



## WINNING THE GENDER BALANCE CAMPAIGN NEEDS BATTLE-LINES REDRAWN!

### A few questions that warrant closer focus

1. Why are organisations continuing to pour money into across-the-board unconscious bias training when there is no evidence that it works?
2. If companies and boards are so committed to gender balance, why is it that many are still unable to appoint even a single woman, despite this being relatively low cost and the existence of provisions allowing for the appointment of 'additional directors'.
3. Which organisations are beacons of gender balance? What are they doing that helps them achieve and sustain gender balance?
4. What factors, for each individual organisation, contribute to the current position and what might reasonably be done to move forward, ideally to achieve breakthrough rather than incremental change only?
5. Which frameworks and models will serve as boosters to propel gender balance efforts to the next level and which are boosters that are now spent and need to be jettisoned?
6. What actions, specifically, are you taking as an individual to improve gender balance?

### *Outdated ideas deliver outdated outcomes!*

UGM is committed to making a positive difference to gender balance at senior levels in organisations. With 'glacial' as the best description of progress, it's clear that what got us all to this point is simply incapable of breaking through to the next level.

The old ideas, not unlike like a booster in a multi-stage rocket (some have up to 5), played an essential role in reaching where we are. But now they're spent! What's the evidence for this claim? A rate of gender balance progress that is unacceptable for this point in history. Any commercial venture that showed such a dismal rate of return on investment would have been scrapped long ago.

But, 'Houston, we still have a gender balance problem!' Because current ideas were the best available at the time, they were seen as the 'capsule' (main focus) rather than as just a booster (springboard) that will launch the next stage!

As leading edge ideas, they were at first uncomfortable (even unmentionable) for many. Then, since there was nothing better, they became more widely accepted over time. Now, for many, they seem like a comfortable pair of old leather shoes. Comfy through wear, but seriously daggy and outdated. But, unfortunately, it gets worse! Some of the older gender balance ideas are more like a comfy old pair of shoes made out of a material that science subsequently discovered is harmful, possibly even carcinogenic.

### *The sad example of unconscious bias training*

For example, knowing something about implicit bias (and others of the over 170 cognitive biases that have been identified) has definitely moved forward our understanding about gender balance. However, the in-fashion (sold as silver-bullet for gender balance), 'unconscious bias training' is much less helpful in achieving outcomes.

There is no evidence that it works and some recent evidence has shown it can be harmful. But many have grown comfortable with the notion, desperately wanting the change it promises yet doesn't deliver. They appear unable to see it for what it is and let it go. Ironically, this inability to reframe is caused by a number of unconscious biases. This surely provides further evidence that the training is lacking!

Well-intentioned senior management teams and boards at last want to do something. Although it's expensive, they invest in the unconscious bias training out of a sincere desire to take some sort of action to improve gender balance. Their intent and commitment to action is a momentous move forward. For this reason, the dismal outcomes and relative lack of realisation of benefits from that

investment must be incredibly frustrating. Importantly this is not simply a disappointing setback for those leaders. More significantly, it's a devastating blow for gender balance progress overall. Stalling yet again!

### *Stalling as the signal for new action*

Stalling is really bad, if it is not possible to restart. But it can serve a useful purpose, if it is seen as a signal. In the gender balance context, it's a timely call for fresh perspectives. Strategically, these next generation ideas will necessarily launch off past perspectives and gains, yet will not be trapped or constrained by them. No army with any hope of victory would go into a battle with outdated maps. In fact, we know that the most sophisticated forces use real-time satellite imagery – even information from 10 minutes ago in a battle is ancient history that may threaten survival!

Updated battle-lines and tactics are needed for us to have any realistic hope of significant and meaningful progress in the gender balance campaign. The scope of that discussion is way beyond what is possible in a short briefing, but here are few relevant ideas.

We've already noted the problems with wide-scale unconscious bias training, so we won't add much more. Nevertheless, we should highlight that this is a large part of the current 'Plan A' of many organisations. Outdated intelligence is always a high risk problem in itself!

A massively positive feature is the unprecedented awareness of the need for gender balance and indeed unprecedented willingness to take action to achieve it. Those gains are undeniably the spoils of the battle just ended. Yet, dangerously, what hasn't changed much is organisations feeling confident that they know what to do to fix the problem. Further, case studies of gender balance successes are remarkably scarce, which means it's difficult to know what really works and if it can be applied to all.

Despite significantly improved capacity to conduct small experiments and make incremental progress on multiple fronts, the field seems fixated on finding a silver-bullet. At the moment, another big focus is flexibility. But, gender balance is an incredibly complex issue and solutions won't be simple. So, while flexibility may turn out to be extremely important, it's certainly not going to deliver gender balance. For example, sooner or later, the matter of rethinking leadership and management competence will challenge every organisation.

### *A call to action – redraw the battle-lines*

This is a call to action! It's time to reflect strategically and then take the next steps that will deliver a breakthrough. Will you update the maps and redraw the battle lines – or just limp along?