Promoting Gender Balance Is Everyone's Business

Progressive companies are moving from awareness to action, and systemic challenges must be overcome.

As business researchers, we find it heartening that improving gender balance has become a central part of mainstream discourse. Thanks in large part to the ample media attention sparked by #MeToo and #TimesUp, it is no longer an uphill battle for gender balance advocates to secure a spot on the organisational agenda. In fact, many organisations are actively attuned to the importance of gender balance and coming to INSEAD for best practices and insights on what they can do to improve. The most progressive companies are shifting their focus from generating awareness to taking concrete steps to level the professional playing field. These are very encouraging developments.

In the context of evolving towards an action-oriented approach to gender balance, we find ourselves frequently saying that there are no quick fixes. Recognition of the entrenched factors at play can get lost in an impatient search for a magic bullet that will "just fix it". The research literature is clear that this type of solution isn't on the horizon. All the evidence indicates that increasing gender equality faces a host of interconnected issues, including ones that are societal, structural, and psychological. In our online **INSEAD Gender Diversity Programme**, we call this a *systemic web of challenges* (Figure 1), which must be addressed on multiple fronts.

Organisations, after all, do not exist in a vacuum.

They have cultural roots and histories whose influence is woven throughout their values and processes. Business leaders can unintentionally create organisations that reflect societal inequalities, which can then inadvertently reinforce and even exacerbate those inequalities. In order to transform these self-reinforcing cycles, multiple types of interventions are required.

Figure 1

Behavioural design

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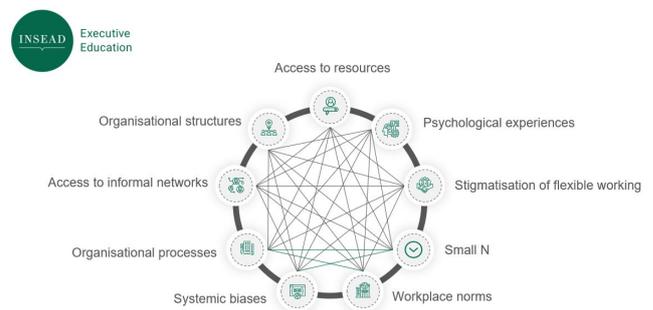
One of the "magic bullets" that companies have been grasping for – to the tune of approximately US$8 billion per year in the United States alone – is diversity training. These courses are designed to root out unconscious bias against underrepresented groups (including women), especially among top managers. But the battle-readiness of this bullet has been seriously **called into question** in recent years by researchers claiming that the courses often have little to no lasting positive impact. In some cases, forced attendance at these courses appeared to have stiffened managers' prejudices rather than softening them.

On a recent **visit to INSEAD's Asia campus**, Harvard Kennedy School's Academic Dean Iris Bohnet advocated for a radically different course of action. "It's hard to change our minds, much harder than the reverse," Bohnet said. "Change the numbers first." She argues that clearer, fairer rules and systems have a far greater de-biasing effect than even the most psychologically acute attempts to rid bias from people's minds. For example, instead of trying to strong-arm or even nicely persuade managers into removing stereotypes about race, gender, etc. from consideration when hiring, Bohnet recommends that companies shore up the formality of their hiring process so that hidden prejudices have less of a chance to seep in.

Psychological interventions

In addition to Bohnet's comprehensive behavioural design-based approach, detailed in her book ***What Works: Gender Equality by Design***, other research points to how her insights could ideally be complemented by psychological interventions.

Despite women's progress, most organisations and societies still hold onto masculine archetypes of leadership. An exaggerated view of gender differences results in women being regarded as inherently less suited to positions of power – often, women themselves harbour such a view. In **a 2018 INSEAD Knowledge interview**, distinguished social psychologist Alice Eagly explained that over the past 70 years, public-opinion polling data shows measures of perceived competence for women now exceed those of men, but women's perceived "agentic" (i.e. assertive and competitive) qualities have remained virtually flat.

Naturally, this has a strong effect on talented women's career prospects. "Hierarchies and leadership are heavily weighted with masculine agency in terms of what people expect," Eagly told us.

These negative stereotypes can harm even women who don't believe in them. Just knowing they exist is enough to saddle women with anxiety about

unwittingly appearing to confirm the stereotypes. This phenomenon, known to social psychologists as stereotype threat or identity threat, leads to self-doubt that can undermine workplace performance, leadership ambitions and professional engagement.

Fortunately, several studies have shown that self-affirmation is a simple, inexpensive yet highly effective tool for ameliorating stereotype threat. For example, a 2016 paper found that **academic performance gaps between men and women** in a competitive MBA programme almost completely disappeared after students were assigned to write about their core personal values. Further analysis showed the effect was mediated by a reduction in a gender gap in self-doubt.

Also, Toni Schmader of the University of British Columbia found (in **research** presented at the 2018 INSEAD **Women at Work** conference) that women's experience of social identity threat can be eliminated through **inclusive organisational signals** and by positive conversations with men in work contexts. While mixed-gender interactions with a negative or neutral emotional tone increased women's identity threat and burnout, their positive interactions with men at work reduced their levels of identity threat and burnout to match those experienced by men.

There are many more examples of psychologically-based interventions we could cite, but these clearly demonstrate that psychological experiences do matter and should not be neglected when developing an organisational action plan for promoting gender balance.

Finding your place in the systemic web

We prefer to think of the systemic web of challenges as empowering, rather than daunting. Its vast scope and complexity means that everyone has a part to play in resolving key challenges within their organisation. But each role will look somewhat different, depending on an individual's organisation and their influence within it.

The INSEAD Gender Diversity Programme addresses this by focusing on three essential objectives:

• building a strong business case for gender balance to convince top decision makers
• identifying the key blockers, which tells you how to navigate the web's stickiest places
• implementing solutions, in order to select the impactful solutions that will work best based on context.

In addition, the INSEAD Gender Initiative's upcoming Women at Work conference in Singapore

takes a similarly diverse approach to identifying solutions, with panels devoted to both highly tangible and process-oriented challenges such as eliminating pay gaps and avoiding "**the glass cliff**" as well as overcoming less visible hurdles such reframing work identities. Coverage of the conference, including video interviews with speakers, can be found on INSEAD Knowledge throughout March and April.

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