

Combating Gender Stereotypes in the Boardroom



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Some women directors feel that they face the challenge of being gender stereotyped in the boardroom.

This is not surprising as gender stereotypes start early in life. A study by researchers from three US universities released earlier this year in journal *Science* found that both girls and boys as young as six years of age see females as being intellectually inferior. The study revealed that girls of five years old are just as likely as boys to associate brilliance with their own gender. However, by the age of six, these girls were less likely than boys to make the association. Specifically, among six-year-olds, boys chose their own gender as “really, really smart” 65 per cent of the time while girls selected their gender as brilliant only 48 per cent of the time.

The study also found that even as older girls were less likely to associate their own gender with brilliance, they (correctly) assessed that at their age, girls were more likely to get good results in school. This suggests that while they believed themselves to be innately disadvantaged vis-a-vis intellect, hard work and effort would ultimately lead to superior outcomes.

Without dealing with the issue of how these stereotypes could or should be addressed (early in life, I should add), how can women combat the gender pitfalls in the boardroom and within themselves?

In my view, there are three actions women can proactively take to expand their horizons for effectiveness in the boardroom.



EXPANDING HORIZONS

Invest in professional development

The first is to be board-ready.

It is a common misconception that depth of professional expertise in any particular domain – be it legal, audit, finance, or human resource – adequately prepares one for board service. The truth is that directors – whether male or female – need to have a strong grounding in the fundamentals of directorship, more than anything else, and thereafter, they need to continue to stay current on developments in corporate governance.

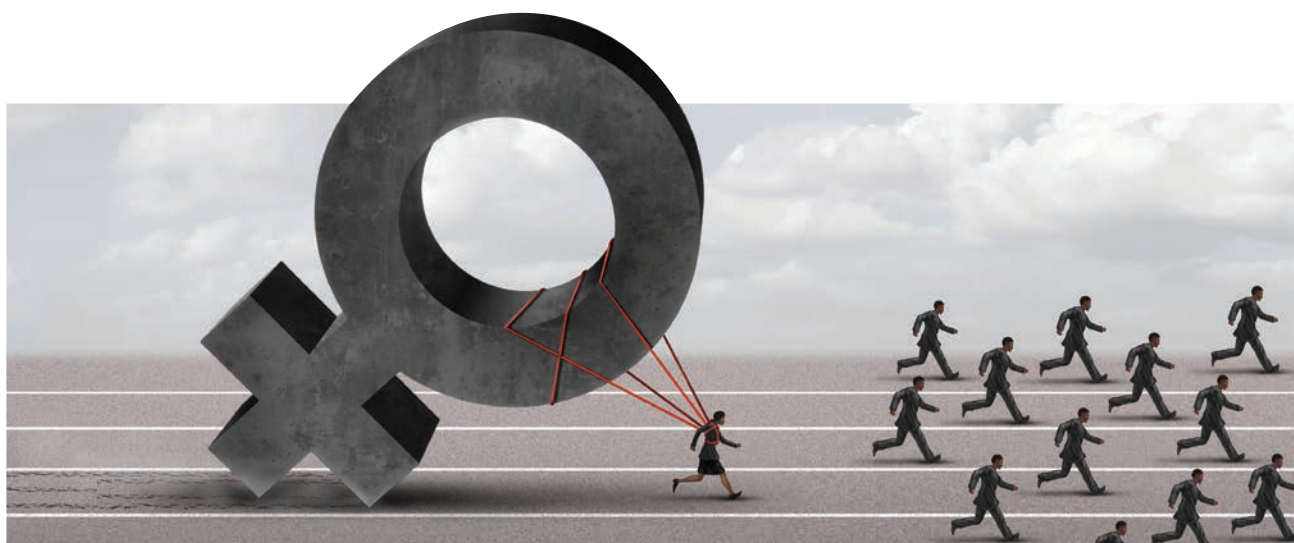
This is particularly so for women, who are often confronted with higher barriers. A solid foundation is likely to help quiet critics and overcome any insecurities.

A good place to start would, of course, be to explore the full suite of professional development courses and forums designed by SID to support directors at every stage of their directorship journeys.

Women directors should avoid the fallacy that they need special women-only courses designed for them. That would only reinforce the gender stereotype and deprive them of the practical benefit of training sessions that mirror the gender mix in the boardroom.

Develop strategic networks

Secondly, it helps to be part of a community of women directors.



There is an African proverb which applies equally to surviving in the bush, as it does to navigating the boardroom: “If you want to go fast, go alone. If you want to go far, go with others.”

Aspiring and established female directors would benefit from connecting with like-minded individuals and organisations such as BoardAgender, Women Corporate Directors, and the Financial Women’s Association of Singapore.

While it is important to have a support structure and network of trusted relationships that are based on interpersonal affinity, the value of the network is directly related to the exposure it provides to others with diverse backgrounds, experiences, affiliations, and perspectives. As such, women need to be deliberate about fostering strategic networks that push beyond their comfort zones.

Successful networks are also about adding value to others and connecting the dots. Remember there is “work” to be done in “networking”.

Seek role models and mentors

Thirdly, all aspiring and new directors could do with role models and mentors.

Many new directors find themselves, with the benefit of 20 or 30 years of experience, at the pinnacle of their respective professions. In fact,

those women who have “made it to the top” of the corporate ladder are often viewed as role models by the next generation of female leaders in the workplace.

But, it is helpful to view the transition to the boardroom as less a direct extension of one’s prior career, and more of a new career. It is an untrodden path in many respects.

That being the case, it behooves women to actively identify mentors who have traversed this route before. Mentors may be female or male; formal or informal. The key is to keep an open mind and to focus on learning, unusual as it may sometimes feel to receive rather than dispense advice.

And, as with networks, the purpose of a mentor is not to serve as an “echo chamber” but to help provide perspectives that broaden one’s radar.

Ultimately, directorship is a journey, not a destination. And whilst pervasive gender biases (whether superimposed or self-imposed) may stack the deck against women, the above actions can help women directors overcome some of these hurdles, become stronger contributors in the boardroom, and result in stronger representation. ■