

White Paper

The Gender Equation

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With Avril Henry

Welcome to the fourth instalment in our 'Thought Leadership Series,' which provides you with a unique insight into a pertinent aspect of leadership or HR practice each month. In this paper, Avril Henry explores a topic that she is most well known for, and which is the subject of her latest book, released in May, '*Leadership Revelations III – How We Achieve The Gender Tipping Point.*'

The Gender Equation – What Women Really Need In The Workplace

Do women really need men to help them get to the top? The answer is a resounding YES, according to author Avril Henry, based on the responses she received from the women she interviewed for her latest book.

'Men have a vital role to play in sponsoring women to help them to get to the top. Senior male leaders sponsoring women will have the greatest immediate impact on the number of women in senior positions,' says Avril.

This was one of the key findings in her new book, and she is not alone in this view.

'Women can stand up for themselves, but when we have a stronger person (male leader) standing up for us, we are more likely to succeed,' writes Elizabeth Broderick, Sex Discrimination Commissioner.

'Sponsorship is very different to mentoring, as a sponsor actively promotes women, seeks opportunities and is visible to others in that woman's career; whereas mentoring is often informal and a mentor can be invisible to others,' explains Avril.

As with the previous two books in her Leadership Revelation Series, Avril has again accessed and interviewed a range of inspiring contributors and shares with us her key findings and trends, this time examining how we can achieve the gender tipping point.

'A tipping point is that moment in time when a collection of ideas and behaviours reach an acceptance by more than a few people that something is a good idea worth pursuing, and it goes from a small group of committed people believing in something and supporting it, to everyone wanting to be part of it' she says.

In her book, Avril Henry shares the views of 91 successful female leaders from 10 countries and across four generations. Aside from the necessity of obtaining male participation in, and championing of sponsoring women in the workplace, there were several other main themes in Avril's research.



Women Need To Become Greater, More Active Champions Of Other Women

Women need to recognise that the pie is big enough for everyone, and to shift from a 'scarcity mentality' to one of 'abundance'. Throughout all the interviews and contributions for this book there has only been one thing on which women agreed 100% regardless of generation, cultural background or profession, and that is that women need to support and help other women.

Men tend to look after each other, and while they love to compete, they also look out for each other, and don't take things personally. Women need to stop taking things personally. Just because someone has disagreed with you doesn't mean that they don't like you any more, or no longer respect you, they simply disagree. And if you suspect that they may be sabotaging you or your ideas, go and ask someone you trust for their opinion, and then make a call about whether the feedback is valid or not, before deciding whether to take it on board.

The other clear commonalities for all the women regarding what women need to do, have been predominantly around self-belief and building self-confidence. In order to do this women need to speak up, without fear of rejection, fear of not being liked and without apologising for having an opinion, especially when it is different to that of others. Often women are labelled as 'bossy' when they are confident and assertive. I have never heard a man refer to himself, or another man for that matter, as bossy, but I have certainly heard both men and women refer to a woman as bossy. What makes one person bossy and another person driven, assertive, competent and capable? Is it their gender? This is another example of the unconscious bias that exists in all of us, including women in relation to other women and ourselves. We need to change our language, and as we do, we change our thinking and in turn our behaviour.

There has been a distinct generational shift in the roles women have played (and been allowed to play). Veteran women were often not 'allowed' to work, and then Baby Boomer women fit themselves into the male environment to survive and progress. Generation X women then demanded greater support to enable combining motherhood and a meaningful career (not just a job). Now Generation Y are demanding equal pay and equal promotional opportunities, or they will simply not join an organisation.

Older, wiser women (the Veterans and Baby Boomers who have seen and experienced much in the workplace) believe that senior male leaders need to be courageous in implementing cultural change within an organisation to be more *gender-diversity friendly* without being afraid of going against the flow. This necessitates the public reward of those men and women who actively implement diversity, while taking timely, corrective action against those who discriminate against women and engage in sexual harassment and bullying at work.



