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Promoting gender equality, advancing the economy

JUMP Corporate Hub

17th May 2016

How to tackle hidden obstacles holding women back:

Office politics, unconscious bias, self-sabotage, corporate culture and more...

Summary of the session

Introduction

Sixteen people from seven different companies gathered at this session hosted by Total. Isabella Lenarduzzi (JUMP) welcomed participants. Christine Cecil (JUMP) introduced the audience to the topic of the session and gave a brief overview of the programme. Then she gave the floor to the speakers.

Expert Presentation 1

Be gender smart: Removing barriers, helping women progress and creating a business culture that works for both women and men - Inge Woudstra (W20 Consulting & Training Managing Director)

Inge Woudstra (W20 Consulting & Training Managing Director) positioned her presentation around the theme of “gender smartness,” the core concept underlying her work and designating the irreducibly ex-clusive values brought by both women and men in the workplace.

Women and men differ from each other in their needs, values, life priorities and working styles. However, the world of work has been designed only by men and for men. Inge illustrates the harshness of being women in a man-tailored workplace with an image of a fish trying to climb a tree with its fins.

The fish striving to climb the tree with no or little success is an effective metaphor for the obstacles holding back women from the full expression of their potential. It explains why most women are hard put to find their place in companies. According to recent statistics, women make up over 50% of graduates. However, only half of the women between 30 and 40 who have been recruited in organisations stay in their company, while the other half leave. Inge criticizes the masculine attitude that women are supposed to adopt to push their way through to success. No doubts that the “jostling” women are those who best succeed in getting promotions and advancing in their career. But do women really want to have to “jostle” their way through to succeed?

The speaker shares a childhood experience to make the point. When she was a little girl she longed to ride a go-cart. But there was always a huge queue and fight in the queue to be able to ride the go-carts, and as she patiently stood and waited her turn, she never managed to get a ride. She used to look at the boys jostling their way through in envy, until the moment she decided she would do anything to get a ride too. And so it was. She struggled and jostled her

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way through the queue... and got to the front and got her ride! The bullying tactics had worked, but...not really. She did not feel comfortable with these tactics and never attempted it again.

Inge illustrates the differences between men and women with an image. Before an examiner stand a monkey, an elephant, a penguin, a seal, a fish in a bowl and other very different animals. They are all waiting to take a test. The man says: "A fair selection - everybody has to take the same exam: please climb that tree!"

The discussion is engaged with the participants, who share their experience of being a woman in a company dominated by all-male rules. One participant talks of a shift in gender attitudes in the last years. Young men are more collaborative and less scared of emotions. They are still competitive, but in a different way with respect to the past. Isabella Lenarduzzi agrees that things have changed. However, they seem to be changed especially to the advantage of men, who are getting more and more appreciation for showing their femininity. Women, by contrast, are not allowed to be emotional without being seen as unsuitable for positions of responsibility. An illustration of this is the comparison between Barak Obama and Hilary Clinton breaking into tears: the first has been applauded for his sensitiveness, the second imputed of weakness.

A male participant remarks that men are often less willing to share what they feel. Actually, it is not that men are little emotional. By opposite, they experience emotions in such a strong way that they fear their power and feel the need to keep them under control. For most men it's much easier to be in the command and control attitude than to let go of themselves. They tend to remove their emotions in order to remain on their safe ground.

Expert Presentation 2

What's Holding Women Back, How Women Can Make It Happen: Insights From a Study on Women and Men - Laurent Levisalles and Katrien Audenaert (Resilience Institute)

Laurent Levisalles and Katrien Audenaert define resilience as a "learned ability" showing up in a complex of 4 interrelated skills:

- Bounce
- Courage
- Creativity
- Connection

Body, heart, mind and spirit must all be trained for developing resilience. They have developed a specific core module within their training programme dedicated to each of these fundamental human dimensions. An additional core module is specifically aimed at stress. The five-module programme is used in leadership and coaching as well as in team trainings.

The resilience programme is based on a diagnosis that measures the level of resilience within organisations. Data drawn from the diagnostics done were analysed in terms of gender, to find out whether there were relevant differences between women and men.

Their study showed, that contrary to popular beliefs, women show up as being less prone to moodiness vs men. On the other hand, they are more vulnerable, can be more distressed and liable to confusion. They lack self-confidence more than men, and they seem to have more difficulties in bouncing back. In these respects, results from the diagnosis seem to confirm popular wisdom!

