

Avoid simple mistakes when increasing gender diversity

Employers that have gender diversity goals, yet make simple mistakes when trying to achieve them, risk major setbacks in their progress, says diversity expert Karen Morley. In male-dominated contexts, such as engineering, gender diversity can actually have strong *negative* effects on team performance

"A lot of organisations think, 'OK, great, let's get a woman in the team, and that will make a difference. But the research shows that that's not really enough; that we need to get more like a gender balance - closer to 50:50 - for the real benefits to work.

Adding just one or two women to a team is "probably the biggest mistake we can make", because "it makes everyone uncomfortable", says Morley, the co-founder of Gender Worx. "Where women are introduced to such domains in low numbers, dissatisfaction increases and the social dynamics of the group become more difficult."

Further, "backlash" can occur when a newly gender-diverse team fails, or there are bad experiences. Employees can view the experience as proof that all attempts to increase gender diversity are doomed, rather than, "in this particular circumstance, it didn't work out".

Collective intelligence insights

New research on collective intelligence provides managers with valuable insights on how to successfully increase the representation of women on teams, Morley says.

For some time now it has been accepted that the presence of women in senior leadership roles contributes to better organisation performance, she says, but the new research finally explains at least part of this differential.

The term "collective intelligence" refers to the combination of average social sensitivity of group members, equality of conversation turn-taking in group discussion, and the number of women in the group.

Women generally demonstrate greater social sensitivity, and this is why their presence makes a difference, Morley says. "Gender-balanced groups work better than homogenous groups."

The research, led by Anita Woolley and Thomas Malone, and published in *Science* and *Harvard Business Review*, explains that group performance is not connected to the intelligence of individual group members. Nor do the average intelligence of group members and the intelligence of the highest-scoring group member strongly correlate with group performance.

Group cohesion, motivation and satisfaction - traditionally considered important for team success - also did not predict group performance.

Instead, the greater the collective intelligence of the group, the better it performs. And collective intelligence can be changed, by adjusting the composition of the group, providing incentives to group members to demonstrate greater social sensitivity, and managing group processes to increase collaboration (e.g. listening well to each other, and avoiding "power plays").

Morley says social sensitivity is not exclusively a female attribute, but "what really makes a difference is the context".

"So if you have a male-dominated group, they'll tend to behave in male-dominated ways, which is about having dominance in the group. They speak up, without paying attention to who else is speaking and who's listening and whose turn it is, and that's what women tend to do.

In addition, she says, research by Gender Worx has found:

- women's different experiences and perspectives contribute to fresh thinking and innovation;
- their interpersonal skills lead to more productive discussion and an increased focus on solving tough problems;
- women's greater diligence around meeting preparation and processes increase rigour and accountability; and
- greater unity is achieved through a focus on collegiality, responsiveness and reduced conflict.

Men can engage in these behaviours, Morley points out, "but what our research shows is that when you get women into groups, it's not just what the women do, but the women's presence and their behaviour makes a difference to how everyone in the group behaves".

"Both men and women can demonstrate cultural sensitivity if the context is right, if they've got the right support, and also the right incentives.

"Most organisations provide incentives to staff on the basis of their individual performance - recognition and reward. To get better team performance, the incentives need to be around the team, and the team productivity and output."