

• GENDER EQUALITY IN THE WORKPLACE: WHAT ORGANIZATIONS CAN DO RIGHT NOW

By Stephanie Bouchard



Iris Bohnet

Organizations across the United States and around the world are concerned about gender equality in their workforce and leadership teams—and rightly so. And, as numerous studies have shown, it makes good business sense, too.

Yet, research has shown that the diversity and leadership training programs that organizations spend billions of dollars on do not yield the hoped-for results. Bias—unconscious bias in particular—is still a huge factor. What do organizations do, then, to reduce bias and close the gender gap?

Behavioral Design

In a nutshell, behavioral design combines insights about human behavior learned through scientific research with structures designed to effectively use that knowledge to change behavior.

“There are so many cognitive biases that affect our thinking,” says **Iris Bohnet**, a behavioral economist and professor of public policy at Harvard University, where she is also the director of the Women and Public Policy Program and co-chair of the Behavioral Insights Group at the Kennedy School of Government. Much of these biases, she says, have been acquired over many thousands of years, which makes changing them difficult. “There are ways to change what we believe, but not by a simple one-day, one-hour, two-day, one-week training program.”

“We need to de-bias our practices and procedures rather than our mind-set,” she says. Behavioral design used to de-bias our mind-sets makes it easier for our minds to do see things differently.

There are many things organizations can do quickly and cheaply. Bohnet presents some of these options in her recently released book, *What Works: Gender Equality by Design*. A few of these solutions are:

- **Watch your language.** We are all aware that if a marketing department wants to sell a certain product to women, they’ll use language and images that appeal to women, and they do the same for men. What we may not be aware of is that even in job ads or on company Web pages, the language used may appeal more to men or more to women. Language that appeals more to men may turn off women, and vice versa. Organizations need to scrutinize the language used in job advertisements and other company communications and replace gendered language with inclusive language.

- **Embrace structured interviews.** “Unstructured interviews are probably the worst predictor of future performance possible,” Bohnet says. Instead of flying by the seat of your pants in interviews, questions should be determined before the interview, and the same questions should be used for all applicants. Additionally, applicants should be given sample tests that mimic the sort of work they’d be doing if hired.
- **Ditch self-evaluations in the performance appraisal process.** Self-evaluations are often viewed by managers before they have completed their end of the performance appraisal, thus potentially influencing managers’ assessments. The self-evaluation rating becomes an unconscious reference point managers use in their appraisal process. If employees differ in their degree of self-confidence, and there is ample research suggesting that men are more confident than women, then the ones with more self-confidence will give themselves higher ratings, which could translate into overall higher performance ratings for men and lower ones for women.
- **Be aware.** Organizations can’t close the gender gap without awareness. For instance, don’t just put a process in place to reduce gender bias and then assume it’s working, says Bohnet. Analyze it to see if it really is working. Analysis will also show you how to tweak processes for improved effectiveness.
- **Support from the top.** If organizations are going to close the gender gap, the impetus must come from the C-suite, says Elisa van Dam, the senior director of executive education and corporate outreach at Simmons College’s School of Management, where the MBA program puts a focus on gender dynamics in the workplace. “Organizational support needs to come from the C-level, in the form of communication, commitment to process re-design and financial and other resource support,” she says.
- **Value differences.** You don’t want everybody on your leadership team to think the same, says Debra Walker, the vice president of the healthcare practice group of Development Dimensions International (DDI), a global human resources consultancy specializing in leadership assessment and development. DDI recently released two studies exploring leadership differences between men and women, which found that there are no differences in terms of skill level. In health care in particular, she says, which serves such a wide variety of people, you want a leadership team that is made up of people with different strengths and different perspectives. “You may want someone who is highly innovative and someone who is more of an enterprise guardian,” she says. “But, you don’t want a whole team of innovators. You don’t want a whole team of enterprise guardians.” If you have a leadership team made up of people who came up the ladder the same way, who did things the same way and have the same experiences, you won’t be able to come up with the great ideas that will make your organization successful, she says. “If you think about how health care will thrive in the future, it’s going to have people with very different ideas who see things differently.”
- **Get limber.** According to the Organization for Economic Cooperation and Development (OECD), which released its latest analysis on the U.S. economy in June, for further progress reducing gender inequities in the workplace requires greater suppleness from organizations (and the government). The OECD, an intergovernmental economic organization headquartered in France, recommends improving the flexibility of working arrangements, providing national access to paid family leave and increasing access to quality pre-school and childcare.

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