

Conversations with Senior Male Executive Champions



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Why are you personally committed to gender diversity?

I am committed to this agenda for both personal and business reasons. As a father of two daughters, I do have a responsibility to them to do my bit to help their future careers. I also know how my mother struggled to be taken seriously in her career, and whilst things are already much better now, I would still like to exert influence where I can. From an organisational perspective, over 60% of our staff at PwC Malaysia are women and it is imperative that we find a way to support our women and enable them to stay with us and be successful. .

Engaging men in the discussion of gender inclusion is seen as important in bringing about positive change. To what extent do you agree with this – and why?

The current reality is that if you look at the numbers in senior management positions in Asia, the majority are still men – one's boss is more likely to be a man than a woman, so we absolutely have to engage men on this issue. This is particularly true when it comes to programmes such as mentoring. Women mentoring women can sometimes be seen as self-serving and we need to broaden the responsibility. The way to make the issue more inclusive is to involve men as well.

According to our study which benchmarked 17 multinational companies in Malaysia, women hold an average of 34.0% of senior roles in Malaysia. What is your reaction to this percentage?

The percentage is good and I am proud of Malaysia for being amongst the top performers in the GDBA 2014. At PwC, 38% of our partners and directors are female. Almost 60% of our entry level graduates are female and we expect to see that representation grow. The numbers are good, but of course they could be better.

What are some of the dynamics you see in the wider Malaysian context that may explain this (strong) performance?

Firstly, we are a diverse country with a history of inclusiveness. We have Malays, Indians and Chinese and our history has made us a lot more sensitive to issues of race, so we are also willing to acknowledge and address issues relating to gender diversity. In addition, in certain states of Malaysia, we have a strong matriarchal culture where women own properties or run businesses and so the concept of women working



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is not unusual. Secondly, in Malaysia we are very open to new thought processes, values and ideas. We have been exposed to best practices from around the world and are happy to adopt and embrace what works. Thirdly, with many women in senior public roles – for example the Governor of the Central Bank, the previous Chairman of the Securities Commission as well as various ministers, we have lots of powerful role models. They show that there is no glass ceiling and that individuals are judged on their capability, not their gender. And lastly, we are a relatively small country of 30 million. This means that we need to leverage all our talent, both men and women – we can't afford not to. Hence there is a current drive on getting women back into the workforce, particularly after they have children. Unfortunately, childcare is still very expensive and few companies offer childcare or nursery facilities – so this is an ongoing challenge.

What are you personally doing to create a culture that is more inclusive of women in your organisation in Malaysia?

It starts with setting the tone from the top and, as a business leader, I am personally vested in promoting gender diversity. I take a personal interest in growing our female talent pipeline by mentoring the next generation of leaders, especially high-performing female talent.

I have also championed the need for our firm to rethink our policies which promote work-life balance and introduce support systems in accommodating the varied needs of working mothers and fathers at different stages of family life.

We have also participated in the Women in Leadership programme, organised by TalentCorp in partnership with the Institute of Chartered Accountants in England and Wales (ICAEW). We hope to identify more of our capable female talents to be mentored under this programme. Internally, we have also empowered more women to take on leadership roles and identified individuals to act as role models for other female staff. For example, our Assurance Leader is a lady and we have encouraged her to interface more with staff to assess what the challenges are and how the firm can support women in building a fulfilling career while balancing their commitments outside work.

Does your company and/or do you personally have stated KPIs or targets to drive and track gender inclusion efforts in Malaysia?

No, we do not have formal KPIs. I am not a great fan of quotas as I think it might send the wrong message.

Having said that, we have exceeded the Malaysian target of 30% women in senior positions and we do monitor the numbers. We are also very keen that our women should be able to reach out to female rolemodels within the firm for moral support or informal coaching sessions.

What do you think it will take for us to see further improvement in the representation of women in senior positions in multinational companies operating in Malaysia?

I am optimistic about the future and believe that gender bias will not hold future talent, like my daughters, back in developing their careers and reaching the top. There are many prominent female CEOs who are very successful – and often they are not just successful, they are better CEOs, because they have a different way of managing things. I can cite various examples where female CEOs have been able to reach better decisions about a particular situation because they have been able to bring a different perspective and show higher levels of empathy to the people involved. But if we are to bring about sustained improvement, I do believe the top leadership in any organisation should be openly talking about better gender diversity in the senior ranks.

How can companies encourage more men in their organisations to follow your example and take gender inclusion seriously?

It goes back to the fact that Malaysia is a country of only 30 million people and talent is a very big issue for our CEOs. If we only focus our efforts on developing the skills of men, we are cutting out 50% of our population. It is incumbent on us to encourage CEOs to see gender diversity as part of their talent discussions and as a business issue, not just an HR issue.

What is the risk of not ensuring greater gender diversity at senior levels?

If talent is the issue, then surely it must be in our interest to try and find resources from both genders – not just one. The accounting field in Malaysia seems unique in that it attracts more women than men. But if women do not come back after they get married or have children, then we are no better off. This is a business issue and ultimately, I don't think any business can run successfully today if they don't take gender issues seriously.