Fixing the ‘Leaky Pipe’
Are the right tools being used for the job?
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For many of us, it has become near impossible to not get involved in some form of discussion (heated or otherwise…) about the inequalities that seem to persist in our places of work. Whether that be the polarising concept of a ‘gender pay gap’, or the extent that sexual harassment still permeates our institutions, as highlighted most visibly by the current ‘#MeToo’ movement. Clearly there are still many problems with the workplace environment, but one that has garnered increased media attention in recent years is the concept of the ‘leaky pipeline’.

What is the ‘Leaky Pipeline’?

Most people have by now heard of the ‘glass ceiling’, which is the understanding that at some point in a person’s career (particularly a woman’s), they will reach a stage in which they can’t progress for reasons outside of their control. The concept of the ‘leaky pipeline’, goes one step further and suggests that like a pipe that leaks water, people are dropping out and not continuing down their chosen career path for a range of reasons. It has been shown that relatively more women choose to stop progressing in their career or choose to stay at home when compared to men. Hence to put it simply, women are ‘leaking’ out of the workforce and are not continuing down the ‘pipe’ of progression. Thus, resulting in a marked shortage of female staff occupying the upper levels of most organisational hierarchies.

What is causing the ‘leak’?

There are many things that can cause someone to remove themselves from promotion contention or the workforce entirely. These include but aren’t limited to gender expectations regarding care duties, pre-existing commitments outside of work, a feeling of inadequacy of one’s own abilities, and even the feeling that only certain genders can do specific roles within an organisation. Unfortunately, these issues not only exist, but also impact women to a much greater extent than their male colleagues. Traditionally it has been women that have been the ones to stay at home to raise the children, manage the household, or look after elderly relatives during periods of ill health. So, it’s plain to see why generally speaking, women in particular are hesitant to take on more time-consuming roles with a higher degree of workplace responsibility. How can we expect someone to opt for working longer hours, whilst feeling they may be needed elsewhere?
**So, what is being done?**

Tackling this issue of limiting workplace gender norms will take time, but some action has been taken to put more women into decision making roles. Firstly, we have ‘workplace quotas’. These can take a range of forms from ‘hiring quotas’ to ‘managerial quotas’, but essentially mean the same thing; a certain percentage of the workforce has to be comprised of women. Also, we have the advent of ‘positive discrimination’, whereby resources or employment are allocated to individuals belonging to certain groups of society that are widely understood to have been historically discriminated against. This has allowed some females to access jobs even though on paper their academic and work life achievements may appear to be lesser than that of another applicant that has been excluded from the process due to their already overrepresentation in the workforce.

These are only two examples of now commonly occurring activities that have been implemented to make it easier for women to advance in their career and shed the historic gender expectations attached to their sex, and thus have for the most part been hailed as a move in the right direction of achieving gender parity. It has even been shown that organisations that have a more equal balance between men and women on the payroll tend to generate more profit. How could you argue with that?

**The Pipe may be fixed, but Pressure is Building**

In the modern cultural climate social media has a huge influence on the actions of all institutions, whether it be government or private business. Through the media attention brought to gender inequality in the workplace through movements, such as ‘#MeToo’, employers have had to react fast to provide some sort of fix to appease the masses for fear of their inaction generating bad publicity. So, the answer is usually the adoption of quotas and positive discrimination. Why not? Everyone is doing it. There is an underlying problem with this somewhat ‘knee jerk’ reaction, however.

The benefits for the female worker in the short-term are hard to argue against, but due to the desire for a quick remedy to this problem we may have inadvertently made lasting change more distant. Research has shown that when changing attitudes in the workplace environment you need two things; 1. A ‘crisis’ and 2. The willingness of the workforce to change. Now if we take the underrepresentation of women at managerial levels and questionably gender biased working conditions as the crisis, then we are still left with the need for the current workforce (including men) to alter their approach to ‘working women’.

If our collective response to getting more women into higher positions in our societies is to essentially forcibly put them there, we run the risk of creating an ‘Us versus Them’ working dynamic. Women who benefit from quotas and positive discrimination aren’t always being seen to have succeeded based on their own merit, but are thought of as needing help to progress. Thus, prolonging the notion that women aren’t ‘built’ for certain jobs. It is not implied that these women are any less competent than their male colleagues, but simply that nobody (in this case men) likes change forced upon them. Especially change that seems to disadvantage you. Effective change can’t be made obligatory. We need to challenge the idea of gender norms at the root cause, and not just shoehorn change. The question is, does short-term gain mean more than risking long lasting success? We are caught in a race to see who can be the most politically correct and pro-woman, without any concern for the final destination.

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