

Women's voice need to be heard in decision making

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Gender diversity though a buzzword in business world, still faces a rough and patchy road when it comes for women to provide equal opportunity of growth and demonstrating the talent at workplace.

Nirmala Behera Executive director, RSB transmissions, Pune, responds to questions variety of put by BM. Here are excerpts of conversation :

BM What should companies be doing to improve diversity in the workforce and what needs to be done to maintain a higher level of diversity?

NB No human being is made alike and same is the case with workforce. There are similarities and differences amongst working colleagues in terms of physical abilities/disabilities, race, cast, religion, cultural background, gender and sexual orientation. For

ages, society has discriminated on these aspects and in the current scenario, diverse work force is more by default and necessity than a choice. This, in its wake, has come up with diverse challenges. Diversity represents wide spectrum of ideas, profile, backgrounds, skill sets, etc. which will kick off innovative thought process, devoid of tunnel vision.

Let a diversity plan take off from the drawing board with time - line chart, commitment with approach/objective parameters clearly defined and chalked out on a well laid path.

Monitoring and measurement of diversity at planned intervals need to be synchronized with KPIs appropriately to gauge overall impact of diversity levels in line with vision and mission. Diversity levels have to comprise of different genders, religious backgrounds, nationalities and differently abled to have a desired balance.

Talent acquisition has to represent allied geographical locations to have a better reach in diversity with focus on diverse work force and talent retention. Diversity has to be at all levels of hierarchy to promote professional culture. Informal steps need to be taken to motivate and develop female leaders, removing myths of gender gap.

BM What are some common myths in gender gap that are worth noting?

NB It has been a dominant feeling for centuries that women played a secondary role, which has been now dispelled as myth, as women have conquered enviable heights which were, once upon a time, beyond one's imagination. With women taking a lead in every frontier, the myth has

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taken a full circle to oblivion.

The women have very high level of ambition, which is now an established fact. Having motherhood never diminished their ambition levels. Women working in shop floor with machines were once upon a time considered not workable, and now they are lead in production, quality, utility, service, etc.

The myth that creating a culture that enables to be more ambitious for women does not put opposite gender to disadvantage, as has been proved from statistics and has in fact shown progress towards gender equality. The factors at work and data analysis clearly indicate that gain of women is never at the expense of men.

BM What is hindering gender diversity? Do you think some of the world's political and economic issues are tied to a lack of diversity in the workforce?

NB Stubborn culture prevailing conventionally in certain pockets of corporate entities continue to be hindrance in gender diversity, no matter diversity changes have a taken visibly a big leap. The mind set, deeply engraved for centuries, that women cannot manage the top, still seen in certain family owned/managed enterprises.

The prevailing notion that it is difficult for a woman to be available 24/7 to manage the task is looked upon as a barrier; this needs a fundamental shift and reversal.

While designing performance models for work - life balance issues, there is a general tilt against women as top - level career implies "any time anywhere" availability to work and that this imposes, in particular, severe constraints on female counterparts. This "tilt" needs to be removed as women are capable handling this issue with vigor.

Integrate gender diversity and equality in training and match male talent to rising female talent in a designated period of time so as to build confidence, create visibility of talent internally and provide access to stretch assignments. Measure each coach's performance on the attainment of gender diversity goals.

There is still an apprehension that even with equal skills and qualifications, women has much more difficulty reaching top management positions. This needs to be erased as time and facts have proved otherwise.

On the economic and political front at the global level, women are not represented equally in various disciplines of work culture. Demographic changes are added drivers for women's economic participation. With the labor forces shrinking and talent shortage emerging, women's integration into economy is a key to promoting dynamism. The prevalent wide gap between women and men employment needs to be bridged.

BM What can be done to promote gender diversity?

NB While formulating policies and programs, women's voice needs to be heard in decision making. Education and training has to be gender sensitive. Aspiration of women has to be addressed equally with men in a common platform. Get women into power and encourage them in non-traditional vocations. Remove the "trespass" designated spaces, hitherto dominated by male only and encourage free flow of women's involvement and role. Remove the disparities in compensation packages and encourage women's participation and empowerment at every level.

Acquire talents where people are valued and women potential is optimized. There is should be openness in strategy for balancing the integration of work and home, measuring success on performance and quality of output. Support women to plan and manage for career 'waves' not ladders.

Create a team in the organization that prioritizes and celebrates diversity.

BM What are some of the informal steps that can help companies motivate and develop female leaders?

NB Reverse mentoring, also called reciprocal mentoring, is how to create visibility of up-coming female leaders to top executives, as well as expose female leaders to the most strategic work at the company. While the method is informal, it helps to break down some of the unconscious bias, while creating visibility for female talent whom the male leaders might not otherwise interact with.

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Bring flexibility in working schedules of women so that they can stay to take children/sick care, at the same time complete the assignment by working from home.

Develop career mapping for women right from induction and adjust the career direction year-on-year accordingly. Development plans, stretch assignments, promotions, and networking opportunities should be equal for men and women who have been rated with similar capabilities. Such approach removes chances of women not being aware of opportunities for their development at higher levels, and it creates visibility to top leadership.

BM What are some positive things you've seen that show that companies, particularly in India, are moving toward improving diversity?

NB It is heartening to see that women's representation in board is now made mandatory as per Company's Act. Many corporate have taken the exercise of internalizing the women leadership identity and develop a sense of purpose. Gauging women's self-driven leadership qualities like reviving a dormant project into a purposeful reality and gains, affirm or resist actions, encourage and discourage subsequent assertions etc. These interactions display leadership qualities and potential of a woman in store, waiting to be harnessed.

There are corporate who have given women high-profile and challenging assignments, hitherto in male bastion, by asserting with organizational endorsements and give fortitude to step outside comfort zone and experiment with unfamiliar situations and new ways of exercising leadership.

To sum it up, gender diversity, is steadily becoming the way of life in corporate world, giving immense opportunity women empowerment and advancement. 