



SPECIAL FEATURE ON INSPIRING FEMALE BOARD LEADERS

Views from Diane Tea

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What progress and positive changes have you observed in the evolution towards gender inclusiveness in governance?

All the efforts that women in our previous generations, and of today have done in fighting for our rights, start to pay off. Companies are opening up to gender equality and diversity in all parts of their organisations. There is a general awareness that gender diversity brings invaluable benefits. Although we are still far from attaining true diversity and equality, women are better represented today at leadership positions, including in boardrooms.

Can you share briefly your directorship journey and what has helped you step into directorship position? (any mentoring, shadowing..?)

I started my directorship journey a year after I left the corporate world and became independent by setting up my own entrepreneurship venture, about 2.5 years ago. Being an entrepreneur, one needs to build his/her personal branding, network and visibility on the market, in order to optimise success. This is what I strived to do right after leaving my last company Vodafone. It worked rather very well as soon after I started, I received more and more solicitations. Board positions in prestigious not for profit organisations I was part of, became vacant. I applied and was selected. I made publicity on it, among other things I was doing, by writing inspirational articles and posts on the social media. The more visibility I gained, the more solicitations I got to sit on Boards.

What initial challenges do you have to overcome? (any gender-related biases?)

Sitting on Boards where, most of the time, you are the only woman and the youngest person, doesn't make things evident at the beginning. You need to "earn" your place, position and "right" to be "listened to". I reckoned that this applies to anyone being new in a team and I have always taken it as a natural course of thing. I overcome this by adopting the right attitude myself. How I feel about myself reflects on me and influences how others behave with and treat me. This is the advice I give to my female protégées whom I mentor. In business, I behave or feel neither as a woman nor as a man. I behave and feel as a person who deserves the same level of respect from others as I give to them, and who legitimately occupies her place. I speak out my mind, I provide my ideas and opinions when I find fit, I challenge people if needed.

It has always worked out for me that way. Peers in my teams or in the boardroom always value my opinion and position.



In your opinion, what are some key enablers that could tip the scale towards gender balance in the boardroom?

The first thing that comes in most people's mind is legislated quotas or voluntary quotas. I personally don't think quotas do women an actual favour as they do not serve them in the long run, even if their setup is for a genuine good and noble reason at the beginning. Quotas inadvertently stigmatise women as their board appointments would be perceived as "a legal obligation" or "for a marketing purpose" and not legitimate.

Companies adopting the following approaches, see a more gender-balanced Board:

- ensure top level commitment and active involvement to gender diversity
- promote equal opportunity at work – in terms of assignments, pay, hiring, promotion and training – for both gender
- promote flexible working arrangements help to retain women leaders
- create an enabling environment with mentoring/sponsorship programmes, with investing in adequate training programmes for high-potential women
- instate a Nomination committee leadership within the Board with the role of developing diversity criteria, engaging search firms and considering candidates based on their experience and skills of course but also considering the representation of women in director selection.

These enablers should be complemented by what each one of us can do: I usually advise women to wander around on the ecosystem and create their own networking. Board positions are still most often, a word-to-mouth thing and people get hired through their network.

What are some tips you would give to aspiring next-gen female board directors to be successful in their board appointment and role?

Be confident in your skills and on the fact that you are fully worthy of the position. No one and nothing should make you doubt that.

Be faithful towards your values. These values are what make you unique and what you should be appointed for: they represent the benefits you will bring to the Boards.

As mentioned in point 3, your perception of yourself influences how others see and treat you. You are a person deserving respect, no matter your gender.

Speak out your mind, provide your ideas and opinions when you find fit, challenge people if needed. Be an active Board member. Follow your instinct and guts feelings. As the Board Director job becomes more and more professionalized and legalized, is imperative for your own sake, to stick to your values, and have an active role rather than a passive one.

As mentioned previously, create a meaningful network. Networking generates opportunities which you should grab whenever they present themselves to you. You never know who will knock on your door. Do not hesitate to "give back" too, as what you give will bounce back in greater ways than you can expect. In turn, give back to the communities by sharing your experiences and mentoring others.