

HRD

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the **HRDIRECTOR**

Issue 113

Hospitality's
a swan...
serene on
the surface,
*paddling like
mad below*

Interview

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Special report

Having worked in the sphere, of unconscious bias, Professor Binna Kandola OBE, Senior Partner at Pearn Kandola has co-written a new book called *"The Invention of Difference: The Story of Gender Bias at Work."* As this article demonstrates, bias is manifest in the mind and consequently ever-present in the workplace.

The stereotypes

Nigel Farage, the leader of UKIP, caused a stir recently when he said that women who have children were "worth less" to employers, because when they are on maternity leave they lose their client base and so are less valuable to their organisations.

Mr Farage made the point that whilst there was sexist behaviour when he began his career, there is now no discrimination against women at all. He has been criticised for his remarks, but seriously, do we really think that it is only members of his party that hold these views? We have heard the same opinions being expressed by very senior people in a variety of industries. The CEO of one financial organisation recently said to us that there was no gender bias in his organisation, a view that he refused to be moved from. Eventually, realising that this position was difficult to maintain, in the light of the evidence, he said that there was no gender bias in his organisation because they had no women.

We have worked extensively in the area of unconscious bias in organisations as business psychologists, and what the above viewpoint demonstrates is that gender is distinct from other forms of bias, as it is often consciously expressed - the difference being that it is not seen as bias. When it comes to gender, people are more open about their opinions and biases

and they will often find others, men and women, willing to agree with them. Certain ideas are accepted as incontrovertible, sacred even, facts, and that being the case, all the other decisions that we make are therefore logical and rational. One of these beliefs is that men and women are fundamentally different in terms of personality and abilities. Another is that the way we can make progress is by establishing a coherent business case. Well, we believe that maybe we need to challenge some of these fundamental assumptions.

Books that claim there are eternal and universal differences between the sexes are popular. We seem to recognise ourselves in them. But what we are really responding to is convenient stereotypes. "Typical man", we say, when a dexterous and technologically inclined man fails to work the washing machine. These books purport to tell us why women can't read maps or stick to the point of a story. The reward in reading books of this kind is a little like that of observational stand-up comedy - they are a kind of satire aimed at ourselves. We identify

with the caricatures presented to us, because this gives us a sense of belonging. We are licensed to excuse the faults and celebrate the talents guaranteed to us by our gender. A good dose of scientific-sounding narrative about natural selection, and preferably some brightly-coloured brain scans, and we're hooked.

The books that tell us women need to shed tears but men just need sheds play to our existing beliefs and reinforce well-established stereotypes. They make sense based on the ideologies we've been exposed to since birth, so we take them as truth. Although we characterise humans as learning animals, people are actually inclined to seek out information that will prove their existing hypotheses. We don't want to abandon what we already believe, so we are attracted to information that confirms our beliefs. As the saying goes, people find what they look for, and the dangers of confirmation bias are well known in scientific disciplines. Given the absolute centrality of stereotypes to our habitual thought processes and our unconscious actions, our proposition is proving difficult for some to deal with. The key point to hold on to is this: Personality and ability differences between men and women are not certain truths.

How can this be the case when evolutionary psychology tells us something completely the opposite? That not only are men and women different; but that these differences are natural and enduring; we are the way we are because we have always been like this. The most popular view of the early history of humankind goes like this: males go out and hunt for days or weeks at a time while the females stay home, looking after the children and collecting herbs – waiting for the men to bring home the bacon. This leads us to think it is right that women should be nurses, teachers and carers, while men will be engineers, doctors, lawyers and leaders. It is right that men should be the breadwinners and that women should be the homemakers. We call this Theory YDD - for Yabba Dabba Doo. For adherents of this view, and there are many, *The Flintstones* isn't a cartoon but a reality documentary. Fred, Wilma, Barney and Betty are us and we are them. Theory YDD, in other words, is a projection of contemporary dominant values on to a distant and ultimately unknowable prehistory. The same agenda is urged less directly when people claim women are (or believe they are) better multi-taskers than men, or say that men have (or believe they have) a better sense of direction. Since these generalisations are themselves false, the evolutionary tale-telling that supposedly explains them is redundant.

Evolutionary theory is a marvellous rhetorical tool for explaining away inequalities. Here, for example, is Nigel Nicholson parenthesisising on the scarcity of women in leadership positions: "Domination, competition and patriarchy are biologically encoded as our model of authority." In other words it is inevitable, because of evolution, that men should dominate in leadership positions. It's not true that prehistoric and modern people are interchangeable. Up until the Industrial Revolution, the family worked as a unit. Tribes in prehistory were often nomadic. Women hunted and men cultivated. In fact, it may be more accurate to describe these groups as gatherer-hunters. We can't picture this way of life, so we say the way we are now is the way we've always been. Desmond Morris, the sociologist and author, has said that he feels "disturbed and angry" at the way women are treated in our age. He says: "To me, as a sociologist who has studied human evolution, this trend towards male domination is simply not in keeping with the way in which homo sapiens have developed over millions of years."

