

# LOOKING FOR FAIRNESS

THE CONFUSION OF "EQUAL" AND ONGOING QUEST FOR "FAIR"

TEXT: ELISABET RODRIGUEZ DENNEHY FOTO: LINA NÉMETH

**W**hen I started to write my book I wanted to find key overarching issues that we all understood, both men and women would be better off in our dynamics at work.

Due to my legal background, yes I used to practice law, I have a tendency to always look at the rule of law that impact our behavior especially at work.

In the US the EEOC has been the guiding force behind gender *equality*. In Europe you have mandates and directives that come from the European Union which promote overall rules and regulations.

The one thing that is the same in most of the regions I work, specially US and Europe is the use of the words equal and equality. For me the selection of these words has been a big part of the challenges we face when we want to get the right message and focus on solving gender integration.

Words we chose are key to define our message. For women to choose equality has meant in my estimation a deviation of the most important message we want to make and that is that as women, we bring a series of attributes that are unique *and* desirable in the business world and that those attribute create an environment of complementarity and collaboration with those of men.

While legal equality is a worthy goal, too many women mistakenly pursued a notion of equality that meant emulating traditional male behaviors. Rough and tough was the perceived acceptable conduct to ensure corporate advancement. Women who decided to have a family and children

felt that qualities valued in their role of wife and mother had to be erased the moment they walked into the office on Monday morning.

## To unlock the potential

For both women and minorities, trying to be equal to – in the sense of being the *same as* – white men has rarely paid off in either career success or personal fulfillment. This approach has also constrained the growth and success of businesses and organizations by eliminating or muting the *different* attributes and qualities that make women and minorities complementary, strategic partners.

For men the use of equality has also created confusion and anxiety. How can they put their arms around treating women like other men? How can they override the cultural and social feelings that are a natural consequence of social and cultural norms?

To unlock the potential of both individuals and organizations, I believe we must shift our paradigm from equality/sameness to *fairness*. This concept has been articulated in various ways by thinkers from all walks of life in recent decades, and I am convinced that it is fundamental to helping women ascend to higher positions in the workforce.

A simple definition of fairness is “the ability to make judgment free from discrimination or dishonesty.” Achieving that standard, rather than mere appearances of “equality,” demands the development of a work environment that:

- > Supports the exchange of ideas with respect and interest in others
- > Celebrates the value of diverse backgrounds and cultural contexts
- > Encourages individuals to use and develop inherent qualities and abilities rather than trying to assimilate



Elisabet Rodriguez Dennehy is speaking about Leading by Influence at Business Woman Breakfast



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- > Promotes inclusive thinking and behaviors
- > Focuses on measuring, encouraging and rewarding real talent and performance
- > Eliminates the quota mentality and demoralizing role of women and minorities as token figures

An emphasis on “sameness” and assimilation results in the loss of complementary attributes associated with women and minorities – like exploring multiple perspectives, focusing on collaboration rather than competition, and developing empathy and trust. These are all proving to be highly valuable attributes in achieving more profitable organizations.

### What am I doing wrong?

University of Michigan Professor Scott E. Page and economist Lu Hong from Chicago Loyola University even developed a mathematical model

## *Men and women are still searching for a way to be themselves*

that reinforces the claims of other researchers that diverse groups can solve complex business problems better than homogeneous groups. In fact, in “Groups of Diverse Problem Solvers Can Outperform Groups of High-Ability Problem Solvers,” they show that, in certain circumstances, “diversity can trump ability.”

An article from Stanford University’s Graduate School of Business titled “Diverse Backgrounds and Personalities Can Strengthen Groups” cites

similar findings by Professor Margaret A. Neale. The article explains that after reviewing fifty years of related research, Neale found that “diversity across dimensions such as functional, education or personality enhanced performance by increasing creativity or group-problem solving.”

It also quotes Neale as saying “the mere presence of diversity you can see, such as a person’s race or gender, actually cues a team in that there’s likely to be differences of opinion” which can “enhance the team’s ability to handle conflict, because members expect it and are not surprised when it surfaces.”

Conversely, when women and minorities strive merely to “act like white men” – and leaders intentionally or unintentionally hold them to that impossible standard – the result is confusion throughout the organization. Women and minorities are left asking: What am I doing wrong? What more do I need to do to be treated fairly? Are my natural attributes getting in the way of my success?

### Partners at work

In my experience, the same challenge exists in markets worldwide. Men and women are still searching for a way to be themselves and develop a sense of normalcy in daily work interactions. The “equality agenda” may have been a necessary first step on that road – but the next step requires that we upshift our thinking to *fairness*. It is time to start to explore that which makes us unique and strategic partners at work. I cannot emphasize enough that, even aside from humanistic concerns, su-

perior business performance depends on understanding and embracing our complementary differences.

During my last trip to Prague, we held an open session in which we had men and women participate. One of the participants was a senior, experienced business man who initially articulated his dislike as it related to quota and merits on hiring. By the time we had done our presentation his shift and understanding of the importance of leveraging gender and unraveling the blocks that keep us in an impasse had emerged.

So as I close this article I not only leave you with some room for thought, but also a good example of how when we do set the right dialogue and use *the right words and concepts* things start to move forward in a positive way. /BW