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WOMEN AND THE WORKPLACE:

The benefits of gender diversity put to the test

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By Dina Medland

Sweeping generalisations are among the great dangers to be avoided when discussing the appointment of more women at senior levels in business.

Broad statements – no matter how intuitive – about “what women bring” are potentially damaging both to the cause itself and to its desired effect, which is better leadership.

But the value of existing statistics is also open to question, and as the debate continues, those who contribute to it are becoming braver in the questions they ask in their research and are getting clearer answers.

A recent survey* by RSA, the executive search firm, looked at the UK life sciences industry and found that “women bring empathy and intuition to leadership” with nearly two-thirds of respondents (62 per cent) thinking that women contribute differently in the boardroom, compared to their male colleagues.

The gender difference was viewed by most respondents in “an overwhelmingly positive light”. The RSA report says: “Three quarters rated women higher than men for intuition and possessing greater awareness of the motivations and concerns of other people. “A similar proportion saw women as more empathetic, with a better insight into how decisions play out in the wider organisation.” When it came to communications and effective collaboration, “over half felt that women were better”.

When it came to other skills, “there was little difference between the sexes” says the survey.

But not everyone agrees that simply being a woman means possessing characteristics that are a positive factor in business leadership. Lynda Gratton, professor of management practice and director of the Centre for Women in Business at London Business School, says: “There is no substantive difference between men and women at work. Some people are highly caring and intuitive and others are not. I am very cautious about claims on gender differences.”

However, she cites interesting research recently carried out on gender differences in areas such as trading in the financial services industry, which features in *The hour between dog and wolf: risk-taking, gut feelings and the biology of boom and bust* by John Coates. The book is currently on the shortlist for the FT/Goldman Sachs Business Book of The Year award. “If you look at (gender differences) from a testosterone perspective, this clearly influences trading – and as the book demonstrates, female traders don’t go to extremes,” says Dr Gratton.

Other research by Herminia Ibarra, professor of leadership and learning at Insead business school, suggests men and women network differently – men are more likely to network upwards, whereas women try to network with other women. However, as there are fewer senior women, it becomes a self-fulfilling prophecy to stay within one’s own “place”.

Ines Wichert, a chartered psychologist and the author of *Where have all the senior women gone?* published last year by Palgrave Macmillan, has since joined Kenexa’s High Performance Institute, where she continues researching the advancement of women leaders worldwide.

She says there is still a “lack of causality” in the research on whether having women in itself makes for better teams: “Women bring an edge in periods of turbulence or in periods of bad governance,” is as far as she is willing to go on the evidence on offer. There is much stronger evidence on functional diversity and diversity of experience playing a positive role in building better leadership teams, she adds.

Dr Wichert stresses, however, that the “values” women often bring with them can be “particularly important”. At London Business School, Dr Gratton echoes this sentiment, saying that “it is different life experiences we want and a woman brings a different perspective”.

In a personal dimension, she adds: “For me, it isn’t about being a woman, it’s more about being a mother – that role has made a difference to my thinking.”

Recent research by Dr Wichert surveying 2,500 professional women and men from the UK, US, Japan, China and Brazil found that being a parent had a positive impact on career progression. For mothers, “women who get help with housework and childcare outside of work hours report a higher number of promotions than women who report having to shoulder the majority of this additional burden outside of work”.

Looking at country differences among women, the study also found that women in Brazil and China “actively look for more critical job assignments and as a result receive and expect more promotions than women in the UK, US and Japan”.

As well as benefiting from “a more supportive workplace culture”, these women in Brazil and China “also rated themselves more highly on their own job performance, reputation and visibility”, says the KHPI research.

In its UK survey, RSA found that the biggest hurdle among the barriers to delivering

more “balanced” boards was “different life choices for women” (71 per cent) followed by dominant male boardroom culture (54 per cent). But when the question was changed, asking respondents to rate which barrier was most important, the “dominant male boardroom culture” overtook different life choices as first choice.

It seems clear that looking for “causality” between “what women bring” and better leadership teams might be a perilous approach, as it involves jumping into existing vicious circles of behaviour influenced by issues as far-ranging as self-esteem, opportunities, and society’s expectations.

Answers, of course, also depend on the questions asked. Jack Zenger and Joseph Folkman carried out a global survey of 7,280 leaders last year across a range of organisations. Writing in Harvard Business Review in March they found the majority of leaders (64 per cent) are still men, and the higher you go the more men you find. According to Mr Zenger and Mr Folkman: “Most stereotypes would have us believe that female leaders excel at “nurturing” competencies such as developing others and building relationships, and many might put exhibiting integrity and engaging in self-development in that category as well. And in all four cases our data concurred – women did score higher than men.

“But the women’s advantages were not at all confined to what are traditionally seen as women’s strengths. In fact, at every level, more women were rated by their peers, their bosses, their direct reports, and their other associates as better overall leaders than their male counterparts – and the higher the level, the wider that gap grows.”

They go on to say: “Specifically, at all levels, women are rated higher in fully 12 of the 16 competencies that go into outstanding leadership. And two of the traits where women out-scored men to the highest degree – taking initiative and driving for results – have long been thought of as particularly male strengths.”

Or to put it another way, the women who “make it” perhaps do so because they are far better than the men. It might mean the focus should be less on “what women bring” and more on getting them into leadership roles in the first place. *

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