Changing Corporate Culture One Person at a Time

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empowering women to speak up and progress on their own terms

There's a lot of talk about women not excelling in the existing corporate culture and about the need to change present leadership models to models that make it more appealing and welcoming for women to contribute their very best.

But what exactly does that mean? What is it about the current corporate culture that makes it so unattractive for women and how do we change it?

As Tony Schwartz recently observed in an article for NY Times Online "great leadership requires a delicate balance between challenging and caring for employees" and yet "most leaders continue to pay far more attention to the first, at the expense of the second." Most leaders focus on customer centricity, operational excellence and efficiency, with far too little emphasis on employees as human beings, with needs that extend beyond the ambitious goals of a company.

This is particularly detrimental for women, most of whom have a number of vying priorities which demand just as much attention as their careers. As set out in more detail in a book by Brigid Schulte called "Overwhelmed: Work, Love and Play When No One Has Time", women in the United States look after housework and children twice as much as men do. Women with higher education also tend to spend more time on mothering, "and working mothers spend more time with their children than stay-at-home mothers did in the 1960s." Women get up at night more frequently than men to take care of others and stay awake longer than men - so much I know first-hand.

And so Tony points out, it is not surprising then that adult women in America "are the fastest growing group being diagnosed with attention deficit hyperactivity disorder" and that "a growing number of researchers believe it isn't really the neurological disorder, but rather that they're so overloaded."

All this should lead to the realisation that companies are leaving behind a pricy chunk of their talent because women are not given the flexibility and time they may need to address these imbalances and to contribute their most. The few companies that have given this some thought and taken some drastic action - like Google's decision to extend its regular maternity leave in the US from three to five months - started reaping the benefits almost instantly! In Google's case, for instance, attrition rates for new mothers halved. As a result, Google is benefiting from retaining the talent it worked hard to recruit and foregoing the cost that comes along with having to re-recruit high calibre talent.

So the question is, why don't more companies see this and make the necessary changes? The answer, I believe, is pretty straight forward. Most industries have a long tradition of working in a particular way and culture, and to ask them to change their modus operandi is easier said than done. Granted, a lot of companies recognise the need for retaining and promoting women, but most of them aren't truly vested in the process - big change is a big ask and takes time, especially the kind of change that requires a culture revolution. And make no mistake, for women to be able to contribute on level playing field with men will require nothing less than a revolution.

So where does this leave women?

We women know all this but we don't speak out, as we believe that we must sacrifice in order to have "it all". Or maybe we don't think speaking up will make a difference - in the words of the Borg of Star Trek, perhaps we believe that "resistance is futile". We tend to be "grateful" for the opportunities we get and rarely negotiate for an uplift in remuneration packages or flexibility. We tend to underestimate our own worth and contribution to companies and continue to grin and bear it, or quietly complain to our friends and family about it, or step out of the corporate game all together.

So if companies aren't going to change their culture and if women don't do it for themselves, how will corporate culture change?

I have a friend who works three days a week and has just been promoted to a very senior role - only second from the top of her department. This is a woman who has three children, having taken a full year of maternity leave for each one of her children (yes, that is still possible here in the UK), and has managed to get the balance she wanted to work at a very senior level. This is just one of a number of examples I can point to where senior women have found ways to persuade their companies to make adjustments to meet individual demands; and the one common theme that emerges from all these stories is that women who have the confidence and skill to speak up tend to get exactly what they're asking for.

In my opinion, there are a number of reasons for this:

- Managers inherently understand the value that women bring to companies and sometimes are not fully aware of what it is women need to continue to thrive and to contribute authentically - once they are told what it is, they are more than happy (perhaps initially reluctantly) to make special arrangements to accommodate those who dare speak up.

- Women who are able to speak up on their own behalf know how to make a compelling case. They are strategic about their careers and lay the foundation early on. They are not prepared to compromise either on their priorities outside the workplace or their contribution at work and they let their managers know this.

- I often hear men say that they do not wish to stand in the way of women and are not actively doing anything to leave women behind, and my personal experience agrees with this contention. So if women were to tell men what it is they need them to do - in the workplace and at home - they would likely get more support from their male colleagues and partners than they currently assume.

For these and many other reasons, I strongly believe that changing corporate culture is up to us individual women. We need to be each one of those women who made it to the top by being able to speak freely and without fear of failure. We need to take more risks with our careers and have these conversations not only at work but also at home. In other words, we need to become a little bit more selfish and ruthless - something that we might be able to learn from our male counterparts who most of the time don't give their own bullish behaviour a thought! And that's not necessarily a bad thing - that's something we can improve on ourselves!

We shouldn't wait for things to change for us; for culture change to be handed to us. If we want a workplace that takes us into account, we need to voice ourselves clearly and assertively. Because we can change corporate culture one person at a time.

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