

Beating the business "boys club": why there is still so much to be done

It's 2023. The days of old school ties, business being done on the golf course, and back-slapping bravado in the boardroom are surely over. But are they?

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There may no longer be a lingering aroma of cigar smoke in the office, but our work has shown that even in the most progressive organisations, remnants of the 'boys club' pervades.

An organisation may well pride itself on its Diversity & Inclusion strategy and congratulate itself on the initiatives it has put in place. Why, just look at the dedicated individual employed to champion inclusiveness, supported by a network of internal communities that promote divergence and differences, and a recruitment policy designed to encourage wider applications. What more can they do?

Closer scrutiny reveals that these virtuous activities are often superficial. Scratch beneath the surface and the behaviours and actual lived experience of employees often tell a different story.

It's fact that women are grossly underrepresented in leadership positions. The gender pay gap remains a gulf that is insurmountable for many. Jobs are advertised without the transparency of salary - and with men more likely to negotiate upwards, that gulf ever widens. Maternity policies punish financially and developmentally, with women's careers often

suffering for taking the time they need to recover from birth.

In our experience of working in male-dominated industries, from the railways to mail to retail, women are still more likely to be overlooked for promotion. Drill down into why and you may discover subtle and unconscious bias displayed through micro-aggressions - for example, women are more likely to be asked to make the tea at meetings, and are less likely to attend after-work drinks due to childcare. Off-work conversation may still centre around male-dominated interests such as football, excluding many (but of course not all) women from participating in these important bonding and networking opportunities.

Sexist behaviours may not be as overt as they were in the 1980s and 1990s - there is less bottom-slapping, fewer page 3 calendars and there have been improvements in awareness and policy. But systemic sexist behaviours remain, often unwittingly, and often as a product of wider societal hangovers and a sense of entitlement that stems from childhood.

Yes, your organisation may have a menopause policy and this is to be applauded - but how comfortable do your older employees really feel in enacting it? Are your leaders really on board, or do they attend the mandatory learning with an eye roll and one eye on the clock? Are your activities well-meaning tokens, or are they just sticking plasters over a deeper cultural wound?

While some things have come a long way in the last few decades, in reality, little has changed. And why? It's because there are no consequences. Take the Equal Pay Act 1970 for example - women still don't have pay parity decades later. There's lots of noise, especially around International Women's Day, but in actuality, everything goes back to normal the day after and it all remains the same.

A woman reacts in anger or assertively at work and is labelled a ball-

breaker, or emotional, while a man exhibiting the same, often negative, behaviours is described as assertive, gutsy, and as someone who calls a spade a spade. We've seen that the more a woman displays typical male traits and behaviours, the more likely they are to be promoted, compartmentalising their own personas for the sake of their careers. So much for being true to ourselves.

There are no commercial consequences either. Corporate KPIs are based on economic performance, making sure shareholders see a return on their investment. Softer KPIs, such as D&I numbers, do not get the same level of focus. Yes, they may get reported on and a policy or two may get championed, but there is little incentive for real, meaningful change, and often, a wilful blindness supported by a groupthink male mindset at the top.

Our concern is that these behaviours were expected to dissipate as the Baby Boomer generation retired, yet we're seeing the new generations of leaders act in the same way. To us, this shows it is learned behaviour, a cultural, deep-rooted acceptance of male superiority that infiltrates all layers of how we work.

It needs to change, and it needs to be taken seriously. CEOs - whether male or female - need to take a good, hard look at what the consequences may be of not changing and really, truly, embedding their well-meaning actions into reality and cultural norms. And yes, considering the impact of not changing on their commercial performance too. After all, women are enormous contributors to organisations' success.

We'd like to say that the *recent issues at the CBI* will influence positive change, but we remain cynical. So we're creating our own movement, helping women be the change they want to be. Giving them the freedom to breathe, to develop courage and confidence, and belief in their purpose.

And we're calling out women who collude in this. Women need to support women, challenging unwanted or undesirable conduct, and putting an end to this insidious and stagnant boys club behaviour. It's had its day.

True change comes through living it. Through it being embedded through belief and action that is more than skin-deep. To develop your equality journey, we have four simple pieces of practical advice:

1. Use an example from your own organisation and ask the men in leadership roles what they would think if their own wife or daughter had had this experience.
2. Find your why and genuinely make it happen. Your organisational purpose needs to shine through all that you do, whether it's commercial or community orientated.
3. Lead from the top. Your CEO and board must be accountable and role model desired behaviours, as your people will look to and mirror what you do.
4. And finally, start again with your women's-based policies. They won't be working.

The boys club is a weed that keeps coming back. So get to the root of the problem, once and for all.

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