



## WOMEN IN THE BOARDROOM

Although the chronic labour shortages of World War II have been credited with transforming the role of women in North America from housewife to businesswoman, the real entry of women into the work force began over a century ago. The catalyst then, and it's the same today was changing technology. Remington introduced the world's first typewriter in 1873, and employers soon found out that women excelled as typists because of their manual dexterity. Telephones, introduced in 1876 had an even more profound impact on the role of women in the workforce. After hiring the first female operator in Boston in 1878; the switchboards became exclusively a female domain. But despite the vast number of women entering the workforce prior to the Second World War, the role of women as second-class citizens was unchanged. A stenographer was expected to listen attentively, record her employers' ideas in shorthand and then type them accurately on the typewriter. Her own ideas or suggestions were neither tolerated nor relevant. For the most part, the role of women during the war was not much different. Although idealized in recruitment posters as a happy "Rosie Riveter", women were often no more than an extension of the machines of production. A classic example is the production of the atom bomb. To make uranium for the first bomb, a machine called a Calutron was invented which could turn out about one-hundredth of an ounce of uranium each day. The problem was that the atom bomb needed almost one hundred pounds of uranium, and that all the work had to be done in great secrecy. The solution was to build thousands of Calutrons and hire thousands of women to operate them. But because of the secrecy, they were never told what they were doing. They simply had to sit in front of a control panel and adjust one or two dials to keep a temperature gauge on track. Like sitting in front of the oven cooking some unknown thing. Seven days a week twenty-four hours a day. After the war, the male dominated corporations regrouped and women once again assumed a subsidiary role. There were a few exceptions in the post war period. Companies selling exclusively to women had female executives. Companies like Estee Lauder, Elizabeth Arden and Helena Rubenstein. The real revolution empowering women did not really arrive until the late sixties with women in the fashion industry and in publishing scaling new heights. But still even by the mid seventies less than fifty women had board seats in America's top companies. Eventually, there seemed to be a recognition that women could succeed better than men in the top positions of large corporations. A book by Sally Helgesen *The Female Advantage* points out that women are better than men at sharing information and power in an interactive environment and that in interpersonal relations women are more intuitive and adaptable. Unfortunately, this recognition seems to have come at a time when large corporations are now under attack from global competitive forces. The tendency of corporate boards in this environment is to eschew diversity in favour of compliance and rational submissive behavior. In the large corporate boardrooms the ranks may again be closing. Given that woman's' progress to the top jobs and the seat on the board may not therefore proceed as many of us had hoped I want to examine the impediments to women reaching for the brass ring and the solutions available to us to facilitate the progress.

Women still have to resolve the same basic conflict that they faced at the beginning. The pull between family and career. Although maternity leave has recently been extended to one year, what woman on the board is willing to leave her hard sought after seat for a year. This is only one factor that has created alarming levels of stress for women. Kate Figs the author of *Because of Her Sex* exclaims that 'women aren't having any fun' because of the pressures of work and family.

It was not only the men that were barring the gates to the boardroom. Many women, who felt they needed to become honorary men or worse, had no choice but to use their sex (we have all heard or met them!) to be effective, adversely affected other women and in fact impeded women from succeeding. Many women adopted the attitude that 'I reached this position on my own and clawed my own path so you're on your own'. This attitude (I like to call the Queen Bee syndrome) is quickly losing its effectiveness as more women; confident and qualified earn their seats. Perhaps its understood that these women should feel threatened. As many women on the board have more interaction with men and so little interaction with other women in their businesses they sometimes feel they are missing out. There can be a feeling of isolation and loneliness within the top ranking women in industry. Many women state that it is the duty of the 'older' female members to act as mentors and coaches to the younger women and the benefits of this can work in both directions.

Today there is a myriad of links for women in the boardroom to assist with perspective, loneliness and isolation. Personal Coaches, Networking Groups, Business Advisory Groups and Diversity Groups are the main links. The first three links are familiar to everyone. The last group is "Diversity Groups". These connections provide for small groups of 4 to 6 business leader and entrepreneurial combinations within a comfortable and exceptionally confidential setting to allow some measure of freedom and exchange of ideas. The women Toronto ADR Services have in Diversity Groups contend that 'it may be the only place where they can truly relax and express their concerns over balancing work and home commitments'. Women 'now have an outlet to articulate ambitions and aspirations without compromise, and ideas without judgment as well as sound out solutions to problems they face'. The diversity of the group provides freedom and not conflict of interest among its members.

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