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The Board Room of the Future & the role of Professional Women

Subroto Bagchi's speech at the
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I am glad that you have given me the honor of speaking at your leadership summit today and I thank you for sharing your platform with me.

I am a feminist, and not without a few distressing moments in my years of growing up simultaneously as a son, husband and father. For much of my life I lived with my mother, one wife and two daughters. That left me with very little choice. Quite often I was run over by all four. In one such moment of onslaught, I decided to resist and brought home a male dog. Dogs, if you did not know, are intelligent folks. The fellow quickly summed up the following pieces of data about myself: middle-aged male, comes home occasionally and when at home, is charged with menial tasks such as walking him. He promptly concluded from all the data-points that indeed, I was the servant of the family. That day, I gave up all resistance and conceded that I would be a feminist for the rest of my life.

But on a far more serious note, I believe that women in India matter. For one, they are 50% of India's total population. However, census figures tell us that they constitute only 18% of the "organized sector". That is not a good indicator of national development. In developed nations of the world, that number would be closer to 50%, and certainly it is 50% for all white collar jobs. There is a direct correlation between women in employment and the economic wellbeing of a nation. So, at 18%, we have our job cut out for us. We have to take the number to where it belongs: 50% in our lifetime.



You have invited me to talk about a very interesting topic - Board Room of the Future and the role of Professional Women in it. Let me now spend sometime in looking at both the issues. But, I may tell you a few unpopular things along the way, so brace yourselves.

First and foremost, board rooms are de-sexed places. Even if in certain countries the law requires that a certain percentage of directors must be women, you do not want to enter a board room with your gender. You want to enter the board room with your intellect and your proven capability.

Yet, let us look at the emerging face of the board room, the Board Room of the Future, and there may be a twist to the tale. I believe that the traditional board room is ready for a face over. In it, there are eight emerging themes that the Board Members must engage in, in addition to what they do best: protecting the interest of the share holders, read: make the management deliver maximum profits within existing legal boundaries.

The eight themes that define the Board of the Future

First and foremost, the Board of the Future must be able to take a multi-disciplinary view of the business. You may be a chemical company, a software enterprise or an airline. In an increasingly global and hyper-competitive world, you have no idea how your products and services impact others and how others impact your business. In this new world, gone are the days when accounting meant accounting and marketing meant marketing and production meant, just that. While operating management must have a more disciplined focus, a Board must be capable of creating synthesis. Harvard professor and author Howard Gardner in his book "Five Minds For The Future" talks of the importance of inter-disciplinary thinking, the capacity to create "synthesis" of the data elements from myriad sources as an important organizational requirement for success. People who aspire to the Board must therefore have the capacity to build a multi-disciplinary view of things.

This requirement goes against the grain of the typical Indian woman professional because she quite often decides to "specialize" in the interest of "work-life balance". She often decides that it is better to be a child specialist than a hospital CEO - she thinks, it is better to be a product manager than the sales head and so on the list goes. As a result, women professionals opt-out of rotational assignments and resist geographic displacement that is essential in mid-career so that a person develops the insights, the capacity to grasp and question, from a multi-disciplinary point of view. The role of a Board is not to focus on the obvious - that any professional management can. The key is to alert a management of risks it may not be seeing, opportunities that may be hidden - in other words, it must see what trained eyes are not seeing. That requires lizard-like eyes that develop only through experiencing variety over time.

The second emergent feature of the Board Room of the Future is the capacity to understand and question, process. While the Board's job is not to deliver the results, nor to engage with the details of the business, yet it must have, at a higher level, process centricity over result centricity. After all, the results are about the past and there is little one can do for things already done. So, the Board must ensure that the processes in the corporation are right, that management is focused on doing the right things in the right way. If board members themselves do not have affinity to process, they would not be able to question the management on the hows and the whys, leaving its interaction at shallow levels and thereby sometimes assuming even punitive risks under an increasingly vigilant legal system.

The third aspect about the Board of the Future is its capacity to understand innovation. This one is critical from the point of view of long-term competitiveness of the enterprise. While it may be possible for an organization to make short-term progress and profits without innovation, without it, in the long-term, it is dead. Hence, the Board must have the capability to encourage, question and guide something that was never even brought up as a board agenda in the days past. Today, more than ever before, competitive market forces are asking for innovation as an output as much as a managed process - imagine the consequences of the board of Cisco or P&G or Tata Sons not understanding the concept of innovation in an existential sense! In the future, innovation will dominate board room conversations from another critical angle: risk taking. So, an intelligent board would mean an innovation centric board for sure.

