

BPW Australia Conference Competition
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**How can women as leaders
navigate the maze to achieve gender equity?**

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How Can Women as Leaders Navigate the Maze to Achieve Gender Equity?

As the term “maze” infers, there is no clear path to achieve gender equity. It's not a matter of choosing the 'right' strategy, or even of simple persistence – of just putting one foot in front of the other, as one might do if they were undertaking a long trek. In a maze there are many dead ends, unexpected pitfalls, and circuitous routes that bring you back where you started from – but is there only one path? Is achieving gender equity simply a matter of finding that one path through the maze, that yellow brick road?

No, it is not. There are a number of paths that women, as leaders, could take to navigate the maze.

This long journey has already spanned many years. Some progress has been made but is it enough? Do women leaders possess the strength of purpose to continue the journey with a clear goal ahead? Or are we happy to rest and celebrate our past triumphs – legislated equal pay, equal access to higher education and, as a result of the promotion of the virtues of greater diversity, the promises of private companies and government boards to 'try very hard' to recruit more women to their senior ranks.

Evidence would suggest we have become very scattered in our approach and there is an urgent need for us to regroup – to redefine our vision, become clearer on our mission, develop strategies and direction, and most importantly to take action.

Regrouping implies a coming together, taking a collective approach to help each other to work toward a shared goal. Sir Isaac Newton said:

"If I have seen further, it is by standing on the shoulders of giants."

Unfortunately it appears that when talking of women working together a closer analogy would be R. W. Hamming's adaptation of Newton's quote,

“Mathematicians stand on each other's shoulders while computer scientists stand on each other's toes.” In too many cases, women still appear to be standing on each other's toes, rather than offering to support each other. This is perhaps one of the first issues we need to address.

Maggie Berry, Managing Director of womenintechology.co.uk discusses the issue of women supporting other women in the forums on her website –

“We asked a simple question – do you prefer a male or female boss? [...] Almost half (44%) said they preferred a male boss. So does that mean the majority preferred a female boss? No. 38% said they had no preference and just 19% favoured women.

However I wasn't at all surprised about this because we've heard this before – see our previous blog post on women vs women. It seems that when it comes to supporting other women, we're just not very good at it.”

Redefining our vision – we need to communicate what gender equity really looks like. Many men and women appear to have forgotten and some think we're already there. Why? Is it because, unlike some 20 years ago, we can apply for a loan without having a male relative co-sign the forms?

While it is possibly not a valid example of the aspiration for our vision, it is amusing to consider this quote from political activist (and daughter of former US President, Ronald Reagan), Maureen Reagan:

“I will feel equality has arrived when we can elect to office women who are as incompetent as some of the men who are already there.”

Clarity of mission – We need to become much clearer on our mission to empower, equip and educate women to become better leaders to navigate the maze towards achieving gender equity.

- To empower is to give women the keys to navigate the maze – developing their critical thinking and leadership skills, their self-confidence and assertiveness.
- Equipping women with appropriate the tools will make them more effective as they journey through the maze. These tools could incorporate resources, such as centralised lists of relevant websites and courses, or improving their negotiating abilities.
- Finally educating women (and men) on what gender equality is... and what it isn't – and why it is important to achieve this in our society today.

Too often women, both young and old, who are currently not personally affected by gender inequity, underestimate its importance. Erma Bombeck describes this well –

“We've got a generation now who were born with semi-equality. They don't know how it was before, so they think, this isn't too bad. We're working. We have our attaché cases and our three-piece suits. I get very disgusted with the younger generation of women. We had a torch to pass, and they are just sitting there. They don't realise it can be taken away. Things are going to have to get worse before they join in fighting the battle.”

Develop strategies and direction – for these to be effective we need a clearer understanding of the problem. At first glance it seems noble that most women wouldn't dream of taking on a leadership role for which they believe they're not totally qualified for. We proudly espouse the quotation by Charlotte Whitton –

“Whatever women do they must do twice as well as men to be thought half as good. Luckily, this is not difficult.”

However many women put high, often unrealistic expectations on their performance. Until they are 'twice as good' they don't feel confident enough to step up to the challenge.

To help us to develop a clear direction we need to ask why women are not stepping up, why they are not coming forward, and why so many of them do not even acknowledge that we have a problem with gender equity.

Sociolinguist and author Dr Deborah Tannen highlights communication and gender culture differences. In addition to conveying information, when women communicate they're concerned with building connections; whereas men want to establish status. Men tend to attribute success to their own abilities, and failure to external factors; while women tend to attribute their success to external factors, and failure to their own shortcomings. So in women's egalitarian gender culture they downplay their own role in success and see any attempt to 'put oneself up' as disruptive to building connections. 'If I'm better than you, that's not going to make you like me more.'

Taking action – Already we have groups of women leaders, such as BPW Australia, advocating affirmative action and promoting awareness through campaigns such as Equal Pay Day.

While these are worthwhile activities we also need to be aware that in navigating the maze there are many more paths we should explore, for example –

- Making learning in critical thinking and negotiation skills more widely available;
- Empowering more women through building their self-confidence and assertiveness;
- Communicating to successful women their responsibility to assist those behind them; and
- Up-skilling women through making more Company Directors Course scholarships available.

In conclusion, regardless of what action we choose to take after we have regrouped, redefined our vision, clarified our mission, and developed strategies and direction – we must ensure we set targets for our journey, monitor our progress, and not be afraid to explore a different path in order to make better progress navigating the maze to achieve gender equity.