

HR DIRECTORS BOARDROOM London 2019

Can we solve the Gender Problem?



Delegates gathered at the London offices of [Eversheds Sutherlands \(International\) LLP](#) and participated in this thought provoking and informative boardroom event. Introduced by [Karen Brown – Senior Business Manager](#) & [Katie Barks Recruitment Consultant](#) - London for Ashley Kate HR & Finance and chaired by [Claire Roughton, Principal Associate](#), Eversheds Sutherland (International) LLP.

[Ria Bailes, Group Director of People and Change](#), with One Housing led this hugely informative and interactive session. Ria gave us an introduction to her wealth of experience and her passion for this subject. She also highlighted the complexity of the issue as our introduction.

We were then taken on a whistle stop tour of the legislation in this area that has led us to where we are now. Ria felt that Gender Pay Gap reporting, whilst quite a blunt tool, has really heightened the focus on this issue, and as we know what gets measured gets done.

Ria explained that this topic is a real passion of hers and that this broad topic is influenced by all aspects of life. She therefore posed the question of whether this is really an employer's problem, and how much impact employers can make. Ria explained that, from a very early age we are influenced by ingrained gender stereotypes, so arguably this is not and cannot just be employer's problem to fix, it is much broader and deeper than that. However, employers clearly have a significant role to play.

So, what approach have One Housing taken? They have been very careful to ensure that this did not become a "thing" and worked hard on a strategic narrative. This is underpinned by a genuine belief that balanced and diverse teams, and not just with regard to protected characteristics, but backgrounds etc., lead to improved business outcomes. In addition, they have ensured that this agenda doesn't just sit with HR, as it is everyone's responsibility.

So the question was thrown out to the group, what are people currently doing with regard to this? The discussion centered on common focus areas, such as reviewing pay and bandings and reporting. Ria talked about One Housing mandating the make-up of shortlists and working closely with their recruitment partners to apply pressure to ensure that this was actioned.

Some delegates talked about the reality of the costs of balancing pay, and the fact that this would need to be a work in progress over many years, in some sectors. It was also highlighted that the continued perceived requirements for "high potentials" to be 100% was a very real inhibiting factor for women driving their careers through an organisation's hierarchy. This then created a debate about whether investment within a business should be focused on a few "high potential candidates" or more widely and the issues that can be created not just for gender equality but in relation to retention, as well as the impact of the majority of employees not being able to benefit from such investment.

It was also discussed that many of the solutions for addressing gender inequality were being demanded across the board. With the vast majority of people being affected by talent shortages, the opening up of real flexibility is being demanded across the board. This is especially apparent with the younger generation who are looking for a work life balance from the start of their careers. So, very much something that was once seen as a solution for gender inequality, is becoming more of a necessity to attract and retain talent generally.

Ria highlighted that within their business they do have key areas that are dominated by one gender or another, operatives are still largely men and care and support workers are largely female. And they are working hard to think more strategically about where pools of talent can come from to try and break some of these stereotypes and achieve more of a balance in these areas.

So, unsurprisingly policies and procedures are one of the first key areas that businesses focus on with looking at this issue, but this is just one dimension. The work at One Housing has really looked at this through culture and also from an individual point of view. This is important as it recognizes the environment in which people have grown up in – back to the hard wiring we talked about earlier.

One Housing were lucky to have a member of the HR team who wanted to focus on this for their masters dissertation. From this research there were some key, practical nuggets, which One Housing were able to utilise to move this forward.

Ria highlighted that so much of this boils down to confidence and there is much evidence to suggest that women, much more than men feel that they need to prove themselves through their career. An important part of the work that has been completed in this area is listening – listening to why women have taken the decisions they have, which has led to the disparity of women in leadership roles. The fact that this could be done for the dissertation meant it was impartial and people felt that they could open up more, which is vital to get the crux of the matter. And indeed given that One Housing had already worked hard in this area, some of the feedback was surprising, as the business thought they had put some great things initiatives in place, these had not always landed and had the impact they should.

And of course, once you have listened it is about the action that you take – so the picture 18 months ago at One Housing was that employees said that diversity was really important to them but:

- The gender pay gap was just above national average
- The board only had 1 woman in 12 and the Executive only 1 woman in 7
- So Ria felt that One Housing couldn't credibly say they valued diversity with such a poor record

So what did the women at One Housing say they felt were the most important qualities to progress in their careers?

- Work experience
- Qualifications
- Networking

So how did women feel that they fared in relation to these?