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Laurent shows the main differences between women and men's resilience levels. The main difference resides in the overall liability. Women seem to manifest symptoms of distress more than their male colleagues. They are more inclined to feel sad and rejected, and to avoid difficult tasks and conflicts when feeling low self-esteem. They feel more stress about difficult decisions and responsibilities. More women than men claim to be overly tired and fatigued by the end of the day, and – what's worse – that they are feeling stress in their body.

Laurent Levisalles and Katrien Audenaert close their presentation by emphasizing that resilience is 100% learnable and that there is always room for improvements. Then they sum up what they think are the most critical elements for women and the points on which they should work: self-confidence; stress mastery; respect of their needs, in particular of their sleep; thinking skills – under this label they seem to intend the skills for single-minded logical reasoning.

Company Testimonial

Gender Equality Is Not a Woman's Issue. It Is a Human Issue - Erwin Ollivier, CEO and General manager of DLL, winner of the Wo.Men @ Work Award and ambassador of Gender Equality 2016

Erwin Ollivier empathizes the role of CEOs and top managers for bringing gender equality in the mind-set and practice of the organisations. However, what really matters is neither the top role nor the subscription to gender equality label, but the personal engagement in trying to understand, think, and stay flexible. Such a personal engagement is what Erwin names Gender Authenticity, the importance of giving both women and men room to be themselves. Asking employees to fit in a one-size-fit-all role is to force them to be inauthentic and to waste energy they could put in work. It means losing the value the employees could bring to their organisation and making them less happy and performant than they could be.

One can know about gender equality without really understanding the issue. Erwin himself had always assumed he was on the equality side, but he only came to understand what was at stake when his oldest daughter reproached him for never being at home nor going to talk to her teachers. It was an "Aha!" moment. All of a sudden, he realized he had always taken for granted his wife and what she was doing for their family and children. Another "Aha" moment was when one of his employees did not apply for the Executive job she was the most qualified for because she was pregnant. She was afraid that she could not have been a perfect mother and a perfect worker at the same time.... Erwin had to convince her that this would be feasible and that the organisation could be flexible to allow her to manage both roles – and she accepted the job!

Erwin started understanding the pitfalls of our thought's "natural" patterns. He realized that women and men, on average, have different life priorities. For women family comes first and work follows, and they themselves come systematically in the last place. As a result, they often lack me-time. For men, to the opposite, work comes in the first place, the me-time follows, and family comes the last. It is very important for a manager to know these general differences in order to equalise opportunities.

Erwin's gender authenticity policy is comprised of three key factors:

1) CHALLENGE THE STATUS QUO – This implies a commitment to break down normative, standardised gender patterns along with the hierarchical ones. The basic principle is that everybody is equal, regardless of gender and hierarchical position. Persisting inequalities in salary and in recruitment and promotion must be targeted and countered. One of Erwin's mottos is "I do not compromise for equality. I want to have the best people in my team!"

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2) REACH OUT - Listening, fostering cross-gender dialogue and welcoming mother and would-be-mothers are complementary grass-roots actions to reach out for women. Managers must watch out for the fact that women not step forward as often as men. They don't ask for promotions and pay rises as often; nor for equal jobs or equal salaries. Unlike men, they expect others to give them rises and promotion as a reward for their worth. Also, they spend less time and energy on networking and building their own visibility because of their different life priorities. Because of this, it is essential to organise punctual events specifically dedicated to women networking. An even more crucial factor is the "mentoring ring," ie. the activation of a role models' virtuous circle.

3) ELIMINATE THE HIDDEN THRESHOLD - The all-male hero model is replaced by a "silent hero" culture where women are allowed to be mothers and men are reminded that they are fathers. Neither of them should be required to sacrifice their families to work. Meetings are scheduled according to key time windows that facilitate everybody's participation. Flex and part-time work are not just tolerated, but encouraged and valued.

Erwin's commitment to gender authenticity also relies on informal basic rules. One of this is "kids always go first", which means that both women and men are allowed to leave the office all of the sudden and without explanations when children issues come into play. Another original rule is that sick leaves up to 5 days are allowed without requirement of medical certification. These rules are based on trust and gave very positive results, with for example, a radical drop in absenteeism.

Among the benefits resulting from gender authenticity, Erwin emphasizes: 1) a brand and culture very competitive and attractive for employees; 2) increased employees' satisfaction; 3) strong loyalty of the employees; 4) the increased resilience of the whole team, both at an individual and collective level.

Finally, among the benefits, most important of all is the enriching experience the manager him or her-self goes through to find her or his team's way to gender authenticity in practice.