Generation X—both in Australia and internationally—put it simply and concisely as only their generation do, telling senior male leaders to simply ‘change your mindset and how you see women at work.’ The international contributors and Australian Generation Ys have simply said, ‘Promote more women.’ Generation Y expect and will demand that senior management, ‘Provide equal pay for the same roles, regardless of gender.’ If you can’t do this they are almost certain to leave your organisation, and either quickly going to another organisation or setting up their own businesses. Note the increasing number of young female entrepreneurs right around the globe today setting up their own businesses, as they do not fear failure to the same degree as earlier generations of women. And they will tell *everyone* on social media why they left and how much you ‘suck’ as an organisation and you personally as a leader—and it’s not against the law to do so!

Men Are Promoted On Potential, While Women Are Promoted On Proven Performance

Men are better at self-promotion and apply for a job if they can spell the job title, whereas women wait until they meet 100% of the criteria, and then in my opinion there is nothing to learn. Avril’s research revealed that the key areas in which women believe they hold themselves back all have to do with a lack of self-confidence, leading to women doubting their abilities.

Women therefore work hard striving for perfection, believing that if they work harder they will be noticed, recognised and be rewarded with promotions and new roles. Women also believe that when they place greater priority on their family, even temporarily or in the short term, this is interpreted [correctly] as career limiting. Men have no hesitation speaking about their achievements and liberally using the word ‘I’, whereas women need to be encouraged to share their achievements and are more inclined to use ‘we,’ even if they did the work themselves without assistance. Women see such language and behaviour as boasting, rather than as self-promoting.

Lack Of Respect For Women Leaders

The lack of respect for the female gender in the workplace is rife, and is at the heart of the problem for many women. In Mexico for example, this is a real challenge for women. Not only are some women not expected to work outside the home in Mexico, but often other men harass the husbands of working women about why they allow their wives to work. At the family level, the husband is the boss. When you go and work for a company in Mexico, one of the things that is difficult for men is to see that the boss is going to be a woman. There simply is no respect for women as leaders.



And then we look at the way Australia treated its first female Prime Minister, Julia Gillard. People made comments about her anatomy and body parts, asked completely inappropriate questions about her partner and her private life, abused her for being *barren* (no children), questioned her morals for not being married and living with her partner, questioned his sexuality because he is a hairdresser, and the list goes on. Cartoons in newspapers and online were horrendous beyond belief, often featuring her in the nude with a strapped on dildo! When she and other women reacted to these comments and images, both men and (surprisingly) women, sent the message to her to 'just get over it!' Yet we have never made comments about the private body parts of our male Prime Ministers when they were in power (except perhaps John Howard's eye brows), what happened in their bedrooms, nor have I seen cartoons at the gutter-level attributed to them and their leadership, in the same way as Julia Gillard. What a national disgrace and complete lack of respect. This is NOT about politics, it is about respect.

The Global Gender Equation

Of course, the gender gap and the prevalence of imbalance is not just limited to these three issues and how they play out in the workplace and on the national stage. The gender equation has an inherent imbalance and bias globally.

In 2014, just 14% of delegates at the World Economic Forum were women. Ironically, one of the key issues being addressed was how improving gender balance in the workplace could positively impact the bottom line of business and economies around the world. The irony of the unbalanced gender equation, even at events like the Economic Forum, is an obvious and all too prevalent one. Such realities are a reminder that a proactive process from both sides of the gender equation is necessary to bring balance and harmony, not just to our workplaces, but also to the world.

Avril Henry believes that small incremental changes executed consistently and done well, create a momentum that enables the achievement of a positive tipping point. Her research also indicates that senior male leaders sponsoring women will have the greatest immediate impact on the number of women in senior positions.

Creating equality, balance and harmony is something each and every one of us needs to actively participate in. Creating transformational change in the context of such a historically skewed equation requires men and women to work together for the benefit of the whole. Keeping an imbalance in place takes a lot more energy and effort than allowing naturally existing ratios to express themselves in their naturally occurring ways. In the context of men and women, there is an inherently equal ratio of each existing on the planet. When our workplaces, our systems, and our representation reflects that natural harmony, this will no doubt facilitate a much more balanced and harmonious experience for us all.

To learn more about the gender equation, you can read Avril Henry's latest book 'Leadership Revelations III: How We Achieve The Gender Tipping Point.' The book is available at www.avrilhenry.com



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