Defining success

Statistics tell us that women are under-represented at senior levels in business. And studies show that women are stalled in their efforts to move up the corporate ladder.

What the stats don't tell us much about is why this is the case.

Some could argue that it's because corporate culture stacks the cards against women. Some might say it's because women aren't as ambitious and therefore are dropping out, essentially choosing not to strive for the top jobs. There are plenty arguing both sides.

Margaret Wente stirred the pot quite effectively in a recent Globe and Mail column entitled *It's Manly at the Top*. She concluded that the concept of women being represented in equal numbers in the top ranks of business is doomed because of fundamental differences between the way women work and approach their careers based on biology.

She argues that business is competitive and aggressive, an exercise more naturally suited to the testosterone-driven behaviour of men, compelled by biology to be competitive, to strive for control and domination—qualities prized and rewarded in the upper echelons of business. Wente reasoned that women can never compete equally, because they can't overcome the built-in disadvantage of not being biologically driven to dominate and to win at all costs; while there are women playing the game with the required competitive brio, they will always be vastly outnumbered by their male counterparts.

Wente also connected these biological differences with the fact that, apart from facing barriers to advancement, women are also *choosing* to drop out of the race. She argues that it's not that they are unambitious, but that their ambitions often take them in a different direction than corporate dominance, that they define success in different ways.

She raises a critical point. At what point do we consider that women are adequately represented at the most senior levels? How do we know when the barriers have been truly broken down? Until we know what a reasonable "critical mass" is, it is difficult to know how much of the scarcity of women in senior roles is because of barriers and how much is self-selection. And, if it is self-selection, how much attrition is due to factors that could be adapted to encourage women to stay the course.

I personally don't think 50-50 is the goal we're aiming for. The goal is to remove barriers, both obvious (discrimination, stereotyping) and more subtle (corporate culture, reward structures, hierarchy). Margaret Wente's scenario also assumes that business must always be organized in a way that rewards and values only the competitive and dominant behaviour typical of men.

And that is the most infuriating part of the whole issue.

It is the very differences between how men and women operate that make it so important to keep women in the fold. Men are not better at business than women and women are not better at business than men; they bring different skills and attitudes and it is this combination that is so powerful. I am confident that business can find ways to value and use the differences brought to the table by women in a way that contributes to the bottom line, an approach which recognizes that women's ambition and the rewards they seek will be quite different from men.

This whole discussion is important to our mission at CWC. We can neither ignore the barriers that still exist nor can we assume that all women do, and should, want to reach the top of the corporate ladder. Our mission means supporting our members in a variety of ways, to succeed in a way that meets their definition. In some cases, that means supporting women as they strive to become senior executives, CEOs or board directors. But it is also a matter of helping to define career goals, facilitating career transitions as one sector is in a slowdown and another is booming, or helping to find a balance between work and personal life that involves setting limits on career priorities, whether temporary or long term.

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So, while I do think there's some validity in Wente's observations, I am less convinced of the inevitability of biological destiny and more inclined to think that enlightened corporate leadership will go a long way to removing the remaining barriers and truly making it a choice for women whether they aspire to the top or decide to focus on other priorities.

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