



BREAKING BARRIERS

Dr. Chris Bart, CEO of Corporate Missions Inc. and founder of The Directors College, addresses the “gatekeepers” who must take critical steps to advance women into the C-suite.

From your vantage point, describe the current environment of gender equality at the executive level.

While young professional women are entering the workforce in numbers equal to men, by the time they reach the executive suite, women still only represent around 24 percent of that level.

How have you observed situations in which women outperform men in the areas of judgment, reasoning, or cognitive ability?

Two years ago, I conducted a unique study in Canada on the moral reasoning capabilities of directors. Moral reasoning involves having the ability to broker a solution among individuals who are party to a conflict through collaboration, social cooperation, and consensus building whereby everyone considers the outcome to be fair. They may not like the outcome because they selfishly did not get everything they wanted but they can agree that the final decision is nonarbitrary or favoring

one stakeholder over another.

This ability is the “holy grail” of moral reasoning and decision-making and it is most needed in the boardroom where Canadian directors are legally required “to make decisions in the best interests of [their] organizations while taking into account the interests of various stakeholders.” Does my research mean that men are not capable of complex moral reasoning? Not at all. In fact, complex moral reason was the highest-ranked reasoning skill for both men and women. It’s just that women seem to be significantly better at it on average.

A staggeringly small percentage of Fortune 500 and FTSE 100 companies are led by female CEOs. In your opinion, why is this the case and how can it be changed?

Getting to the top in these companies is simply a much longer road than in other corporations. And so, depending on whether a Fortune 500 firm embraced gender equality in the C-suite 20 years ago or not, it’s going to affect the number and speed with which women are moving into the highest echelons of those companies.

Today, smart boards know that they have a choice: to either be on the gender equality train or under its tracks.

The issues hindering this are probably still the classic ones. Are younger or junior executive women being mentored by senior executives in the way their male counterparts are? Are women being given the same “emerging leader” development opportunities as men?

And are boards insisting that their C-suite executives [and recruiting firms] include women in their succession planning activities and outside executive searches?

How would you encourage male “gatekeepers” to take a more proactive stance toward the advancement of women into C-level roles?

The key to the advancement of women in the workplace lies in creating the same opportunities as those that currently exist for men: mentoring, emerging leader development programs, and succession planning — both at the C-suite and board level.

Furthermore, I say to those currently at the board level, to be bold and stop worrying about “being part of the gang.” Don’t concern yourself with being excluded if you don’t go along with your fellow directors. Sometimes the board’s norms and customs need to be changed or ignored because they are either outdated or just plain inappropriate.