

LADIES FIRST?

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Management consulting, like financial services, has struggled to attract and retain women. Some of the traditional requirements of the job – long, inflexible hours and lots of travel – have not helped. But there is no debate in the industry about the need to have a better gender balance at every level. All the management consulting leaders I know believe that having more women is the right thing to do and will improve their firms.

The industry has been working hard to make changes. Consulting firms are experimenting with new approaches to recruiting, reviews, and development. They have introduced mentoring programs, sponsorship, flexible work, and extended parental leave, among other things. These initiatives are making a difference, but the changes have not been big enough or fast enough.

Anyone who has tried to change an institutional culture knows that it's a slog. Improving diversity and inclusion (D&I) is especially challenging because it requires an examination of deeply held values. Yet it's one of the most important ways that firms evolve. At Oliver Wyman, I am already proud of the progress we have made challenging some of the basic requirements of the job, creating programs and processes to attract and support our women and improve our culture.

But I am beginning to question some of the core elements of our plan and, certainly, the emphasis placed on gender. I think there might have been a better path.

When we started, our intention was to create a culture that would be inclusive and diverse. We wanted an environment where anyone could feel comfortable and have a chance to shine, regardless of their gender, sexuality, race, religion, personality type, or thinking style. The ultimate goal was to improve our capacity to solve complex problems for clients by including diverse perspectives and abilities within our ranks.

I thought we should start by focusing on women. They represent half the population, are a visible sign of diversity, and, arguably, present the clearest path towards change. I figured that if we made rapid progress on gender, we could extend this success to other groups and eventually develop a more universal approach that would crack the broader inclusion challenge for us. I think many others in management consulting and financial services proceeded along the same lines.

For my part, while my larger ambition is unchanged, I am no longer convinced that our approach of focussing on gender diversity was the right one. I suspect we would be further along if we had pursued entirely general D&I solutions rather than specific solutions for specific groups. The desire to form groups or “tribes” is part of human nature. And, although this tribalism can be empowering, it can also be divisive.

Members of the recognized identity groups, which at Oliver Wyman we call Employee Resource Groups, benefit in various ways, such as bonding with colleagues who share their experiences, building collective pride, and consolidating a coherent approach to their inclusion. Offsetting such benefits of the group-by-group approach, however, are the costs of narrowing our focus. Inclusion is an entirely general goal; it is not about any particular group, such as women, or even any list of groups that might practically be drawn up. Focusing on particular, specified groups can act to exclude other, unnamed or “invisible” groups. The group-by-group approach too easily creates an environment which promotes not genuine inclusivity but a competition between groups for the resources devoted to their particular concerns.

We are now shifting our efforts to measures that create a stronger sense of community amongst us all and that value all differences. Though we continue to pursue meaningful progress towards gender balance, it is no longer taking center stage. As we have made this shift, we have tapped into more universal needs: for community, for work/life sustainability, for compassion, and for mutual understanding of others' experiences and beliefs.

In practice, this requires us to pay more attention to general modes of human interaction, rather than what is required to address the needs of any one group. We seek a pervasive culture of trust and respect, and we are emphasizing the power of listening.

“Society’s progress on gender diversity has been glacially slow. Yet, sadly, we could say the same for many other dimensions of diversity. At Oliver Wyman, we’re focused on evolving our workplace to one in which all colleagues feel they belong and that their unique differences, gender or others, are valued. This means ensuring that we are curious, courageous, compassionate, and collaborative with one another; and so far, it is having a profound impact”
Aimee Horowitz, Global Director Talent Strategy and Inclusion, Oliver Wyman

It seems to be working. Cultural change has accelerated since we extended our efforts beyond a specific group. Our people seem to respond better to the “enlightenment universalism” of our new approach than the “tribalism” it has replaced. I’ve been delighted by the profound insights and engagement generated by our efforts aimed at forming deeper connections, encouraging introspection and honest, respectful dialogue. We are moving towards a diversity of leadership styles that adds colour and new perspectives to the decisions we take.

Since this shift in focus, engagement has taken off. Where, in the past, we have encountered resistance, we are now struggling to meet the demand for inclusion programs and to share more techniques to make our teams smarter and stronger.

In the end, perhaps, both paths lead to the same destination, and there is merit in making rapid progress with any group that feels excluded. But I suspect there is a smarter approach than the one we took. If I could do it again, I would move faster from group-specific initiatives to the broader inclusion challenge. That would have expedited cultural change. Many will disagree. But it is a question that requires serious thought by those of us who are determined to create workplaces where any talented person has every chance to thrive.

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