

It's not just the players who matter ...



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While reading an article about how boys are discriminated against in elementary schools, I thought about how the rules of the game really can determine so much of the outcome, whether a school system, a corporation, a family or a game. The article, a review of the book *Why Gender Matters* by Leonard Sax, argues that the established norms, the way classes are structured, and the behavioural expectations that are in place put boys behind the eight ball from the start in schools, most notably at the elementary level.

I was glad to read the article, having thought much the same for many years as a parent of two boys. And it seems to be getting worse. I really began to boil

about this issue around the same time as my youngest son's elementary school proclaimed its "No Touching" policy, a rule whereby a student could be suspended for merely *touching* another student. There was no distinction between goofing-around touching and intent-to-harm touching. Add zero tolerance to that (another popular and dangerous bromide) and you could easily get half the boys in any school expelled with little effort.

From what I can tell with my two sons, three brothers and three nephews, boys just communicate physically. They push, shove and wrestle as a matter of course, a different matter entirely from the real problems of bullying and true physical violence. Anyone who has ever parented or even observed boys for more than two minutes knows how ludicrous a "no touching" rule is, and how it turns essentially normal "boy" behaviour into a serious transgression.

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No one put the rules in place with the intent of stacking the deck against boys, but that's the outcome. Clearly, no matter how hard they try boys are going to get tripped up more often than girls in a system set up so that it rewards girl behaviour and punishes boy behaviour.

And that doesn't just apply to schools. The rules of the game can determine success almost as much as the actions of the players.

It's the same dynamic that women bump up against when they reach senior management. The rules of the game clearly favour men, especially those with stay-at-home spouses. There are the long office hours and the presumption that once you get to senior management, your family is or should be handled by someone else. It doesn't have to be that way, but that's the established norm and anyone with

aspirations will be measured against it, whether it's right or wrong.

Then there are the social issues. Women are trying to fit into a social structure that is already established. That's why there are programs sprouting like mushrooms teaching women how to play golf, as they seek ways to fit in and to reap the benefits of informal networking and "bonding".

Mercifully these days, in most sectors, strip clubs are stricken from the corporate social activities list, but that extreme aside many women report that they feel excluded from informal networking; a casual get-together for drinks, the locker room/men's room chitchat. Some women respond by becoming more like the guys than the guys, becoming the notorious "third sex" of women trying to be men.

Yet, it's not a conspiracy. The same would be true in reverse if corporate culture had been established by women and men were trying to break in, the way it is that boys have such a struggle in ele-

mentary school to be accepted and valued for who and what they are. But that doesn't mean it's not a real issue.

I think the point is that if you're looking at productivity, and making the best use of the talent at hand, it's important to look beyond the "accepted norms" to the very rules of the game and how they may impact the major constituencies of your workforce. One of those constituencies is women, but there are others. And it's not a question of accommodation but of retention and succession.

And a happy offshoot is that in a workplace that helps to attract and retain talented women there will be a lot of men who will be happier too, a point that was made just this moment as a bulletin crossed my desk saying that a senior male executive in the industry had just retired to spend more time with his family.