



GENDER BALANCE – WHAT DO YOU CHOOSE?

Choosing to address gender balance

1. When you speak with people about addressing gender balance, try to ensure that action items are identified, no matter how small, every time if possible. While there may be a need for frequent ‘talking and meditation’ about gender balance, there is an even greater need for persistent action.
2. Achieving gender balance in management ranks of organisations will, realistically, take some time. In the meanwhile, what are the milestones along the way that indicate progress? Just having more talk about intended gender balance change is not sufficient!
3. Organisations that have boards could, with relative ease, appoint at least one woman to their board pretty much immediately under ‘additional director’ provisions. While it’s only one small gesture, it shows a genuine commitment to gender balance and gives hope that other initiatives will follow.
4. Identify just one small thing that you could do to improve gender balance. Then, do it! Rinse and repeat, and hopefully engage others in a ripple-like effect.

A tough truth about choice

It’s impossible to adequately express (or even imagine) the hardship and suffering endured by concentration camp survivor, Viktor Frankl. Much easier though is sharing of some of his powerful insights that his (and millions of others) agony bought for humankind.

Among many profound insights is Frankl’s perspective on human choice. Writing in the style of the time, he asks about life in the “singular world of the concentration camp”: “Does man have no choice of action in the face of such circumstances?” His answer, “Everything can be taken from a man but one thing: the last of the human freedoms – to choose one’s attitude in any given set of circumstances, to choose one’s own way.”

Frankl’s perspective on choice is pretty widely known, even if people weren’t directly aware of who was responsible for that particular framing of the notion. Perhaps less known though are Frankl’s comments about the meaning of life and action.

“Our answer [to the question about the meaning of life]”, he writes, “must consist, not in talk and meditation, *but in right action and right conduct*. Life ultimately means taking the responsibility to find the right answers to its problems and to fulfil the tasks it sets for each individual.”

Gender balance and choice

Organisations, and the individuals that make them, face many and varied challenges. A critical success factor for every organisation is identifying and addressing its most important challenges. That’s essentially what sets each apart from competitors and ensures survival over time.

Although we acknowledge organisations face many challenges, in this briefing, we focus on one - gender balance. More than any time in history, organisations are saying that a lack of gender balance in senior positions is of concern. Collectively they cite an impressive compendium of compelling evidence that gender balance is good for organisations. The case has been made – well and truly!

But, as UGM has highlighted recently, organisations seem stuck, unable to move from awareness to action. Many organisations are at least acknowledging there is a need for some semblance of gender balance. Most of those have entered the “talk and meditation” phase that Frankl mentions. Far fewer though have taken the responsibility to find the right answers and to continue their efforts when initial choices don’t immediately deliver desired outcomes.

Allowing efforts to stall when current initiatives don’t deliver desired outcomes represents a choice to

return to ‘talk and meditation’ at best. Without action, nothing will change! A quick review and analysis are well advised after a failed or partially successful initiative, but sustained talk and meditation are not an adequate response.

Taking action to address gender balance

Working out what you think could be done to address gender balance is a good place to start. You might like to consider what you, personally, can do and also what you might influence and encourage others to do, more collectively. One person may well make a difference, even a profound contribution. But, others will also need to be in on the changes. Collectively, everyone is both a part of the current problem and also, essentially, part of the solution.

What worked for another organisation may not work for yours! So, join with others and collaboratively explore possible gender balance solutions suited to your current context. However, don’t wait until you find that silver bullet or a magical one-size-fits-all approach – it doesn’t exist! There’ll be plenty of small (no- or low-cost) changes that could contribute towards improving gender balance. Small actions perhaps, but cumulatively they could make a big difference. There are likely also to be longer-term actions that are needed – though they never even get started without that first step.

If you’ve already had gender balance initiatives running in your organisation, you’d be well advised to review their effectiveness. What worked and what didn’t and, more important, why? Can you add to what’s already in place, to make to make a bigger impact? It may be that refreshed thinking can redirect or re-invigorate efforts that have lost a little momentum. That’s often easier than starting something completely new.

Overcoming the obstacles

If the gender balance journey was easy, you wouldn’t be reading this briefing – in fact, it probably wouldn’t have been written. There would be little need! But, the lack of any significant progress over decades illustrates how tough the challenges really are. That said, they’re not insurmountable and there are signs that a different reality is achievable in the future. With continuous action, each of us can help speed things up.

Organisations and the individuals within will need to change how they operate, to make progress on the gender balance front. That won’t be easy since change is effortful. It’s not just new behaviours. Significant effort is required to unlearn old habits. Frankl has wise advice for being more thoughtful about the change needed: “Live as if you were living for the second time and as if you had acted the first time as wrongly as you are about to act now.”