



# perspective

## **The debate about gender balance in leadership is not new.**

Despite that, there has been significant press comment on the issue in the past year and I believe the debate is shifting away from advocating positive discrimination and targets. There is more of a focus on the risks associated with gender imbalance, and the approaches required to access the benefits that can be seen to flow in organisations that do achieve a good gender balance.

This is more than a politically correct thing. This is a strategic issue for organisations, as well as a moral imperative for any profession. There is a growing body of evidence that organisations with a better gender balance amongst their leadership teams are more commercially successful. It is difficult to ascertain if this is driven by successful companies choosing to appoint more women into leadership roles, or if appointing women results in more success. Either way, it is hard to dispute with the research that points to specific benefits in better employee engagement, for instance, as a direct result of better gender balance.

This is of course more than about commercial success. The impact of achieving the best leadership possible by looking at gender balance is just as relevant in education, government and other public services. I suggest that the outdoor learning world still has some distance to travel to truly benefit from balanced gender leadership. Please take a moment to consider how many business owners, senior managers or key decision makers in your network are female. Why might that be and what can we do to achieve some change?

So should we be looking to positively discriminate? I'm not sure. Too many men and women alike are uncomfortable with targeted quotas for women in leadership roles. Women are insulted at the idea of being perceived as getting promotions only because of their gender, while men feel that such promotions are deeply unfair. There is also a danger in simply appointing talented women into leadership roles that the dominant existing male role models remain. The danger lies in female leaders adopting the male based approaches in order to gain acceptance or credibility or even to have their 'voice heard'. There is a need to look closely at the changes that start to emerge as a result of more gender balance and to ensure that existing senior leadership is not only aware of the changes but positively encourages them.

So, if we are all to benefit from better gender balance in our leadership teams we need to consider what current practices constrain or discourage positive female influence in leadership. The Institute is seeking to gain a better understanding of the current gender balance related issues in the outdoor learning sector. Thanks to a generous donation we are able to fund some research in this area. The research will be undertaken by Cress Allwood. If you want to make sure you or your organisation contributes to this research please contact Cress at the Institute - [institute@outdoor-learning.org](mailto:institute@outdoor-learning.org). ■

by Andy Robinson, IOL CEO

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