The next theme I am going to talk to you about is sustainability. It has been on many lips but on few hearts so far. But today, more than ever before, businesses must recognize the interconnectedness of the world within which money must be made. That interconnected world is full of surprises. The role of enterprise must be to de-risk these surprises and to deliver consistently. Successful corporations cannot any longer come out with a spectacular product or a service or a market find from a shareholder stand-point as just a flash in the pan. Sustainability is a leadership expectation. It is the core of all strategy. While every part of the organization must do more in less time and be present in more places, all that has to be achieved by guaranteeing that tomorrow will come with no negative surprises. The Board of the Future has to hold the sustainability mirror in front of the management face for every key policy and its implementation and all sustainability begins with inclusion.

Having spoken about sustainability, let me now guide your mind to something rather unusual. I want to talk to you about an emergent concept called "Emotional Infrastructure". Since the last couple of years, Professor Vijay Govindarajan of Tuck School (Author of "Ten Rules of Strategic Innovation" and GE's Professor in Residence for Innovation for 2008) and I have been applying our minds to this new way of looking at the leadership imperative.

Our view is that an organization has three layers of infrastructure. At the bottom-most is the Physical Infrastructure which is easy to build and easy to replicate, gives you the "table stakes", but no competitive advantage.

Above it, is what we call the Intellectual Infrastructure which is thought-leadership intensive, takes longer to build and offers competitive advantage. But according to the two of us, all competitive advantage is fleeting and no Intellectual Infrastructure is the ultimate defense. That comes with building the Emotional Infrastructure in a corporation and it is the Emotional Infrastructure that creates "memorability". We believe that in the past, corporate leaders focused largely on issues related to Physical Infrastructure like number of factories, offices - they focused on their largeness and expanse. Assets mostly meant physical objects, similar to what land meant to the conquerors of the past. With the advent of the concept of Intellectual Capital(IC) in the later part of the last century, Boards began to understand newer concepts like trademarks, copyrights and patents and started looking at content, process and methodology as assets as well. Today, no corporation worth its name, can under-focus on its intellectual capital. We believe, in the very near future, people will go to the next level: they would have to understand Emotional Infrastructure, they would begin to monetize "emotional assets".

Just as the Board of the Future must focus on the Emotional Infrastructure of the enterprise, it also must fully engage with the all-encompassing thought of Governance. It is not just going to be a legal issue with a narrow geographic focus. The principles of governance must be global, the practices must be scalable and the propagation and defense must be cogent and visible to all stake-holders. These are beyond legalities in any narrow, domestic sense. For instance, child labour may be a non-issue at the point of origin of a product but at the point of consumption, it may become so huge that interest groups can force a boycott and the resultant bad press may sour investor interest in an increasingly porous financial market. In addition, board members assume direct oversight and legal responsibility in matters of audit, compensation and benefits, investor issues and so on. More countries mandate that committees of board actively oversee these issues and are attaching punitive provisions for a Board's failure.

In addition to Governance, I believe the Board of the Future would have to lead the charge on issues related to our Environment, in a far more visible and proactive manner. This is no longer about the melting of the polar caps or the depletion of an invisible ozone-layer. It is becoming a lot more here and now. Farmers in the Punjab are now realizing that years of wanton chemical usage has burnt their land into a state of infertility. Chemicals and pesticides and plastic packaging and industrial effluents discharged into the ground water are returning in our own children with myriad congenital disorders from respiratory problems to attention disorder. So, Board Rooms of the future will have to discern and dialogue on what a corporation's approved product idea, manufacturing practice or the expansion plan, do to the environment.

Lastly, I want to touch upon another issue of great significance, the social responsibility of an enterprise. No longer are we operating in isolation. Investors and buyers alike are beginning to ask what the social beliefs of the enterprise are, what does it stand for? As a civil society, we are no longer willing to accept that business has only one face - that of a money maker. The Board is the representative of the civil society to keep the management honest and the enterprise cognizant of its social purpose.

In summary, we talked about eight things that would define the Board of the Future: capability to take a multi-disciplinary view, process centricity, innovation, sustainable practices, emotional infrastructure, governance, the environment and social responsibility.

Are our Women Professionals in India Ready?

Now let me ask you to step back and ask a fundamental question: between the two genders, which one has a natural flair for these eight? Yes, indeed these eight elements are inherently feminine; they require a nurturing view of the future and ask us to take a long view of time. Suddenly, as if, the corporation - the male bastion of greed - is discovering its feminine side with which alone would make it whole. This sudden turn would naturally make a woman professional very happy but, that does not take away a basic question from being asked: Is she ready? Probably, largely, the answer is a 'No'. Not today.

