



GENDER BALANCE SUCCESS IS HANGING IN THE BALANCE

Approaches that have failed to deliver gender balance

The Roundtable identified initiatives which, though pursued with good intent and good will, have largely or wholly failed.

1. General unconscious bias training, research shows, may have done more harm than good. Like assertiveness training that it succeeded, it may have a few niche applications (e.g. identifying systems bias) but is pretty much discredited as a general approach to achieving gender balance.
2. Mentoring, especially in-house, 'vanilla mentoring' has largely failed to deliver change. Female-only mentoring circles are seen as particularly unhelpful. Instead, 'sponsorship' is viewed as being much more likely to progress gender balance.
3. Diversity Councils can be useful. But, many have a 'hands-off' approach, leaving the heavy-lifting to HR. This results in much less buy-in from the rest of the organisation. For some organisations, Diversity Councils are little more than window-dressing.
4. Extraordinary role models don't much help the 'average' person. Additionally, context is critical yet isn't likely to be transferrable.

Lots of effort, little progress

Compared with the past, there is little doubt that gender balance is enjoying much greater attention. Along with that comes the not insignificant spend on attempts to improve gender balance in organisations. Yet, to the frustration and disappointment of many, the rate of gender balance progress is dismal.

Since this has been going on for a few years, the question of ROI on gender balance initiatives is justifiably never far away. UGM, along with concerned clients, is mindful that interest in gender balance may wane if significant effort and resources fail to deliver meaningful progress.

UGM believes that gender balance has likely reached a critical point of strategic inflection. If important elements align, then gender balance may be achieved sooner rather than later. However, points of strategic inflection always present a distinct risk if critical aspects don't align. Should that occur, gender balance will probably suffer a profound set-back and may be stalled for decades. Based on current (unacceptable) rates of progress, Oxfam has estimated that gender balance (using pay equity as a metric) will only be achieved by around 2070!

Taking a strategic look at Gender Balance

UGM recently convened a Roundtable focusing on the strategic position of Gender Balance. The relatively small, but highly experienced group of contributors focused on what might be needed strategically to progress gender balance. The exploration, although focused on future strategy, necessarily reviewed current and past initiatives.

The most important strategic insight for the UGM team is that the challenge for organisations going forward is significantly more complex than originally anticipated. Five distinct strategic areas were identified by the Roundtable. Each, in itself, represents a major undertaking and involves a substantial strategic shift away from prevailing practice. The rest of this briefing explores the key areas where significant strategic change is needed for gender balance to have a chance of succeeding.

Refresh strategic approach

Many organisations, despite goodwill and good intent, have not achieved the GB progress they are seeking. This means they'll need to rethink the way forward. Having realised that there is no 'silver bullet' or 'one-size-fits-all' approach, organisations will need to work out what suits their own context. There is recognition that moving forward may well involve taking a step back to become 'unstuck'.

Just as for most business strategies, decisions about action should be data directed and data driven. It includes using root-cause and gap analysis to

determine what will work best for the organisation. Also, it is essential that organisations use a 'nimble' approach: test, learn and act, repeating the cycle rapidly. This approach would help avoid costly misfires, like the decades spent trying to use assertiveness training or, worse still, the decade just wasted on unconscious bias training. Research now suggests it may actually have increased bias!

Implement 'targets with teeth'

There is probably much truth in the adage, 'what gets measured, gets managed'. Equally true is the fact that reward or punishment has a big impact on where people focus their attention. There was a strong feeling at the Roundtable that the time for 'targets with teeth' has arrived. KPI's and GB data should be transparent, as well as there being consequences for delivering or missing GB KPIs. Slow-moving metrics may need proxy measures, and organisations would be well advised to project what metrics will be relevant and valuable 10 or 15 years into the future.

Make role/work flexibility mainstream

Flexibility in and of itself will not deliver gender balance. However, it is considered a core enabler. Many organisations have made excellent progress in devising flexibility policies. In contrast, the ability to translate those policies into everyday practice has, on the whole, been woeful. Organisations will need to mainstream flexibility of most, if not all, roles for gender balance to progress.

Overhaul talent management

Having taken a strategic perspective, Roundtable contributors also recognised that the traditional talent management system is not only outmoded, it's probably perversely sustaining the GB status quo. For example, performance reviews in their current form might unintentionally be favouring a particular group. Also, the popular talent pipeline model takes little account of career pathways that might have multiple peaks and even span multiple careers. Overall, 'talent management' has also not ensured a sound, fair understanding of 'merit based' systems.

Update organisational leadership

Given the widespread disruption of whole sectors, it is only a matter of time before outmoded styles of leadership are replaced too. Inclusive leadership will play an important role in building and sustaining inclusive cultures in future. However, changing overall leadership style is likely to be as challenging as the organisational changes needed to survive in sectors that have been disrupted and revolutionised.

In conclusion, gender balance progress is reliant on changes in its own field and also on major strategic shifts in numerous strategically adjacent areas.