

Supportive culture to back women's career advancement



Those companies identified as doing the most to encourage women's advancement are also those who are among the high performers economically

In a recent report from Ernst & Young Global Limited (EY Global), 27% of men said that in their own experiences having a supportive culture is the best way to support women's career advancement.

The EY Global report entitled 'Women. Fast forward: The time for gender parity is now' is a response to a forecast in another report from the World Economic Forum concerning gender equality in the workplace.

In October 2014, the World Economic Forum issued a report which forecasted that achievement of gender equality in the workplace may take an amazingly long time of around 80 years being reached only by the year 2095.

Based on data collated, EY Global identified three clear pathways for organizations to assist in accelerating the process of gender equality - revealing the path to leadership, speed up culture change with corporate policy change, and establish a supportive environment and work to eliminate conscious and unconscious bias.

According to the report, good prospects for progression are considered a top enabler by men (26%) and women (35%), suggesting that organizations must work harder to make the path ahead clearer to women, demonstrate what is possible and show them career opportunities that match their skills and

ambition.

Touching on organizations speeding up culture change, the report said, "The twin enablers of work/life balance and flexibility are high on the women's list of accelerators."

From its own experience and what the high-performer responses suggest, EY Global believes informal flexibility for both men and women is highly effective in helping all employees balance their personal and professional lives.

In the report, men cited unconscious bias as the number one barrier for women in the workplace. To advance women, EY Global recommends that leaders must spread an organization-wide message that bias is unacceptable.

For the report, EY Global commissioned Longitude Research to carry out the worldwide survey covering around 400 companies around the world. The survey aimed to find out how the business sector can play a more active role in creating a more supportive environment for women empowerment in the workplace and the benefits from such a turnaround.

The economic benefits of gender equality and growth of women's role in the workplace is supported by a growing number of research studies. Thus, the EY Global survey focused on both men and women at management and C-suite levels.

The aim was to find out their personal experiences and views



Beth Brooke

on the impediments or factors that supported women's progress in the workplace. It further focused on what the organizations themselves could do to accelerate the process.

One of the foremost highly encouraging discoveries from the survey was that those companies identified as doing the most to encourage women's advancement are also those who are among the high performers economically. These were companies growing at a rate of more than 20% on an annualized basis.

The survey also found that the high performers were way ahead in their policies. Among the things in place was the offer of flexible work arrangements for both male and female staff, setting goals to increase numbers of women in leadership and offering programmes that exposed women to all company



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— Weinberger

operations and functions.

In the view of EY Global, all these indicators showed that building bridges to leadership for women would in all likelihood lead to a healthier company culture and subsequently better performance and a better bottom line.

Another interesting finding from the research was that around 30% of both men and women agreed that while women need to take proactive steps to advance themselves in the workplace, this may not necessarily be sufficient to accelerate the change process.

As a result of the research, principal factors in accelerating the process are cooperation between men and women, elimination of bias, both conscious and unconscious, and having the right policies in place.

Both genders also expressed the view that higher female leadership

resulted in stronger companies. This is perhaps an indication that the process of closing the gap may already be happening.

EY Global vice chair of public policy Beth Brooke-Marciniak said, "Without a little nudge, it's easy to gravitate toward colleagues and leaders who think, look and act like we do. Unconscious bias on the part of those in power is undoubtedly partly responsible for the glacial pace of change."

The report from EY Global is further supported by the annual survey done by Grant Thornton, an independent assurance, tax and advisory firm.

The assessments from Grant Thornton were close to those from EY Global with some indicators of the Malaysian scenario. Grant Thornton stressed on the need for top-level commitment from businesses in Malaysia to facilitate women's career development as an increasing number of women in high positions are leaving the workforce.

Grant Thornton's annual survey indicated a worrying trend of a decline in the number of women in senior management in Malaysia, which has been declining since 2011, from 31% to 22% this year.

There is a similar decline in the ASEAN region, with the proportion of senior roles held by women declining from 35% last year to 22%. Indonesia fared the worst with the least number of women holding senior positions at 20%, followed by Singapore at 23%.

The global outlook is slightly more promising with 22% of senior roles held by women, which is an increase from the 19% in 2004. However, it is a decline from the 24% last year.

Grant Thornton felt that companies need to make their leadership positions more attractive to women. Greater flexibility allowing for family or other obligations was thought to be among the incentives to attract the women. Other incentives include investments in support structures such as mentoring and sponsorship programmes.

As a fitting overview on this issue, EY Global Chairman and CEO Mark Weinberger stated, "As we think about the keys to growth, business, nations and economies cannot afford to wait another 80 years to fully engage the talent represented by the world's women."

"For EY, as for others, accelerating women's progress is essential not only to creating a better working world but also to our success as a business. As an organization, we are focused on making a difference both internally and externally - and believe it's time to accelerate our efforts." MSME