Getting gender balance ‘unstuck’: Taking action with a new strategic approach

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Despite the need to address gender imbalance, especially in senior management ranks, progress has been slow.

The over-focus on unconscious bias is impeding progress.

This article identifies five strategic areas that involve a substantial strategic shift away from prevailing practice to address gender imbalance.

Hardly a fortnight goes by without the release of yet another report extolling the value proposition of having more women at senior levels. In fact, the quantity of articles highlighting the need for gender balance, mostly on boards but also increasingly in senior management ranks has exploded in the past few years.

Gender balance on boards and in management

There is no shortage either of reports pointing out the tremendous gender imbalances that exist in so many organisations around the world. In a similar vein, research studies demonstrating the business case for gender balance have also multiplied.

It is understandable why boards have been the main focus. Besides the significance (status) of board-level roles, there is also the relative ease of collecting data about board composition. While boards are no doubt important, the total number of individuals involved is miniscule in comparison with the various layers of management within organisations. Ultimately, that involves hundreds of thousands of positions and usefully, in just the past two years, the Workplace Gender Equality Agency has published gender balance statistics that at last allow fair comparison among organisations. Those statistics highlight the pressing need to address the current gender imbalance, especially in senior management ranks.

While some have been celebrating progress, in truth it is slow, off a relatively low base and there have not been many spectacular changes or breakthroughs. It is probably no longer quite like watching paint dry, but let us acknowledge there have not been any fireworks either.

Gender balance is stuck

Based on this slow progress, gender balance appears largely stuck. As has been pointed out by many, if gender balance change was to continue at the current pace, it would take decades before any meaningful levels of balance are reached. Oxfam has estimated that gender balance (using pay equity as a metric) will only be achieved by around 2070. Why should women (and organisations) have to wait any longer, let alone as long as forecast?

It is becoming very clear that the approaches used to this point are now simply incapable of breaking through to the next level. Those old ideas, perspectives and approaches played an essential role in helping us get here. But now they’re spent! What’s the evidence for this claim? A rate of gender balance progress that is frankly unacceptable for this point in history. Any commercial venture that showed such a dismal rate of return on investment would have been scrapped long ago.
But we still have a gender balance problem. Because current ideas and approaches were the best available at the time, they were seen as the main focus rather than as just a springboard that will launch the next stage! As leading edge ideas, they were at first uncomfortable (even unmentionable) for many. Over time they became more widely accepted as there was nothing better. Now, for many, they seem like a pair of old leather shoes — comfy through wear but outdated. And it gets worse. Some of the older gender balance ideas are more like a comfy pair of shoes made out of a material that is possibly carcinogenic.

The over-focus on unconscious bias is impeding progress

Many organisations, despite goodwill, good intent and even significant spend on efforts to generate change, have not achieved the gender balance progress they seek. This means they’ll need to rethink the way forward. There will need to be an acknowledgement that there is no ‘silver bullet’ or ‘one-size-fits-all’ approach and organisations will also need to work out what suits their own context. This will require recognition that moving forward may well involve taking a step back first in order to become ‘unstuck’.

But, unconscious bias is still seen (without any evidence at all) and used by many decision-makers in this field as the ‘silver bullet’ for gender balance. This poses a great threat to progress. Initially (almost two decades ago), decision-makers who opted for general unconscious bias (or more correctly termed implicit bias) training did so with good intent and in good faith. Although there has never been any substantial evidence supporting the efficacy of unconscious bias training, giving the new, untested approach a chance was the best D&I alternative available at the time. However, almost twenty years on, two glaring pieces of evidence are now available. First, despite all the investment (estimated US$6–8 billion per year in the US alone) in unconscious bias and allied diversity training, there has been so little progress, so little change.

Second, recent research, published in the highly reputable Journal of Applied Psychology in March 2015, demonstrates that unconscious bias training does not work! Further, researchers Dr Michelle Duguid and Dr Thomas Hunt even suggest that unconscious bias training is, ironically, likely to increase the levels of unconscious bias.

