

Gender Balance as a Metric for Success



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Companies are learning to embrace both masculine and feminine energies in their quest for excellence. Among the UK's biggest firms, for instance, all-male boards have become a rarity.

Smart companies know that difference is valuable and should be cherished. They are increasingly aware that a balance between masculine and feminine energies creates better results and a healthier corporate environment than a male-dominated one that accesses only part of our human potential. The reality is that men and women complement each other.

Consider that in today's networked world, true power is gained increasingly through influence and collaboration rather than by force. Empathy, listening, building trust, thinking about the group and transparency are all required to build networks. These attributes are traditionally viewed as feminine—though of course, many men have

them, too—but neuroscience suggests that women are wired in an advantageous way for today's world. These attributes are now recognized as necessary for good decision-making, creating a model for the future.

This gives everyone a great opportunity to make progress in what has too often been characterized as a fight for gender equality. This is not a battle of the sexes. Rather, it's collaboration on a shared goal, so that both men and women can enjoy a work environment that is more natural, normal and productive.

Seeing the issue through this lens has already delivered exciting results in the United Kingdom. A major focus for me over the past few years

has been the unfolding of the 30% Club, a group of business leaders (men and women) working together toward better gender balance at all organizational levels. In November 2010, we launched with the simple voluntary goal of 30 percent female directors of FTSE 100 companies by the end of 2015. Back then, the actual figure was just 12.5 percent.

Fast-forward four years, and 12.5 percent has jumped to 23.6 percent. And where there were 21 all-male FTSE 100 boards in 2010, now there are none. (You can imagine how intense the competition was not to be that last one!) In the next-biggest group of UK-listed companies, the FTSE 250, just 23 all-male boards remain compared with 131 in 2010.

This has been voluntary change—businesses doing it for themselves, without legislation.

How was such progress achieved?

In addition to the critical recognition that better gender balance leads to better results, these five factors created a replicable formula for success:

1

A measurable goal with a defined timetable.

The 30% Club opposes quotas. We're not interested in seeing a few token women at the top; rather, we seek sustainable change at all levels. Setting a numerical target, like business-plan objectives, created a new sense of urgency and kept the focus.

2

Political consensus that the status quo was unacceptable.

A cross-party review concluded that working with businesses rather than imposing regulations was the best way to encourage genuine change.

3

Change driven by those in power—

that means the chairs and CEOs of top companies, who are mostly men. Their evangelism helped transform public perception in the UK; gender imbalance is no longer considered just a women's or special-interest issue.

4

Openness to collaboration.

The 30% Club started with an openness about how to achieve its goal—at the time, our approach drew criticism, but ultimately it contributed to our progress. After all, nothing had worked before, so while we had a clearly defined destination, we had to write a new map. By being open-source and collaborative,

we evolved as momentum developed and moved quickly to meet the next challenge or opportunity.

5

A concerted and consistent series of actions and programs, from schoolrooms to boardrooms.

There is no single program that can solve the problem of too few women at the top. We need an ecosystem that nurtures female talent and helps organizations embed new attitudes and approaches.

I'm confident we will build on the progress made so far. Companies that have yet to see this as normal risk being left behind as talent gravitates towards smarter organizations. Working together as true equals in a world created for the benefit of us all is the path we are now taking.

Most of all, I'm excited for my (six!) daughters because we are heading for a stage where they can be themselves. My generation has had to make compromises to fit in with the status quo and get that seat at the table. As the old power order breaks down, replaced by something much more inclusive, the next generation needs to contribute to this new culture.

We can get to 30% — and beyond!

