

Why a Women's Quota will not help (and is counter-productive)

Personal Opinion from a "Career Woman"

For the last few years we led a heated debate in Germany (and elsewhere) about the benefits and problems of a "women's quota" to get more women in leadership positions.

Having spent almost 25 years in business myself and the last 15 years in top management positions I fully support the goal of more female participation in leadership positions (and likewise more male presence in the education system, by the way...) While there are some advantages of being the only woman in a meeting (you automatically get attention and are not easily forgotten), most of the time you feel isolated, lack role models, do not know when to assimilate and when to stick to your personal (female?) style – in short: all the effects of being a minority.

Apart from the personal experience I think there also is a solid business case for having women better represented across the ranks:

- Diverse teams perform better
- Companies cannot afford missing out half of the population, especially in times of shortages of skilled labor
- Losing well educated women, that companies have invested much money in, is quite costly
- Many industries are also demanding more balanced teams that reflect the structure of the population and their customers better

So I clearly see the need for more women in middle and top management.

But why should this request not be accelerated by a quota? First, we need to define properly what kind of quota we mean, when arguing feverishly in favor of or against it. I am for the time being only referring to a women's quota in the top management of large companies.

I believe that a mandatory, uniform quota for women in top management of large companies would be counter-productive (and I am not even addressing legal or moral concerns with such an interference in a key business process). Initially it would lead to many cases of women being promoted, who are less suited than male candidates. I firmly believe that women (who are mostly better educated) have the same potential as men. Due to some natural factors (such as women giving birth, often taking time off afterwards or working in some kind of part-time model) they often lack experience, though. Experience is particularly relevant in leadership positions. You can study calculus at university, but how to lead people, to develop teams, to take complex decisions requires different skills. And while we do have many well educated women in Germany, they are on average less experienced than a man of same age. So the quota won't help companies who need the best person in a job.

But the quota won't help the women either. We have not yet managed to create the pre-requisites for success for women at the top, so many quota women are doomed to fail. This will hurt the overall cause and even throw us back more years than we had hoped to accelerate.

When reflecting upon my own experience and the mentoring of almost 100 other women in the last decades I saw two main reasons why women failed (and left) or felt uncomfortable in their job (and eventually left – for another job or the “home choice”):

- They did not understand the rules of the game
- They did not want to play the rules of the game

So we need to teach women the rules of the game to allow them to succeed. Just one example: how to position yourself in a group of alpha-males, which subtle behaviors should be adapted, how to make your point in a decisive way, are key skills that need to be mastered by women and men alike. But men generally have higher comfort levels in dealing with these rules (they have been made by men, similar to themselves) and have more role models/peers to educate them about these (formally or – mostly – by mimicking their behavior).

I have observed men’s performance and behavior to follow more a Gauss distribution while the performance of the few women in middle management is much more distributed to the extremes. In their communication they are being assessed as either too pushy or too shy, but rarely in the middle, they are either too ambitious (and un-woman like) or not ambitious enough. This for me is a clear signal about the uncertainty of many women and volatility in their behavior.

I believe many things will be different when we have reached a 30% representation (the borderline for minority or not minority), but the first quota women will continue to fail if they do not master these rules of the game. Obviously companies need to make an effort to teach about these rules, also to extend their set of accepted norms to the somewhat different female style (after all they want women for being different, so it cannot be the goal to make them all like the men), but that won’t happen overnight. A mandatory quota will be counter-productive as it would force women into positions for which neither they nor the companies are really prepared. So instead of introducing a fixed quota, which might accelerate the development, but will also lead to many new problems, politics and companies should increase their efforts to help women succeed.

Preparatory work is necessary: Any company that would like to increase their share of women in top positions should first analyze their specific problem (in recruiting, development or retention) and then systematically create an environment which explicitly values diversity, but in parallel teaches women the rules of the game. This – as any other organizational change – will take time.

But why do even companies who are really advanced in this dimension lose more women than they had hoped? Here comes the second factor in play that I have observed over the years: Women more often than men **do not want to play this game**. Yes, I believe that the “average woman” is less ambitious than the “average man”. Here are two reasons: a man who quits a top career for a part-time job or decides to stay at home will meet huge public astonishment and disapproval. A woman can do the same and many people will at least secretly think that she has made the right choice. So a woman has fewer incentives to stick to a career compared to a man. Additionally the price that women have to pay for a career is still over-proportionally high. Working women regularly do the bigger share of housework, they feel in charge of the kids (or society treats them as the one in charge), organize the social life etc.

Being in top management is tough, it requires many hours, huge enthusiasm and also significant sacrifices. **Women cannot have it all**: they cannot be the public image of the perfect mother, accompanying the kid to all doctor’s appointments, being the local parent class representative in school and in parallel run a multi billion dollar business. Neither can men. Any top career requires real focus and commitment and many women are not willing to make that step. With a quota we would see not only relatively less experienced women pushed into top management, but also women who lack the ambition and drive for this position. The consequence: they fail or quit and again both sides are unhappy.

So in order to get more women in top management, we need to acknowledge the full picture: the partner and society (represented e.g. by the mother-in-law who is worried about the grandkids with the mother travelling so much or by the nursery teacher demanding more contributions at festivities and self-baked, organic cakes).

For more women wanting to succeed in business we need more really supportive husbands, who are – at the extreme – willing to sacrifice their own careers for those of their wives (the normal model the other way around). We need more understanding in society that there are many ways of being a good mother (or a good father). Beside better child care institutions we need more faith that children will not turn into monsters when they are not being taken care of by the mother 24 hours a day the first three years (a view across the German borders usually helps for that). Only when it is as normal for a dad to stay home as it is for the mom (both in terms of social acceptance and normality in the companies), we will have removed the easy way for women to opt out.

Will this come with a quota? Certainly not! This is a long cultural change process that cannot be ordered via legislation. It can be accelerated with more options for flexibility in the workplace for women and men, more and better child care institutions (that do not force women into part-time jobs) and more preferential taxation for families (instead of couples). It will require more debate and public information about what is possible in other countries. We will have come a big step forward when a stay at home dad is not automatically stamped as softy, a part-time manager not judged as lacking ambition and when the association with the word “career woman” will not be “unfeminine” any more.

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