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Engaging digital ex-changes

Inspiring Female Leaders Programme – what’s the problem and why we need to solve it.

By Claire Sully

Introduction

With increased female leadership (and influence at the top) it would enable and encourage more women contributing their full potential in the economy, through upskilling and promotions. Women make up almost half the workforce, while the proportion of female leaders is low in many areas.

Increasing the number of female leaders is critically important to any strategic programme that wishes to utilise the potential of the full workforce, leading to improvements in productivity and boosting the economy. This article sets out the issues around women in leadership and why we need a specific solution to solve a significant problem with far-reaching consequences.

Shifting attitudes

We have seen attitudinal shifts about women in the work place - set against the backdrop of powerful men and their alleged treatment of female subordinates. While this has come to the fore in high profile campaigns such as #timesup and #metoo, the debate around the lack of women in power (leadership) in business, Government and civic/communities seems in the shadows, even though data suggests the issue is not getting any better anytime soon.

Let’s start with the data: In 2017 The female employment rate was 70.8%, compared to 79.7% for men. 20% of small and medium-sized enterprises (SMEs) with employees were led by women in 2016. SMEs make up 99% of all businesses, so this is a good measure for the visibility of female leaders in business in general.

The number of female CEOs in FTSE 100 is only 7% and even less in the FTSE 250.

Even when women dominate a sector they still not lead and influence from the top:

78% of jobs in the health and social work sector are held by women, while females have just 37% of the senior roles. 74% of band 1 staff, the lowest paid group in the NHS, are women, suggesting a lack of career progression. Two thirds of consultants are men in the NHS.

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In 2014, women constituted 62.2% of the secondary school teaching workforce but only 37% were headteachers. Recent analysis of the Times Higher Education’s world rankings data shows that in 2016–17, 36 of the top 200 universities globally – just 18% – have a female leader.

In media, arts and culture we still see far fewer women in leadership roles. In 2017, 83.2% of music artists were men and only 16.8% were women. 2017 marked a six-year low for female artists in popular music:

Of 2,767 songwriters credited, 87.7% were male and 12.3% were female. Less than 6% of female songwriters had 6 or more credits across the sampled time frame. Nine male songwriters were responsible for 1/5 of the songs in the sample. Out of the study’s 651 producers, 98% were male and only 2% female. A total of 899 individuals were nominated for a Grammy Award between 2013 and 2018. 90.7% of those were male and 9.3% were female.

The leadership of the 100 largest international media corporations is dominated by men. Thirty corporations have no women in senior management, according to statistics.

In the British film industry, women are also under-represented in key positions, such as Directors and Cinematographers. Of these roles on 3,452 films in production from 2003 to 2015, only 14% of all directors and only 7% of all cinematographers were women.

How does this affect the running of our public bodies?

The UN has set targets for gender equality in public administration by 2030 and points out starkly why this is necessary:

“Public administration is the bedrock of government and the central instrument through which national policies and programmes are implemented. An accountable and inclusive public administration is at the core of sustainable development. The participation and leadership of women in the civil service is therefore important for ensuring truly inclusive development and democratic governance, as well as enhancing the sustainability and responsiveness of public policies implemented by governments that mirror the diversity of the population they serve.”

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If women are not influencing key decision making, be this in the top tiers of Government or organisations and business, then our society may disadvantage women and girls and continue to perpetuate the problem. It would of course be impossible for governing bodies to “mirror the diversity of the population they serve” without females influencing decision making.

Economic implications

We need to consider what the economic implications could be:

"Plenty of explanations have been canvassed for Britain’s recent woeful productivity record: too little investment, poor infrastructure, insufficient spending on research and development, too many low-paid, low-skilled jobs, weak management and a long tail of under-performing firms among them. Strangely, the one that gets the least attention is the failure to utilise fully the skills of the available workforce.

Women outperform men in higher and further education, yet their talents are being wasted. Women and men are not equal partners in the workplace and the gap between them remains large despite some progress in recent decades.

A report by McKinsey in 2015 said that advancing women’s equality could add \$12tn a year to the world economy – equivalent to the economies of Britain, Germany and Japan combined. An enormous pool of human capital is being squandered because of sexist cultures, glass ceilings and economic structures that make it hard for women."

Larry Elliott, Economics Editor, The Guardian

This can also impact on regional economies. As an example forecasts predict that the south west will be one of the UK's fastest-growing regions - the Nuclear sector alone is investing over 20 billion over the next 12 years in the south west. However, there is a risk to any investment that wants to create jobs and regional economic growth because of an existing gap in productivity: The south west accounts for 8.4% of the UK's population, it only accounts for 7.5% of the total output.

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Flatline productivity is a regional, national and international problem that is causing many economies to stagnate.

How do we solve this?

While accepting we have a problem to solve - with lower than expected numbers of women not making it to the top positions of influence -seems universal, solving it seems far from unified. Some see it as issues around women’s choices, having families not being prepared to take risks. Writing in The Guardian Sabrina Spangsdorf suggests it may be down to internal and external perceptions:

“We don't see women as leaders – and it's holding them back.”

Lucy Shea grapples with why women in the workforce often find themselves stuck in middle management positions without the opportunity for advancement in her article for GenFKD.org, she says “Women do not believe that they can achieve their goals”.

A study observed how women view themselves and found that only 39 percent of women surveyed believed they would meet their career goals.

Chartered Institute of Personnel and Development (CIPD) in their submission to the Women and Equalities Select Committee titled: “Why are there so few women at the top?” concluded that an existing barrier to women achieving senior positions includes perceptions about women’s potential. In other words: How we view our own potential.

In Sabrina Spangsdorf article she talks about “the glass slipper effect” as a potential reason for women not progressing in leadership roles. This refers to a concept where we attach different personality traits as “inherently masculine or feminine” to job roles, this could make genders feel that certain job roles aren’t for them.

The theory is that if a job advert suggests masculine traits, such as dominance, assertiveness, ambition and competitiveness, it can make women feel that they are not right for the job role and therefore not apply. Women do hold these attributes, it is an internal perception that they don’t.

Studies from the US, UK and Germany suggest that masculine traits can be associated to job adverts for leadership positions, as well as jobs in engineering and IT, which has a historic difficulty in

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recruiting women into jobs. If the perfect candidate is described as having male qualities, would a woman who isn't relating herself to these qualities going to feel confident in trying to win the position?

Karen Quintos, currently serving on Dell's executive team wrote in her article for Forbes about the problem of lack of female leaders, she suggests the solution could be found if:

“Women can help women in choosing jobs, choosing careers, choosing companies”. Which was something she herself experienced, an empathy amongst her female peers after she took a career break after having children.

The suggestion is to encourage more women to step-up as leaders in their careers we should focus on female internal and external perceptions. Having a sustainable resilience is important, especially if women are to navigate challenging environmental factors, such as male dominated working cultures. It is beneficial if women support other women in helping to build confidence and strategies.

About Inspiring Female Leaders

Inspiring Female Leaders Programme's vision is to help more women step-up as female leaders through a digital transformation programme that includes:

- Peer-to-peer network driven value exchange - technology platform
- Step change Inspiring Female Leaders training model
- Resilience Practice APP (called FYOS)
- Real time social and economic impact measures and reporting

This is an open innovative partnership project working with Universities and other partners.

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