonding activities, and being left out of the loop on important projects or company strategies also tell women they aren't really a part of the team.

How many of the women with whom you have done exit interviews have told you the unvarnished truth about why they are leaving? Until you learn how to elicit these real reasons, you won't be able to show there's a problem that needs correcting. Hire a third party to increase your chances of getting candid feedback.

3. Conduct a gender-pay audit – Talk about biting the transparency bullet, more and more companies are now doing gender-pay audits and publishing the results. Companies that are committed to paying their women the same as their men for comparable work now include Salesforce.com (the first firm to do so), GoDaddy, The Gap, Raytheon, and Microsoft.

But you can conduct a gender-pay audit without public disclosure of the results if that's "a bridge too far" for top management. The important point is to KNOW whether you are paying women less than man, a fact that you may be unaware of. An audit like this is not about blame or shame, it is about providing information on which you can base future decisions.

4. Correlate annual employee-engagement scores with the percentage of women in leadership roles – Employee engagement isn't a "nice to have." It's critical. Recent research from Deloitte found that "Teams that operate in an inclusive culture outperform their peers by a staggering 80 percent."

Gallup finds employees who work for a female manager are six percentage points more engaged, on average, than those who work for a male manager -- 33% to 27%, respectively. Female employees who work for a female manager are the most engaged, at 35%. Male employees who report to a male manager are the least engaged, at 25% -- a difference of 10 points.

5. Comb your talent reviews for biased language or standards – Fortune.com was the first to publish work by linguist Kieran Snyder showing that women's performance reviews contain feedback that is more negative in tone than men's do, with words like bossy, abrasive, strident, and aggressive often popping up in the women's evaluations. (The results were similar whether a man or woman was performing the review.)

New research by Stanford's Clayman Institute for Gender Research reports that "managers are significantly more likely to critique female employees for coming on too strong, and their accomplishments are more likely than men's to be seen as the result of team, rather than individual efforts." Again, those trends appear to hold up whether the boss making the assessments is male or female. Many companies are taking these findings seriously. To prompt managers to be objective when assessing employees, firms like Ernst & Young and Deloitte are developing research-based criteria to remove gut feelings from promotion decisions and performance reviews, and Google has developed a bias checklist for use during assessments.

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