

Achieving gender balance was the subject of our recent breakfast conversation, hosted by Lynn White of WDI Consulting and David Green, member of the senior management team, Charles Russell Speechlys.

David and Lynn told the story so far of developing greater gender balance at senior levels in the Firm, before exploring how subtle and pervasive power differences play a significant role in sustaining the status quo whereas creating an 'equal' power environment leads to open conversations, fresh insights and creative solutions.

Gender balance: Courageous conversations energise and shift the status quo

Often, the topic of creating gender balance at senior levels creates unease amongst men and women. From the executives there is discomfort and confusion about how to create change, and from the women, a sense of feeling undervalued and needing to push to fulfil their potential. However, our work with Charles Russell Speechlys has shown that open and honest dialogue enables a new positive energy for change, with senior teams and women agreeing:

- ✦ "I'm proud that I work in a firm that is so committed to making changes that will increase the number of women partners and senior managers in the Firm"
- ✦ "This really matters to me personally"
- ✦ "It's a process that will take time, I'm inspired that we are having these open conversations and see how changes are starting".

"Dialogue is a conversation with a centre, not sides. It is a way of taking the energy of our differences and channelling it toward something that has never been created before. Dialogue is a conversation in which people think together, no longer taking their own position as final but relaxing their grip on certainty and listening to possibilities".
 From William Isaacs

Real dialogue through courageous listening and authentic advocacy

WDI Consulting and Charles Russell Speechlys worked together over six months to engage women and senior partners across the Firm in conversations that went beyond fact finding and information gathering. The initial phase of the work (one-to-one interviews and small facilitated workshops) generated a huge depth of insight, and started to generate a momentum for change:

- ✦ David: "We learnt a lot from the women that we could not have foreseen and didn't expect - we got under the skin of what will make a difference to create gender balance in the short and long term"
- ✦ **Building trust and understanding across grades and departments:** "I feel heard", "until now we have never shared the positive stories of what's working already so we can build on them", "I'm moved by hearing others experiences and now feel even more invested in creating change". "It was a revelation"
- ✦ **Developing relationships:** "I have met other women who are mentors and role models for me", "to speak with a senior partner on this subject is a new conversation"
- ✦ **Gaining traction and initiating change:** "My team are coming to me and asking about these conversations and what is happening next" (Partner), "more than triple the number of people wanted to be involved than we anticipated" (core project team)

Some of the conversation:

"Of course quotas are a good thing. Where I'm from we had quotas for Catholics and Protestants and no-one said; Oh, I shouldn't have that job because I haven't earned it. If the system is discriminating, the women appointed through quotas will be great - and just need to get over it!"

"We need the D of Diversity, but it's the I of Inclusivity that will bring about the culture David is talking about that brings about equal numbers of women and men in senior levels." Alison Young, Leaders in Change

"In complex scenarios - we need to see role models."

"D&I is not achieved just by policy, process and unconscious bias training, and the subtle and nuanced approach required is a genuine differentiator for WDI." Lucy Harley, Business Consultant

Attitudes, cultures and mindsets are key to achieving gender balance

David: "I kept hearing it said that, we need a flexible working policy, an agile working policy - but we have them. I learned why they are not working as we intended them to. Fundamentally, increasing our gender balance is more about changing attitudes and mindsets especially in some influential, senior people in the Firm."

And in our experience, that means creating new forums for courageous conversations that create safety to talk about taboos, to enable the organisation to hear from the women's perspective what will enable women's progression, and for women to hear and feel the genuine desire to create change from the Firm.

David: "WDI's presence in the meetings enabled the women to be open, by building trust between the women and the core team. I was humbled by what I heard. We were always worried by the expectations we could be creating, that we were opening Pandora's box. And it still concerns me. My view of what needs to happen now has changed as a result of hearing the women's experiences and discussing what changes are needed with them."

Real dialogue means having conversations that feel 'risky' - yet they are also a means to generate the creative, sustainable solutions, without which talented women leaders (and their performance and potential) will continue to leave at key thresholds in organisations. Denying the depth of attitudinal and cultural shift needed is exposing organisations to significant risk as clients become more diverse and expect and need their service providers to be inclusive and representative. Responding with real dialogue develops the foresight for lasting change.

Our take-aways

We heard and felt the passion that so many people, especially women, feel about creating balanced, thriving workplaces. We talked about how women at work are often caught in a "low power double bind" - stuck in less powerful roles, and yet being judged when they go for more in ways that end up reinforcing their powerlessness. And yet, we also experienced the power of bringing people together, of networking and creating an "us" from "me", of sharing common perspectives and openly exploring differences, to inspire and energise and move forward.

Finally, a huge thanks to David, for hosting us, and offering a masterclass in how candour, and belief build trust and create a compelling narrative.

References

[Heartmath Institute](#) [Adam Galinsky, How to speak up for yourself](#) [Mary Beard, Women's power and language](#)

We would love to have a conversation about creating balanced leadership in your organisation, if this touches you, please contact Lynn White on +44 (0) 7767 692809.

Further reflections:

"In silicon valley you can't tell who has power by the usual signs, for instance, everyone has jeans and a T-shirt. So I look for the person with the most people following them ... they'll be the CEO."

Martin Powell, Dialogue Semiconductor

"I am always trying to be more aware of my own agency in the choices I make. I don't think people are waiting to or expecting me to ask permission."

Lili Sulejmanovic, Business Consultant

"We need change to come from the top. I have seen too many great women leave or be passed over."

"I was impressed with David for embracing the journey, his openness, and the attitude of humility he embodied."

Jelena Sevo, Director, Tax Markets, LexisNexis

"It was an inspiring and stimulating experience that has stayed with me."