There is a lot of research that has been carried out which looks at gender differences. The more subjective formats for the research, relying on interviews and 360 degree feedback, show more gender differences than more rigorously conducted studies. One report, based on interviews with women non-executive directors, concluded that women were committed to the goals of the organisation, were more team oriented, better at dealing with conflicts and less ego driven. Which of course is all very wonderful, but it does not say much for their selfish, lay, uncommitted male counterparts. It is this type of research that predominates in the popular media. But the data are flawed, and so is the methodology. The fundamental problem with this kind of approach is the base assumption that there is a binary male/female distinction to be explored in the first place.

When we examine more rigorously conducted research, another picture emerges. Summing up the academic research on gender differences in leadership, the authors of the highly-respected book, *Organisational Behaviour*, conclude: "The evidence suggests that the best place to begin is with the recognition, that there are few, if any, important differences between men and women that will affect their job performance. There are, for instance, no consistent male-female differences in problem-solving ability, analytical skills, competitive drive, motivation, sociability or learning agility". Commenting on a meta-analysis study which showed that the

only differences between men and women were in motor performance (in particular, throwing distance and speed), the authors of *Work in the 21st Century* concluded: "So unless leadership positions require the CEO to throw the quarterly report the length of the conference table, it would not appear that women have less potential than men to become managers and leaders". You want more? The British psychologists Stephen Woods and Michael West noted that where differences are found in the leadership styles and role performance of men and women they are "so small in fact that it is safer to assume that there is no difference in leadership effectiveness between men and women".



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How come we have not heard more about these conclusions? It is primarily because much of the media is only interested in findings that show differences. We are being presented with stories all of the time which confirms our view about the differing characters of males and females. The real danger of accepting the proposition that men and women are different is that the problem is one of understanding and awareness. So, as far as gender is concerned, notions of prejudice, discrimination and bias are not considered important or relevant. The Davies Report, for example, makes no reference to discrimination, prejudice or bias in the main body of the text. Implicitly the Davies Report is agreeing with Nigel Farage, it could be argued.

However, in the specially commissioned research conducted for the Davies Report and buried in the report's Annex, the major reason

why women are under-represented in the boardrooms of UK-listed companies was found to be “bias, prejudice or stereotypical behaviour”. The work environment or culture was another major factor, which itself, will of course, be impacted by bias, prejudice and stereotypes. Unfortunately, this does not fit with the story people wish to tell about gender at work. The evidence is concealed in order to perpetuate the myth that women are under-represented in many roles because of ignorance. And this ignorance is to be combated by knowledge; and for many, including Davies this relates specifically to the business case. However, in most organisations the senior roles are held by men, so when we are making the business case for gender diversity we are really making a case for more women in those positions.



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Despite the recession arguably being a crisis created by men, no one has ever been asked to justify their places at the top table. We find it inconceivable that, if the list of names had been predominantly female, the very notion of women’s competence and capability to run organisations would not be questioned. Christine Lagarde’s quip that “if Lehman Brothers had been ‘Lehman Sisters’, today’s economic crisis clearly would look quite different” is off the mark. It’s more likely that we’d be in the same mess, but the commentariat would have told us we had it coming. Eyes would have rolled, then heads. Then serious questions would have been raised as to whether women are competent to lead businesses.

The business case for “gender diversity” is essentially an argument for more women in

leadership. It is an argument that seeks to justify why women should be afforded equality, but assumes they have no right to occupy leadership positions. The business case seeks to answer the question; “women, what’s the point”? No one ever seeks to ask, never mind answer, the equivalent question for men. In other words, the business case for gender diversity is not only a futile exercise but sexist as well. Davies also makes the recommendation that companies should set themselves a voluntary target of 25 percent of the non-executive directors as women. Whilst the merits of having a target have been much debated there has been much less discussion about the actual recommended figure itself. As we have seen the research shows that there is little or no difference in leadership capabilities between men and women. That being the case, the correct figure, and note this is not a target, is 50 percent. Perhaps we should tip the usual approach to gender diversity on its head: rather than setting an arbitrary target, as Davies has done, why instead don’t we say: “If the correct figure is 50 percent, why are we not achieving it?”

The first step in changing our behaviour, therefore, has to be recognising that our beliefs about gender are indeed beliefs and not true knowledge. We can then start to look at the evidence for our beliefs and question their validity. Challenging the truth of existing beliefs is necessarily confrontational. In this regard, we have found that some diversity practitioners are either not willing to challenge the predominant views about gender, or are actively embarked on strategies that ensure that men and women are able to recognise the strengths that the other gender has. There is indeed a well-established industry which promulgates this message. Unfortunately it perpetuates age old myths and stereotypes about men and women and ironically only undermines the very progress that they and others wish to see.

Gender at work remains a blind spot in most organisations. Gender equality is seen as a cause, and a peripheral one at that. We believe that issues of gender form the most fundamental and obstinate barriers to organisational effectiveness and individual happiness. Equality is more than a cause. It is a natural right that is being systematically denied to us, by ourselves. Can our businesses, government departments, schools and hospitals become places that serve and benefit men and women equally? Can we create organisations for people, regardless of their sex? We believe this is achievable. The power to make the change is in our heads. The

world of work is what we think it is, what we say it is, and what we hear it is. If we can think, speak and hear anew, then we can make it new. *The Invention of difference - the story of gender bias at work* is by Binna Kandola and Jo Kandola, published by Pearn Kandola Publishing. ●



For further information:
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