Biased decision-making ironically keeping ‘unconscious bias’ in play

The inability of unconscious bias proponents to shift perspective, even in the light of substantial contrary evidence, means they are actually making flawed decisions. Ironically, a major factor in their poor decision-making is bias. Management professor Sidney Finkelstein and colleagues examined how good organisations and good leaders sometimes make very bad (even catastrophic) decisions when, in retrospect, they had everything they needed to make a better decision instead. All cases involved elements of uncertainty and, interestingly, decision-makers with good levels of experience and competence in the field of the decision-making. Having examined over 80 cases, Finkelstein and colleagues identified four major causes of decision-making error. In many cases more than one, and not infrequently even all four, of the decision-making errors were detected.

First is misleading experience, where decision-makers erroneously believed their current situation was the same as a past experience when, at best, it may only have been similar. As a result, critical dissimilarities were missed or overlooked, resulting in wrong calls being made. The second category was misleading judgment. In this category, the approach, model or formula that was applied to a complex problem was not appropriate in the context, but this inappropriateness was not recognised. Third was inappropriate attachment, where the decision-makers’ judgement was clouded by psychological attachments (often unconscious) to less appropriate courses of action. For example, promoting a favourite even though they’re not the best person for the job. Finally, some errors were due to inappropriate self-interest (again often unconscious), where decision-makers were unhelpfully influenced, as a result of direct, personal conflicts of interest — the conflicted decision-maker stood to gain or lose from the decision.

Turning to the matter of unconscious bias, there are many in the field who have had experience with training of various types. As a result, they believe that the problem of unconscious bias can be improved through some kind of training regime. Their prior experience of people acquiring new skills, and perhaps even abandoning less helpful behaviours, raises their hope (and belief) that unconscious bias is essentially no different from other training challenges they have successfully addressed. However, unconscious bias is substantially different (note its unconscious nature for one thing) and their misplaced beliefs that training will work represents a decision-making error, stemming from misleading experience. Secondly, because bias is undoubtedly a contributing factor to the gender
balance challenge, many of these decision-makers feel strongly that it should be eliminated. This is a commendable sentiment, but the problem is that bias is at the very core of how the human brain deals with massive amounts of information. Often bias works in favour of good outcomes — for example we filter out distractions so we can get on with the task at hand; but, sometimes, it delivers unwanted, negative outcomes, such as non-inclusive behaviours. A major challenge is that the process is as labelled ‘unconscious’. While organisational systems can and should be regularly monitored for bias that has become formalised within procedures, processes and policies, and its impact at least mitigated, the same is not possible where people are concerned. In fact, truth be told, Dr Anthony Greenwald, co-researcher who coined the term ‘implicit bias’ warned, ‘caution is warranted in speculating that repeated interventions…will have enduring effects on levels of implicit bias’. Consequently, while it is helpful to be alert to unconscious bias, general unconscious bias training (and testing) is based on misleading prejudgments that bias in people can be eliminated. Further, having awareness and intent without meaningful action never changed anything.

A third reason organisations might stick with unconscious bias training is inappropriate attachment. One example is loyalty to an approach, which caught on as a possible way forward for D&I a decade ago, when options were few. Even though it has delivered so little in the way of ROI after all this time, it remains in favour, a little like the Stockholm Syndrome where hostages develop positive emotional connections to their captors. For some, the attachment has even assumed crusade-like proportions. Many who have done unconscious bias training share how they have been castigated for having bias — and their sense was that the unconscious bias interrogators (trainers) were deriving some satisfaction from the upset they elicited. Ironically, it seems as if some of those attached to unconscious bias have come to focus on it as the end, rather than simply a means to the end, of increased gender balance and diversity.

