

Women, Empowerment and Leadership

Joint ESSEC/ EuropeanPWN Conference, June 11 at La Defense.

In partnership with European PWN and International media partners with the International Herald Tribune, ESSEC has launched last June a cycle of conferences for Women. The first one “Women empowerment & Leadership” took place on the ESSEC campus in la Défense and was a real success.

Women on boards, quotas, career levers, mentoring networking, reconciling work and family: this conference ran the full gamut of topics bearing on women’s empowerment. **Hilary Ellis**, EuropeanPWN-Paris President, and **Junko Takagi**, ESSEC Diversity & Performance Chair, opened the conference, followed by **Celia de Anca**, PhD, Instituto de Empresa in Madrid, Spain, who presented her findings regarding women on boards in Sweden. Thanks to the quota legislation, Swedish women are now well represented on Boards but there is no trickle down effect in Executive Committees. Ms de Anca sees several possible developments as a result of the quotas:

- The same few women will be seated on a large number of boards, prevented the same spread of board experience.
- There will be an assessment on the impact of more women on boards and people will want to know if greater gender parity can avert the next dot.com, bubble housing or other global economic crisis? Quotas will be at the center of the debate.

It took a male prime minister to sell the legislation in Spain, and it took male leaders in Sweden and Norway to pass similar laws. It was a man who championed Norway’s boardroom quota obliging companies to fill at least 40 percent of the seats with women.

Would a female Spanish prime minister have been able to appoint a cabinet that is 50 percent female in 2004?

Unlikely, thinks Celia de Anca, of IE Business School in Madrid. “When you want to change a culture,” she said, “it’s easier for a representative of that culture to sell the change.”

Basically, men are the more effective feminists because other men are more likely to listen to them.

That’s also true in business. Role models of female leaders matter, Ms. de Anca said. But male role models who take time off with their children, leave the office at a decent time, promote women and spread the word with male colleagues matter perhaps even more.

The message is filtering through.

In France, for example, Deloitte France is starting an initiative this month to educate men on staff about gender diversity. A handful of companies, including the nuclear giant Areva (run by a woman) have put men in charge of gender.

Jean-Michel Monnot, head of the European diversity program at the food service company **Sodexo**, says his gender is his greatest asset in convincing male colleagues of the business case for promoting women: “You need to speak the language of the guys.”

Few men are overtly sexist these days, he said. But they don't think twice about scheduling late meetings. Some who give the promotion to the guy instead of the recent mother think of themselves as considerate.

Mr. Monnot, who until 2007 managed 60 production sites, speaks from experience. It took a man and fellow sports fan to bring home the issue to him when he explained at the bar counter one day why he liked a good gender mix in his teams. It improved the atmosphere, gave rise to new ideas and was more in line with Sodexo's clients.

“Until then, I didn't think there was a problem, and I certainly didn't think of myself as the problem,” Mr. Monnot said. Now he travels his company's sites encouraging managers to shut their offices at 7 p.m. and recent fathers to go part-time “to set an example.”

Giving the next generation strong father figures would not only help explode the glass ceiling, it might also be the best hope for those failing boys in school who lack male role models.

Men have a lot to gain from the rise of women, said **Joanne Dreyfus**, an audit associate at **Deloitte** in Paris, pointing out that at the moment three-quarters of those taking advantage of the company's flex-time scheme are women.

Put another way: The last frontier of women's liberation may well be men's liberation.

The next conference will be held in Mannheim in December 2010 where you are all invited to continue the debate.

“I have had the opportunity to attend to ESSEC conference about “Women empowerment and leadership” and was very impressed by the quality of the exchanges and the participants willingness not only to share their experiences but also to brainstorm about the ways and means to raise gender issues on the top of companies' agendas.

This conference was a very good initiative that should definitely be repeated.”

Lamia Belkaid, Executive MBA alumnus.

“In general, I can say that the topics treated were very well selected ,the group of attendees was very diverse , highly qualified and very interesting and last but not least the event was very well prepared. I enjoyed very much that afternoon and hope you will set forth this great idea.” Tatiana Gillitzer, Corporate Director & General Manager, Workshop Training & coaching