

Our corporate culture must become more gender-diverse

Corporate lawyer Alys Carlton discusses her experiences navigating the corporate landscape as a woman in business...



I RECENTLY participated in the launch of the Welsh Government's Approach to Supporting Entrepreneurial Women, which was held in the offices of my employers, leading Welsh law firm Capital Law.

Of the name badges laid out carefully on the reception desk, only three were not collected. Clearly many people were keen not to miss out on learning more about how their government was looking to support the entrepreneurial aims and ambitions of women in Wales.

I was particularly delighted that the Minister for Economy and Transport, Ken Skates, was both able to attend and clearly be so supportive.

I have been part of the Expert Panel for this initiative for the past 18 months. The Panel (constituted in accordance with the REAP principles of Be The Spark, bringing together representatives from government, academia, the third sector and the private sector) was borne out of an acknowledgement that encouraging, supporting and increasing women's participation in entrepreneurship could have a positive impact on the economy of Wales - it would promote opportunity, tackle inequality and hopefully deliver individual and national prosperity.

As part of the review, the Panel commissioned the University of South Wales to conduct a small study with both women and business support organisations.

This study aimed to establish both the barriers and challenges that women entrepreneurs are currently experiencing, as well as determining the current views and landscape of the business support provision in Wales.

The Panel also met with a number of organisations from my "community" - the corporate finance sector - and we were encouraged by the responsiveness to the issues raised.

Following our research, consultations and extensive discussions, the Panel came up with 10 recommendations around how to target and engage more effectively with women entrepreneurs, and to tailor and promote support services to better meet their needs.

The challenge is now to convert the strong words and good intentions into tangible actions.

I have been reflecting on what contribution I personally, and Capital Law more generally, can make.

So far, ideas include encouraging our women to become mentors, harnessing the power of our networks by helping clients who are female founders connect with each other, and (as suggested by one of the members of our Lean In group) asking our women to blog about advice they would give to women in business based on their own careers to date. (Including these ideas in this article is one way of ensuring that I stand by my commitments!)

A gender-balanced workforce has been at the heart of Capital's growth - our managing partner is a woman, and women occupy 50% of our leadership positions. I know that this is unusual within the Welsh corporate finance scene - when I am asked by publications to comment on the business landscape, together with representatives from finance providers and other intermediaries, it is not uncommon for me to be the only woman. The last time this happened, it was me and 14 men. I find this unacceptable; if I were an entrepreneur, I would find it very uninspiring.

So what can my community do? An easy step would be for organisations, on receiving such requests for commentary, to consider whether they could nominate one of their women (assuming, of course, that they have one - amazingly, not all do), rather than defaulting to the same old men.

The same could be said of dinners, networking events and award ceremonies - how hard do businesses try to ensure that their guests are as diverse as possible?

Too often I see men just lazily inviting their mates. Guess what - women can be really good company too!

This may not seem like a big deal, but in my opinion it is vital in

order to start to create a business environment which is seen to value and support gender diversity.

Something else the corporate finance community can do relates specifically to one of the Panel's recommendations, namely: "Ensure that business awards in Wales actively encourage recognition of women entrepreneurs and ensure that there is a gender-balanced panel and judging criteria".

I was a judge for the Wales Start-Up Awards last year, one of three women on a panel of five; many of the businesses that pitched to us, and indeed of the winners themselves, were founded and led by women.

This is a world away from the award ceremonies catering for businesses much further down the growth trajectory, which are invariably entirely dominated by men, both in terms of the judging panels and the winners.

People can argue that they are simply reacting to the pool available to them; again, I would argue that this is laziness, both on the part of the organisers and my peers - I am not suggesting we will get to 50/50 overnight, but we all can and should make small, incremental changes and these will slowly start to turn the dial.

At the launch event, our senior partner Chris Nott spoke (as he has done many times before) about how bizarre it is that we still have to have this conversation. He is convinced (and the evidence shows) that gender diversity (indeed, diversity more generally) improves business performance.

He talked about how there are men out there who get this and are supportive (in theory) of our efforts - they are the "persuadable". If you are a "persuadable", please ask yourself what action you can take. And then just do it.

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