Finally, there is the question of inappropriate self-interest and the fact that it too is often, but not always, unconscious. For example, if you were an HR director, CEO or diversity council member that had spent millions of dollars on unconscious bias training, which has now been discredited, you’d likely have a lot at stake if the ineffectiveness was exposed. In that circumstance, a completely understandable bias against contrary information would be strong. Similarly, if you didn’t have any alternative gender balance fixes to offer, you’d want to hang on to what you have — even if it is not effective. Usefully, you also hold the trump card of being able to accuse any dissenters of not supporting gender balance and diversity. Powerful weapons indeed, especially in an era where managers want to appear to be ‘on message’. Others might make a clear case against unconscious bias as an effective approach, but you’re unable to process the conflicting perspective due to inappropriate self-interest.

Perhaps the biggest irony is that all four of the decision-making errors that Finklestein and team identified arise from a range of cognitive (unconscious) biases. Perhaps this irony is also the greatest evidence of the ineffectiveness of general unconscious bias training. Those who are the most ardent and aware advocates of the fashionable unconscious bias training fail to recognise its impact on their decision-making. More importantly, they can’t see the damage it may do to their organisations and to the poor rate of gender balance progress more generally.

**Other failing strategies**

The unconscious bias fashion is a major problem, but not the only one. With a concern about lack of progress, UGM recently convened a roundtable focusing on the strategic position of gender balance. The relatively small, but highly experienced group of contributors focused on what might be needed strategically to progress gender balance. The exploration, although focused on future strategy, necessarily reviewed current and past initiatives as well. See Figure 1.

In addition to the failure of unconscious bias training, mentoring, especially in-house, ‘vanilla mentoring’ is seen as largely having failed to deliver change.
Female-only mentoring circles are considered particularly unhelpful. Instead, ‘sponsorship’ is viewed as being much more likely to progress gender balance. Diversity councils can be useful. But, many have a ‘hands-off’ approach, leaving the heavy-lifting to HR alone. This results in much less buy-in from the rest of the organisation, and regularly not enough to bring about meaningful change. For some organisations, Diversity Councils are little more than window-dressing. Finally, the over-focus on extraordinary role models does not much help the ‘average’ person. Additionally, the context of stellar performance is critical yet isn’t likely to be transferrable. This links closely to enthusiastically implementing research findings and case studies. While very interesting, and likely excellent stimuli for finding solutions in individual organisational contexts, well-intentioned conference goers often try and implement solutions that don’t fit their context. Reflecting back on Finkelstein’s decision-making errors helps identify how these various approaches continue to be pursued even though they are failing to deliver change.

Forging a new strategic mainstream for gender balance progress

Given that past strategic direction has delivered so little progress, the best hope for positive change is to try something new. The most important strategic insight from the gender balance roundtable for the UGM team is that the challenge for organisations going forward is significantly more complex than originally anticipated. Five distinct strategic areas were identified by the roundtable. See Figure 2. Each area represents a major undertaking and involves a substantial strategic shift away from prevailing practice. These key areas need significant strategic shifts for gender balance to have a chance of succeeding. In other words, gender balance progress is reliant on changes in its own field and also on major strategic shifts in numerous strategically adjacent areas.

Just as for most business strategies, decisions about action should be data directed and data driven. It includes using root-cause and gap analysis to determine what will work best for your particular organisation. Also, it is essential that organisations use a ‘nimble’ approach: test, learn and act, repeating the cycle rapidly. This approach helps avoid costly misfires, like the decades spent trying to use assertiveness training or, worse still, like the decades spent trying to use unconscious bias training.

There is much truth in the adage, ‘what gets measured, gets managed’. Equally true is the fact that reward or punishment has a big impact on where people focus their attention. There was a strong feeling at the roundtable that the time for ‘targets with teeth’ has arrived. KPI’s and gender balance data should be transparent, as well as there being consequences for delivering or missing gender balance KPIs. Slow-moving metrics may need proxy measures, and organisations would be well advised to project what metrics will be relevant and valuable 10 or 15 years into the future.

