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Collective Intelligence: how women make the difference to performance

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References

For all references please refer to Working Paper References on the Gender Worx website.



Collective intelligence: how women make the difference to performance

One of the easiest and most effective ways to ensure good performance is to ensure a balanced representation of women in work groups.

In Gender Worx' board research we compared gender diverse boards with male dominated boards and found that they were different in a number of ways, particularly in regard to board dynamics. We canvassed the global research and found that there were a number of factors that contributed to better dynamics on gender-balanced boards and identified these supportive findings:

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

As evidence grows supporting the proposition that the presence of more women in senior leadership roles contributes to better organisational performance, the big question is how does women's presence make this difference?

It seems that at least part of this performance differential is explained by what has recently been identified as Collective Intelligence. Recent research has identified Collective Intelligence, the general ability of the group to perform a wide variety of tasks, as a critical factor in explaining differences in the performance of groups: more than 40% of the performance gap between one group and another can be explained by Collective Intelligence.

Collective Intelligence is a combination of average social sensitivity of group members, equality of conversational 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. 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 group performance as unconnected to the intelligence of individual group members: average intelligence of group members and intelligence of the highest-scoring group member do not strongly correlate with group performance. Group cohesion, motivation and satisfaction, traditionally considered important for team work, also did not predict group performance.

In distinction to individual intelligence, Woolley and Malone claim that Collective Intelligence can be changed, by changing the composition of the group, providing incentives to group members to demonstrate greater social sensitivity, managing group processes to increase



collaboration, eg listening well to each other, and avoiding dominance and power plays.

Research on team diversity has until recently been perplexing in its inconclusiveness. Some studies show that diversity increases creativity and innovation whereas others show reduced employee satisfaction and increased turnover. What is clear is that research supports gender diversity having a positive effect on team experiences and processes. Women's greater social sensitivity means that they pay more attention to nonverbal cues, more accurately intuit what others are thinking and feeling and are responsive to them, paying attention to the contributions of others and seeking to build on team members' skills and abilities. Men tend to display greater social dominance in groups, including gesturing, direct eye contact and chin thrusting and this reduces collective action.

The impact of an increased representation of women on team performance is a little more complex, and the context is critical. In male-dominated contexts, such as engineering, gender diversity can have strong negative effects on team performance. The research shows that where women are introduced to such domains in low numbers, dissatisfaction increases and the social dynamics of the group may become more difficult.

However, once women's representation increases and nears a balance, performance increases. In gender-balanced contexts, the benefits of Collective Intelligence are attained.

Collective Intelligence provides greater insight into the conditions in which increased gender diversity, through the increased social sensitivity of women, leads to significantly better team functioning and performance.

There is considerable food for thought for human resource practitioners in these findings. Putting the smartest people in the room into teams and expecting the best results used to be common sense, yet could be more of a liability, unless those people are able to work well together.

Adding a token woman to a team in a male-dominated context may decrease performance and team relationships. Clustering women in teams in such contexts, rather than spreading them across teams is a better way to introduce women, break down limiting stereotypes, increase positive experiences and achieve the performance benefits of Collective Intelligence. Clustering women, enabling a reasonable representation in groups helps avoid some of the backlash that can accompany the introduction of women into male-dominated domains.

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References

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About Gender Worx

Gender Worx is a specialist gender diversity practice. We are thought leaders, experts and consultants to organisations in gender diversity measurement and change. We assist organisations to unlock the potential of women and help make organisations:

- better places to work; and
- more productive and profitable

Gender Worx is a specialist division of Insync Surveys, stakeholder survey and consulting specialists and a 2009 BRW Fast 100 Company.

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About Insync Surveys

Insync Surveys has one of the largest suites of leading edge integrated benchmarked stakeholder surveys in the world. Its surveys are distributed in over 30 countries and in over 15 languages and include surveys for employees, customers, boards, community groups and many other organisation stakeholders.

Insync Surveys has carried out surveys for some of the largest public, private, government and not-for-profit organisations in Asia Pacific. It is based in Australia and has representatives in New Zealand, Asia, UK and North America. Insync Surveys' technology also powers the surveys of Board Benchmarking and Gender Worx.

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