- Women needed to be more confident in their abilities, they felt they needed more experience than male counterparts to push for promotion
- Again women assumed the requirement for higher levels of qualification than their male counterparts
- Many felt that who you knew and where you were seen was important

So where did One Housing go from here?

One Housing started by demonstrating they were committed to diversity right at the top. The Board and Executive Team now have a 50:50 gender balance. They then took the results of the research and partnered with an organisation specialising in the science of happiness and confidence to build a programme to address some of the common issues women said they faced. They felt it was important to add some science to this research to find a solution. The programme which was developed focuses on eight areas:

- Emotional Intelligence
- Positive Communication
- Challenging Limiting self-beliefs
- Strengths based leadership
- The science of work-related stress
- Mindfulness at work
- Developing a positive mindset

Emotional Intelligence – this module was hard to name, but essentially it is geared to making people mindful of the fact that they view the world through their own lens and things may not always be how they perceive them

Positive Communication - Thriving as a leader requires the ability to communicate clearly in high pressure scenarios and during times of stress. Leaders need to be able to facilitate discussion and gain consensus. Positive communication and how it can be used to address challenges within the workplace, both verbal and non-verbal, without becoming entangled in negative spirals of communication

Challenging Limiting self-beliefs - Research shows that women are more likely to internally discount themselves from opportunities than men. This module explores our internal thought processes and how they have become ingrained. It will enable delegates to identify and challenge beliefs that may be holding them back, helping them to seek out and embrace new opportunities in the workplace.

Strengths based leadership - Career advancement and success in leadership require a person to make the best use of the skills, talents and strengths at their disposal. Research suggests that there is significantly greater potential for personal growth and development by focusing on building strengths rather than fixing weaknesses.

The science of work related stress - To excel in leadership roles, it's critical to be able to handle stress and maintain a positive attitude. Without it, staff are less engaged, less likely to recommend an organisation as a good place to work and more likely to view leaders as irrelevant or harmful to the organisation's performance.

Mindfulness at work - Top business leaders are increasingly turning to mindfulness, the practice of cultivating present moment awareness, to maximise their performance. Research has shown that mindfulness has far-reaching benefits including increased ability to focus, improved productivity and better performance under pressure.

Developing a positive mind-set - Navigate adversity without losing motivation, belief and momentum. Strength of character and act as role-models to their teams. Resilience to life's challenges and maintaining positivity is a skill that can be developed through intentional observation and practice.

Ria explained that it is too early to measure outcomes of the programme, but they are hopeful of the positive impact that this can have and will then look at extending the programme to their male employees. They are already providing the programme to other organisations across Housing and Health and hope to expand its reach to others.

Some delegates were interested to understand how this was communicated out, so not to get negative feedback on this just being for women. Ria explained that this was positioned as supporting the commitment to diversity, and not as an L and D investment only targeted at women.

This is clearly a work in progress, and Ria was very open about them not having all the answers. But felt this was a very positive step forward, and reiterated the key change for them was to focus on the individuals views.

So to conclude, Ria stated that there are four key areas which businesses need to be focused on to address this issue:

- Organisational changes
- Support for individuals
- Managers
- Culture

To see a summary of the key points from Ria in discussion with Karen Brown [click here](#).

And as for broader society, that will need to be a discussion for another day.

Our exclusive HR Directors Boardroom discussion gives you unprecedented access to valuable business and professional contacts as well as providing you with unique opportunities to debate topical and strategic HR issues. We have further dates in place for 2019 for these discussions as well as essential Employment Law Updates.

Please email hrnetworking@ashleykatehr.com to find out more or to book your place.



The flyer is split into two main sections. The left section has a purple background with white text. It features the Ashley Kate HR & Finance logo at the top left, followed by the text 'EVERSHEDS SUTHERLAND' in a vertical orientation. The main heading is 'HR DIRECTORS BOARDROOM' in large, bold, white letters. Below this, it lists three dates: 'Thursday 7th November - Nottingham', 'Wednesday 13th November - Manchester', and 'Thursday 5th December - Cambridge'. The second heading is 'EMPLOYMENT LAW UPDATES' in large, bold, white letters. Below this, it lists three dates: 'Tuesday 12th November - Birmingham', 'Wednesday 27th November - London', and 'Thursday 28th November - Leeds'. The right section of the flyer is a black and white photograph of a woman standing at the front of a classroom, holding a book and looking towards a group of seated students.



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