Flexibility in and of itself will not deliver gender balance. However, it is considered a core enabler. Many organisations have made excellent
progress in devising flexibility policies. In contrast, the ability to translate those policies into everyday practice has, on the whole, been woeful. Organisations will need to mainstream flexibility of most, if not all, roles for gender balance to progress.

Having taken a strategic perspective, roundtable contributors also recognised that the traditional talent management system is not only outmoded, it is probably perversely sustaining the gender balance status quo. For example, performance reviews in their current form might unintentionally be favouring a particular group. Also, the popular talent pipeline model takes little account of career pathways that might have multiple peaks and even span multiple careers. Overall, ‘talent management’ has also not ensured a sound, fair understanding of ‘merit based’ systems.

A fresh approach that helps individual businesses succeed

An up-to-date strategic perspective of the field as outlined above is essential, but individual businesses will only achieve gender balance progress through local, customised actions. Thinking of their own unique context, they will need to translate and infuse the broad strategic insights into their own unique business context and practices. But busy, pressured, time-poor executives baulk at being faced with one more thing they have to do. As well as ‘business as usual’, they’re now required to promote ‘gender balance’. No wonder it tends to fall off the crowded ‘to do’ list!

As identified earlier, gender balance is too often seen as an ‘HR issue’ (or even an ‘HR demand’), rather than a business priority. To change this, HR together with well-meaning consultants have worked long and hard to design and present the ‘business case for gender balance’. But, though the case is now well made, in general this approach has not delivered change. As senior executives keep an eye on their priorities, the advancement of women simply has not made the cut. Measurement is one thing, but what matters most to people is where they...
usually put their attention. Any time left over, the view is, can be given to ‘extras’ and gender balance is all too often judged to be an extra.

With these concerns in mind, we decided to take a much closer look at what people really do at work in order to identify potential leverage points for change — to find opportunities for ‘hacking’ gender balance. So we took cameras into thirty organisations around the country in a wide variety of sectors, business types and organisation sizes. We filmed people doing their regular jobs. We were especially interested in the part of a person’s job that they have to do with other people — where they need to collaborate to solve problems, innovate, create and make that stream of everyday decisions that forms the lifeblood of any workplace.

This unique corpus of data, now almost 200 hours, has given us a powerful insight into the link between organisational health and innovation, for instance. We can see what goes on and what all too often goes wrong when people work together to get things done. We discovered something compelling and important. Focusing on building inclusive cultures adds far greater value than focusing mostly on developing inclusive managers. When people behave inclusively the quality of their performance improves. There are more innovative ideas. Productivity goes up. Decision risk is reduced. In addition, people feel a genuine sense of belonging when their team functions in this inclusive style. They feel motivated to contribute more because they want to do the best they can. Things seem to matter more to them.

This filmed data is eloquent. Watching it over and over, at times frame by frame, we can identify what high performing individuals and teams do a lot of and, by the same token, what they do very little of or avoid altogether. Based on this analysis, we’ve been able to identify specific protocols, practices and tools that support innovative, high performing people and teams. The fact that these behaviours are also inclusive is not their primary selling point, in our experience. It’s more about being able to demonstrate that if you want innovation and you want productivity, then you’re going to need to learn the skills of inclusion.

We’ve developed an inclusion approach and toolkit that is readily versioned to fit unique business contexts including sector, level and circumstance. First, we audit exactly how and where conversation and interaction occur in your business — and then we improve it. It should not be a surprise to learn that good problem-solving and quality decision-making rest on a foundation of inclusive behaviours. It is through securing broad-based challenge, debate and contribution that innovation is optimised and risk minimised. The evidence we’ve collected shows that inclusion is not just good for business. It’s actually fundamental to business. In this complex 21st century world of global markets and the knowledge economy, inclusion secures the innovation edge that will help to protect our shared financial future and security. And, added to all these benefits, we believe a mature inclusive culture will make a major contribution towards finally achieving gender balance.

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