

## THE EDGE DEBATE

### BOARDROOM QUOTAS



Only 13% of board members in the UK are women. Should the government introduce quotas to increase the proportion of women in our boardrooms?



**YES** Margi Gordon  
*Director of tailored programmes,  
Raffley Park*

We all know that government intervention shouldn't be needed to encourage more women into the boardroom. That is obvious, but if appointments are made solely on merit, where are the women? While women continue to make substantial progress in the workplace, higher up in organisations they are in the minority – and this has been the case for many years.

The glass ceiling still remains very much unbroken. A recent FT report, *Women at the Top*, celebrated the top 50 women in the world of business and it was an impressive list, but just 10% of those female CEOs were located within the UK. So we have some progress to make here.

The business world is changing. The events of the last 18 months have shaken up traditional ways of operating, new generations are changing the workplace and uncertainty is the only real certainty. Yet the faces at the top of the organisation largely remain unchanged. A recent study by Aurora and Caliper, *The DNA of Women Leaders*, found that women leaders possessed strong leadership profiles with an open, collegial style. They were assertive, persuasive, empathic risk-takers, with the drive to get things done. All of these skills are vital in today's diverse workplace and organisations that ignore this do so at their peril.

Our annual workplace survey, *The Management Agenda*, looked at the impact of several aspects of diversity among organisational leaders. Broadly the research finds that where there is diversity, this results in higher leadership rankings. Maybe a radical approach is needed to get directors away from recruiting via the old boy's network and embracing diversity. Boards need to be representative of their workforce and their customers; ergo women need to be part of governance and decision making. If that means government legislation, then so be it.

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BOARDS NEED TO REPRESENT THEIR WORKFORCE AND CUSTOMERS. WOMEN NEED TO BE A PART OF IT. IF THAT MEANS LEGISLATION, THEN SO BE IT  
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**NO** Helen Pitcher  
*Chairman,  
IDDAS*

The case for having more women on boards is obvious: how can talent be linked to gender? Aside from equality issues, it has been demonstrated that businesses with female senior executives do better in bottom line terms. Women bring different perspectives and skills, leading to a measurable improvement in performance.

But the introduction of enforced quotas would be absurd. This would simply encourage the 'dinosaurs' to question the merits of their enforced female colleagues. Women already have enough petty inequities to deal with without having to face unspoken – or open – criticism of their right to lead.

Furthermore, while corporate governance is a key reason given for having more women on boards, it is exactly why quotas are dangerous. If organisations are to function efficiently, we need to ensure the best person is recruited for every board role. If boards are forced to take on a certain number of women, then this won't always be the case.

We all know why women are still in the minority on boards; it's a self-perpetuating cycle. Talented women often find it difficult to progress and decide not to fight the system. Consequently, they don't have exposure to the pressure of senior level leadership so when an opportunity presents itself, they may feel that they're not actually qualified to take it.

In order to help women make that jump, employers have a duty to invest in the right training, as well as putting them forward for non-executive director positions where they can gain board exposure.

There are companies that are doing this already and a number of external initiatives, like the recently launched 30% Club, have been developed to encourage organisations to recruit talented women.

We have to adopt an evolutionary approach to this issue. The imposition of quotas would do more harm than good to the case for more women in the boardroom.

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