



HOW TO MOVE THE GENDER AGENDA FROM AWARENESS TO ACTION

Moving from awareness to action

1. Organisations are complex and each is different. A sign of action may be running a small research project to understand how gender balance may realistically be addressed in the organisation.
2. Women's networks may seem like a good way forward. But, having them as the single or major gender balance initiative is not going to deliver much change – don't allow the establishment of such networks to stall real change in other areas.
3. A useful foundation for change could come from concerted action to foster a more inclusive culture. For example, the organisation develops a set of behaviours that represents inclusiveness. Then, there is a regular focus at all levels on making these behaviours part of 'the way we do things around here'.
4. Another possible action is reviewing recruiting criteria for roles. Rather than listing numerous criteria for a role, focus on the handful that absolutely make a difference in the role. Research shows women are more likely to apply for those jobs.

Same approach, very similar outcomes

Gender balance in the senior management ranks of organisations is important to UGM. In addition to our own consulting, writing, training programs and research in the field, we regularly scan the web for other up to date news items and noteworthy studies.

The quantity of articles highlighting the need for gender balance on boards and in senior management ranks has exploded in the past few years. There is no shortage either of reports pointing out the tremendous gender imbalances that exist in so many organisations around the world.

Similarly, research studies showing the business case for gender balance have also multiplied. Hardly a fortnight goes by without the release of yet another report extolling the value proposition of having more women at senior levels. Most frequently, the focus is on the board. Besides the significance (status) of board-level roles, there's also the relative ease of collecting data about board composition.

While some may celebrate the slow progress off a relatively low base, there haven't been many spectacular changes. It's probably no longer quite like watching paint dry, but let's acknowledge there haven't been any fireworks either.

Is the process stuck?

We'd say the process is largely stuck. As has been pointed out many times, if change was to continue at the current pace, it would take decades before any meaningful levels are reached. Why should women have to wait any longer, let alone that long?

Quite obviously, increased interest levels are good for the cause. But, let's interrogate the business case idea a little more deeply. Surely the value of repeatedly trotting out pretty similar statistics and the articles they spawn must be questioned? Truth is, the studies and the articles are, overwhelmingly, just repeating the same thing over and over.

Only a few years ago, the raised level of interest was drawing much needed attention to gender imbalance at senior levels. So, at that time, the items were all relatively very valuable. Increased attention moved the issue from low (near invisible) on organisational development agendas to much nearer the top.

In change terms, the first stage – awareness - is vital. If people don't know about something they're obviously not going to pay it any attention. Here's the catch though: once people have an awareness of a need to change, telling them repeatedly that change is needed doesn't moving things along. The awareness chorus has become a widely known refrain, with a critical mass of people singing energetically from the same song sheet. But, heartily repeating the chorus doesn't progress the song!

Moving to the next stage of change

For change to progress, the focus needs to move to the belief stage. Again, a critical mass at this stage is important. Enough individuals and organisations need to believe two things. First, there needs to be a level of certainty that the desired change is possible. Note this is not simply re-running the awareness of change story. There is a rather subtle but critical distinction. It's not that change is needed (awareness) but rather that it could actually happen.

Once this first significant belief hurdle is overcome, the next looms equally dauntingly. It's getting that same critical mass to believe that they and their organisations are capable of implementing change successfully. It may be that during this phase individuals and the organisation start acquiring or sharpening the skills (and policies) they need.

Signs that might foster belief

For the next while at least in the quest for gender balance at senior management levels, belief will not come from remarkably changed statistics. We're absolutely not going to suddenly see vast numbers of women moving into senior management positions. First, wholesale resignations or the spill of all executive positions in companies is unlikely any time soon – or ever! Second, unlike boards that could substantially change percentage representation with only one or two additional appointments, changing gender ratios at a number of levels of management is a significantly bigger undertaking.

So, we need to be looking for other signs that change is underway, appreciating that they signal likely gender balance in senior management in the longer term. Organisations are complex and, importantly, what matters will vary considerably, organisation by organisation. In fact, larger organisations will likely have different emphases within various parts of the same organisation. There is no single, quick fix.

One example might be flexible work arrangements. Little change in belief can be expected when the organisation develops a flexible work policy, but no one feels comfortable actually using it. Belief is boosted when people can say they are able to work flexibly, without any concern of penalty and everyone who wants to actually works in that way.

Another signal might be moving from a context where there is little formal career planning to a more purposeful approach to career and advancement. As well as valued personal development opportunities, a resulting gender balance for senior role shortlists, based on merit, will serve as a reliable signal of gender balance progress in the short term.

The essential next step on the gender balance agenda is moving away from awareness of change to belief that it is possible. Only then will action follow!