



Why Corporate Malaysia can't afford to stall on DEI

Conversations on diversity, equity and inclusion (DEI) are ramping up, as they usually do, in the run up to International Women's Day (IWD). Compared with previous years' tone of hope and encouragement, the discourse this year is pensive. Recent setbacks in DEI policies in the US and the cascading effects are sending worrying signals globally for progress in other parts of the world.

Here in Malaysia, we stand at a pivotal juncture that calls for both attention and action. DEI is not merely a policy, it is the pathway to parity, so that everyone has equal access to the same opportunities.

For the 30% Club, our mission remains clear — we are a business-led campaign aspiring to move beyond 30% female representation in boardrooms and senior leadership in Corporate Malaysia. Between 2021 and 2023, Corporate Malaysia witnessed a significant uptick in women on boards (WoB), primarily driven by regulatory measures implemented by Bursa Malaysia. Progress continues, with 33% WoB in the top 100 PLCs and 27.6% WoB across PLCs overall as at January 2025.

As we celebrate our 10th anniversary in Malaysia this year, we are adopting the theme "Inclusive future" to resonate with the vision of creating a future where gender equality and inclusivity are integral to the success of organisations and society at large. However, the question that I keep coming back to is this: why should businesses care about DEI if some of the world's largest economies are "opting out"?

DISPELLING DEI MISCONCEPTIONS

Let's start with what DEI is not about: ticking boxes, filling quotas or giving jobs to unqualified individuals over qualified ones. Instead, DEI is about ensuring that everyone has an equal chance at the opportunities around them and that we do not overlook talent based on appearance, biology or socioeconomic background.

The effort to provide better access can sometimes be misconstrued as special privileges, for the very reason that some people need it but not others. Having worked at the same place for nearly three decades, I've seen how policies that support flexible working or reduced work weeks for those who have dependent children, elderly parents or need to attend to personal circumstances may apply to people at different times in their lives.

Support groups, mentoring circles and intentional hiring practices are not there to elevate specific groups over others, but to ensure that, for example, women in male-dominated fields especially are able to progress at the same rate as their male counterparts. Without DEI, these barriers will remain unchecked, stifling potential and progress.

WHY DEI CONTINUES TO MAKE GOOD BUSINESS SENSE

Some 53% of board members surveyed in PwC Malaysia's Corporate Directors Survey 2024 recognise the value women bring to boards, agreeing that diversity introduces unique perspectives, while 44% agree that diversity improves culture.

Amid the challenges presented by today's megatrends, including climate change, rapid digitalisation and the advent of AI, boards are looking closer at their skills composition than ever to navigate an uncertain future. Technical expertise is ranked the top factor in achieving board diversity, in the same survey. With nearly equal numbers of adult affiliates in the Institute of Corporate Directors Malaysia (ICDM), skills don't need to come at the expense of gender.

My conversations with board members reveal a few key insights. There are conscious efforts to include a proportionate number of women candidates in board recruitment. Boards feel that they can do more to measure outcomes, and this is where cataloguing data specific to individual organisations can help them convince sceptics and stay the course. Most importantly, boards need to be aligned with their C-suite in the business value of gender-diverse boards.

In fact, there have been observations that while US companies are toeing the line when it comes to the term "DEI", they are talking about values like inclusivity and belonging instead. I believe that these values will remain important as precursors to good culture, and culture positions companies for long-term success.

While the actions of global leaders influence discussions on DEI, the role of local corporate governance policies, regulatory frameworks and cultural attitudes towards diversity and inclusion are equally, if not more important.

From the number of IWD celebrations celebrated this month, I am hopeful that diverse voices will continue to shape the future of our businesses and communities. Now is not the time to stall on DEI. We must accelerate action towards building an inclusive future for all. ■

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This op-ed is part of a thought leadership series — Equity, Equality, Prosperity, by diverse voices for inclusion — done in collaboration with the 30% Club Malaysia, part of a global business campaign.