



Changing hats

by Stephanie Caunter

A VESTED INTEREST

One of the subjects that I am passionate about (well, apart from my daughter and my work) is the subject of gender diversity. Or more simply and specifically, getting more women into successful, long-term careers.

Why, you ask.

Well, there's a business case for it. Research has shown that when you have more diverse teams, you get better results. There are the statistics too: Women are still outnumbered at the highest levels of business and government in most places around the world. This is even though the volume of women's enrolment in university outpaces that of men's.

But I'll also tell you why it really matters to me. Firstly, it is because I am a woman. Secondly, it is because of my daughter. I also work with a team of bright young people who all happen (not by design or intent, I promise) to be women!

It is also because I've seen lots of talented women drop out midway through their careers because they can't juggle young kids with a demanding workload.

I've had conversations with young, single, brilliant women who seem to have the world at their feet. The kind of conversations where they unexpectedly tell me they worry about being able to manage a family and career when the time comes. Essentially, they are preparing themselves to take a back seat when that inevitable struggle happens.

I myself have felt the glaring inequalities that biology and culture have set on me: guilt for working full-time and not being able to spend more time with my daughter; an aversion to networking and claiming credit for work well done; being called "aggressive" at work because I guess a woman isn't supposed to behave that way (rare-

ly, do men get accused of being too aggressive ... they're often called decisive instead!)

So yes, I'm personally vested in this.

But what's wrong with that? Well, I have to admit that talking so openly about the subject takes some effort on my part. I've always felt a slight unease when speakers on the topic build their case for gender diversity by proclaiming that stereotypes of men and women are true.

Stereotypes like:

- Women can multitask, men can't;
- Women will put down their heads but they'll get the real work done; and
- Women have higher EQ (emotional quotient). This is what is expected of leaders of today.

I've heard enough anecdotal evidence and experienced it myself to instinctively know that these "stereotypes" are probably mostly true! Of course, I'm speaking in generalities here. There are always the few women or men who buck the trend.

So why do I feel this discomfort, this reticence? I thought about it while struggling with this piece and realised it is because very often, these speakers are women. They are women with naturally vested interests, like me, in the cause.

And yet, the one time I heard a male business leader speak about his epiphany on women at the workplace, it blew my mind. He spoke on why meritocracy alone will never be enough. How implementing women-friendly policies are just the tip of the iceberg to helping women succeed.

He spoke about how these policies can have unintended consequences — real, everyday issues women face. It could range from contending with the whispers that go around the office to perception that you're not quite committed enough because you're making use of flexible arrangements.

He explained how a leader's job was far from done at that point and that the best of intentions can go awry when middle managers have their own interpretations and implementation of policy. He told us how in the process of researching his speech, he'd developed a personal vested interest in the subject of women at work.

This leader spoke to a crowd of 300, mostly women, that day. I can tell you that almost every single one of them walked away more inspired, appreciated and wowed than they'd ever been before. His impact was profound.

But I wonder, if he had been a she ... would her message have resonated so keenly? Would we have been motivated yet still question if things could ever change? Perhaps we'd feel that she was just preaching to the converted and life would go on much the same as before.

I honestly think that's true. Yes, his message touched us because it was honest and from the heart. But also because it came from an unexpected source: a man. Ironically, in our quest for gender equality, we rate a man's message as more significant than a woman's. Ah, life!

So what I'm asking for is for more men to stand up and be counted. And for today's leaders and future leaders to make gender diversity a vested interest because we've all at one point or another experienced what it was like to be the minority,



and because you know it's the right thing to do.

Or as Michael Poku, a "Manbassador" at Harvard Business School who promotes gender equality, said: "Why do we need a business case to do the right thing?"

Why indeed, leaders, do you need any more reason to help the women in your professional and personal lives succeed? **E**

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