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## Women in the Boardroom - The View From Here:

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Calls for greater female representation at senior levels are being amplified, with Lord Davies set this week to name and shame fifty British companies with all male boards. It seems however, that whenever this debate comes up in the media, the same arguments are regurgitated from a singular and narrow perspective. Firstly, there is a hyper focus on board rooms of the FTSE 100, a miniscule window into the world of behemoth corporates that represent only a fraction of the leadership positions in this country. SMEs account for 99% of all privately owned businesses in the UK, therefore to ignore the bigger picture is to massively skew the debate. A more holistic view needs to be taken.

Secondly, the key paradigm is well intentioned, but misguided...and falls flat in the commercial world. That is, the need for more women in boardrooms to achieve greater equality, and because it's fair. While this is a virtuous ideal that should of course be made a reality, it is no way to approach the business world. We need to be smarter than that. Businesses by their very nature serve a purpose that is misaligned with moral standards. They exist to make money, and so to implement social change means they need to see the difference to their bottom line.

The reality is that most businesses don't make decisions on something as important as who's in charge on the basis of fairness, they make that decision on the basis of 'who's going to stop us getting killed in the market'. You don't get to be a profitable business by pushing a socially motivated agenda over a commercial one. The same people who will agree in principal at a dinner party, that will argue for greater representation, are the same people who make these decisions on safe bets, and on the numbers in front of them.

The last thing we want to do, however, is champion government interference as a solution, with talk of boardroom quotas, which are quite frankly patronizing. They're simply glazing over a deeper issue while suffocating organisations, and will only prompt eye-rolling sighs from senior management.

So why do we want more women in senior positions? Why does it matter? The reason I fundamentally believe that we should have more women in senior positions is because it will lead to better, more successful businesses. Diverse leadership teams, not just in terms of gender or race, but in terms of having a range of perspectives leads to good, balanced decisions and greater innovation. When we lose diversity, not just of gender but in every essence, we lose the ability to think and we end up with the kind of dogmatic conformism that sinks companies. If this is how your company operates then you're missing a trick, and somebody else will quickly outpace you.

Once we've got that point across, we're halfway there. The second step to implementing this change is to shake up our value system and the characteristics that we revere. It is stereotypically masculine traits such as competitiveness and aggression that get promoted to board level. Experience tells us that women have historically felt they need to display

these same traits to get ahead, but should they have to? Should we not start to value typically female traits of communication and cooperation for their own merit?

What I seek as a business owner is not a woman that behaves like a man, but a woman who thinks and acts like a woman, and value that. Quotas will drive companies to seek women who mimic executive behaviour. The real reason we should have them is because they think in a different way. That's why I seek to hire women for my own business. Executive search is about aggression and competitiveness, but it's also a hell of a lot about communication and cooperation as well.

I have a nine-year-old daughter. I want her to fulfill her potential, and I want her to feel happy. I also have a son. I want them to both have the opportunity to play to their strengths and have equal opportunities. We'll only give them this if we can demonstrate there's a benefit to society by having it. Fairness is a justification, but sadly it's not an argument that's not going to win.

In short, you don't have diversity in any of your senior levels, you're going to miss out. Chances are, half your customers are women. Companies need to look beyond the well-trodden path.

**ACTION:** As a headhunter, I make a point of;

1) Always putting women forward on shortlists. On the whole my clients ask for them, so the business community is making a concerted effort. My view from the inside is that there is no anti female agenda. This part is being done.

2) Helping my clients see past their prejudices in the interview room. Although they ask for mixed shortlists, they still fall into the trap of placing higher value on male attributes; simply because this is what they believe will be more successful. The self-doubt that many women display, can often be their undoing. We need to get clients to put these aside. This is when you'll really see a cultural shift.