

Gender

Hiring More Women Means Changing Your Company's Culture

by Avivah Wittenberg-Cox

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The Web is alive... with the music of Mitt Romney's "binder full of women." But why the surprise? Evaluating the position of CEOs on gender balancing issues is pretty simple: just take a look at their direct reports. Romney's corporate track record speaks for itself. There were no women partners at Bain Capital during the time he was running the place, and there are still only 4 women among the firm's 49 partners today. There were also fewer women in his administration as governor of Massachusetts when he left than when he arrived, most staffed in lesser roles. Oh yes, and he didn't ask for the binders; that would have revealed some interest. They were presented to him by a coalition of women's groups.

We know that the number one criteria on why companies balance — or don't — is CEO commitment. And as the head of Bain & Co. consulting in Europe told me when I was writing my first book, **"women may hold the keys [to gender balance], but men generally still control the locks."**

The leaders of countries, like companies, hugely affect the culture that is created internally. That is obvious. But nowhere is it more defining than on gender issues. Why? Because shifting the balance between men and women in organizations requires everyone to change, and move out of their familiar, and often familial, histories and patterns.

Women need to stretch into still-new positions of power and influence, which we have watched them do for the past few decades. They need leaders that recognize their talents and give them a place at the table. **But more importantly, and much less acknowledged, leaders need to tell the majority of men in corporate life that they also need to change, and allow new and different styles of leadership to move in — and up.** This requires a bit more than flipping through a binder of candidates.

How interested CEOs and country presidents are in doing this depends a lot on their own personal lives. Notably the mothers, wives and daughters they are surrounded by at home who have raised them, loved them and shaped their vision of what women are — and are not.

The two U.S. presidential candidates embody very different versions of this. One candidate had a mentor-grandmother, a single mother, a powerful, high-earning wife and two daughters likely to be encouraged to greatness. The other had a father in business and politics, and a mother who, between being active in philanthropy and civic circles, ran for a Michigan Senate seat. His wife, who helped raise their five successful sons, primarily devoted her time to charity and volunteer work. This is all admirable. But it makes Romney's life experience with professional women minimal to non-existent. No wonder he blunders on the topic.

I work with some CEOs like him. They simply don't, as many women say, "get it." They can't. They have no idea what a modern working woman is about. They don't know how to recognize or appreciate leadership styles that don't conform to the dominant male norm, which they seek to perpetuate, convinced that this is the key to success. They respond to the current pressure on gender balancing

leadership with diversionary tactics (women's networks), PR events (women's conferences), and hand-on-heart professions à la Romney that they would love to hire more women, if they could just find some.

The need for binders in many organizations is real. It's because they've neglected over the past 20 years to develop a pipeline of female talent in their own organizations. They will suffer the inevitable consequences — talent shortages, misunderstanding of their client bases and flawed decision-making.

The competitive advantage of companies — and countries — that understand the power and potential of leveraging 100% of the talent pool and connecting with 100% of their markets is real. Romney already dumped 47% of the electorate last month. Now he's dumped 50% of whatever he had left.

Do the math. He obviously hasn't.

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