

It takes a helluva lot to make the Business Council of Australia call for quotas for women in leadership.

Katie Lahey, BCA's chief executive of an organisation representing the top 100 Australian corporations was driven to it by publication of the latest report from the EOWA's 2008 Australian Census of Women in Leadership.

This discloses a lamentable truth: that the proportion of women in leadership roles has gone backwards faster than any 'shrinkage' of leadership opportunities, over the last two years. Just 2% (four women) are chairs of the boards of ASX 200 companies. There has been a drop from 3% to 2% of women CEOs, and a further drop of .4% in the numbers of women board members to 8.3%. Hidden in the data is the fact that those few women who are in board positions are often members of multiple boards, so the raw numbers of engaged women, and the exponential growth of gender disparity and of homosocial reproduction at Board level may be even lower.

Even the 'pipeline' has been scoured. Women executive managers (that is, managers who report directly to their CEO) make just 10.7% - 182 women out of a total of 1700 - which is a derisory inadequate representation of powerful, smart, savvy and committed women. These companies make policy decisions that affect 52% of our population, of investors, business operators and employees as well as customers and consumers, without the input of women, driving the private sector economy. They include our major financial institutions. And just look where they have taken us.

The facts speak. The proportion of companies with no executive managers of the female persuasion has risen over two years to 45.5%, from 39.5%, and this in a period of growth and a decade of 'diversity' rhetoric.

When I was a younger woman I determined to be a lawyer - 'not a very feminine career, choice, dear,' as my careers mistress told me - at a time that women who were University graduates were so rare as to be celebrated in gold leaf on school honours boards. It is no longer so. Women have, since the 1970s, been graduating with first class honours in what were once men-only disciplines (engineering, astrophysics, law, medicine, business administration) and starting out in a career which, we were told, would over time be rewarded through the 'pipeline' principle. One of the hardest lessons for women to learn is that merit and hard work will not be rewarded like that.

Anna McPhee, the about-to-resign chief executive of the federal government's Equal Opportunity for Women in the Workplace agency, attributed the flop in women's progress since the 'glacial' advances reported in the EOWA 2006 survey, to outdated workplace practices, hostile environments and fewer opportunities for women. Other commentators have predicted, with the burgeoning global economic crisis, that women who have recently taken advantage of opportunities fuelled by 'diversity' and leadership programs will probably be the first, and worst, affected by cutbacks and safe practices in firms and other institutions paring back operations, and falling back on the tried-and-true experienced male managers among their colleagues. There are - and this week were - women who are prepared to assert that they have never experienced discrimination and that the poor representation of women in the heights is because they don't want the burdens that come with the rewards of front-line leadership, and that opportunities are still there, if they choose to aspire to them. But the diminution of women on Australian boards, at the pointy end of top ASX companies and in that pipeline is far greater than the shrinkage of executive teams. Something more is going on.

Part of it is the universal truth that those with power don't want to share or relinquish it. Australian women political leaders, with the notable exception of former NT Chief Minister Clare Martin, have been handed their premiership roles when problems lie ahead and men are willing to relinquish the vessel with the pestle (apologies to Danny Kaye in The Court Jester) to women like Carmen Lawrence and Joan Kirner, then stand by as the potion proves untrue. Yet in Rwanda, a country virtually destroyed by genocidal violence, women have

become the majority of its parliamentary and governmental leaders, and their reconstruction of Rwandan society and economy appears to be flourishing. Yet it was the big white European men heading the financial institutions that wallowed on Wall Street and engineered a world financial crisis – ‘Look, Ma: no hands!’”. When those few women leaders of investment banks and financial institutions that began to falter in 2007 were sacrificed by their institutions, their share values fell apart, as did trust in the institutions they once led.

Another factor in Australia’s slide to mediocrity may well be, as McPhee suggests, that its leadership environment is primed with preoccupation over hierarchy and status, deal-doing, understandings, intrigue, backbiting and vicious competition. Women may well feel it is hard to enjoy the amity of colleagues comfortable with relationships and influence among circles whose qualities are meritorious because they are so like their own. And yet another may be the ongoing failure to understand and overcome our unconscious rejection of difference. ‘Team players’ have to fit. But different ‘team players’ generate uncomfortable new views.

World-famous US linguistics Professor Deborah Tannen’s research into how men and women communicate at work, and how this affects how merit is recognised and rewarded, concluded that the patterns of relationship-formation, communicating and coalescence among women, and among men, began in pre-adolescent play, and in adulthood remain so fundamentally different that they might be speaking different languages. This, too, is why men on boards appoint women whom they know and with whose discourse they are comfortable. Such women do not speak the language of feminism or womanly concerns to fit in with Board culture.

Australia is now last in the list of world companies in comparable economies that have a woman senior executive. Once, we rated second to the US.

It may take quotas to overcome this. But it also takes women who are prepared to be women, even in hand-to-hand combat. Last night I mistakenly viewed a short part of the UKTV version of The Apprentice. I concluded from this nasty experience that there probably are as many rude, ruthless, and single-minded women seeking business advantage as there are men; women whose ‘style’ is derived from crusty old male business ‘leaders’ who will make a decision that these women fit to be Man’s peer. Such women who seek to succeed as ‘honorary men’ will not last long. There is no such thing as an ‘honorary’ man. A fully functional market reflects the preferences and different life experiences of women consumers. Brothers can’t keep doing it for themselves. There’s a name for it, and it isn’t progeneration.

So long as women mould themselves on a block designed by those whose language, expectations and patterns of relationships were formed in and have outlasted the schoolyard, there will be no change. ‘Merit’ is in the eye of the beholder..

The BCA established a ‘Council for Equal Opportunity in Employment more than twenty two years ago, to demonstrate that there was no need for an ‘Affirmative Action Agency’ to advance the interests of women. It has since freed it to become the Diversity Council of Australia Ltd. It has done good work. There has been plenty of encouragement. The BCA and the women and men of Australia now need proof that business can adapt. They will be little but carbon deposits in the tar-pools of future economic history for those that cannot evolve to survive in a catastrophically changing climate.

Source: <http://moirarayner.com>