There are three hindrances working against her, vis-a-vis the Board of the Future. These are, stereotyping the female professional, personal sense of mid-career guilt and finally, the proverbial glass ceiling. Let us talk briefly about each of these.

The stereotype relates to the role of gender in a profession. The woman professional is both a victim and a perpetrator of the stereotype. Consider these:

Women should choose banking as a career over sales

Women should be teachers (Preferably part-time!)

Women should not take up transferable jobs

In their first two jobs after college, women-professionals are just waiting to get married and then get serious about their work

If the woman-professional marries someone out of town, it is she who must relocate

The moment we succumb to these stereotypes, the conversation on the Board of the Future becomes meaningless. Sometimes, women themselves perpetuate the stereotype. Consider this: a young woman engineer joins the software profession. Her young male supervisor, untrained in dealing with gender issues, does not know how to relate to her. In our society, young males are conditioned to treat women as mother, sister or wife and seldom as a fellow professional. The young male suffers from the stereotype that women are not comfortable working late hours. Even as the trans-continental software project requires late night reviews and burning of the mid-night oil, he does not load her with tasks that would make her stay late. She does not object either. She gets excluded as much as she opts-out of certain tasks that would make her stay ahead.

Another instance: a young woman MBA from up North was inducted in one of my departments. She had a great manager who gave her excellent training, ahead of time responsibility and all the freedom. However, her mother wanted her to come back and get married. The reason? The mother was not keeping good health and wanted to see the young woman marry. The young professional protested some and finally succumbed. Just as she was blossoming in to her second year at work, she quit and went back to marry. What a monumental loss to all the parties involved! If this was to be the end-game, why do the MBA? What way the good manager who invested so much in her can be repaid? Would he ever do it again?

The bottom-line is that the woman professional who wants to go to the top must first refuse to be stereotyped. Once you do that, it is amazing how quickly everybody gets the message.

Then comes the need to honestly, boldly, unambiguously and without fear or favour, answer three questions: Who am I today? Who do I want to become in my future? And finally, am I willing to pay the price at the entrance itself or am I being ambivalent about it?

The "who am I" question is to break stereotypes as much as to come to terms with who I am as a person deep inside of myself. The question seeks an answer and it also demands that the individual is at peace with the outcome.

Unhappiness comes when people do not clearly answer what is their core; postpone it to such events like a marriage or childbirth to throw up the answer subsequently. If someone is inherently happier being a home-maker, it is a perfectly legitimate goal and home makers build the nation as well. The problem comes up when I am unhappy being a home-maker and am a dissatisfied professional at the same time because I lacked clarity in my heart of hearts on what defines me as an individual.

Once a woman-professional answers these questions, she must know that at the top, life is very demanding and very de-sexed.

A good CEO is like an athlete, a classical singer or a painter, a pianist or a ballet dancer. He or she is a product of focus, discipline, and regimen.

You just cannot become an Indra Nooyi, Naina Lal Kidwai, Mallika Sarabhai or a Vasundhara Raje Scindia by trying to juggle work, home, husband, mother-in-law and making pickle. The truth is, these women are juggling nothing - they are steadfastly committed to their respective professions and they are very ambitious individuals who are focused on the goal that demands a price paid at the entrance. These people are professionals first and women next. They are led by their competence and not their gender when they walk into an organization, perform before an audience or run a state.



Now let me tell you about something that many of you have been in denial of, for a long time. It needs a short flashback.

The young woman professional is quite starry eyed as she begins her profession. In a male dominated society, the fact that she is an engineer, a chartered accountant, a doctor or a policewoman, itself is huge victory. She begins life as a high-achiever. Invariably, she is doted by her parents. They are enormously proud of her. In most instances, right at the doorstep of her professional career, she has already scored many firsts in her family by becoming who she is:

First female child to study engineering, first to take up a job, first to live alone in a city by herself, first to drive a car, first to fly an airplane at 22! First, first, first....

Then she begins excelling at work, ups and downs notwithstanding.

Before long, she weds; these days, increasingly with her choice of a partner and if not, mostly with her consent. A few more years go by and then she gets pregnant and the baby comes along, goes to school - she continues to cope with all these with the help of her mother, mother-in-law, crèche and the domestic help. But one day, as the child enters the third, fourth or the inconsequential fifth grade, the all powerful woman comes under a hundred feet tall tidal wave of guilt. Am I being a good mother? That question just destroys her completely.

I want to wake you up to the reality of that sense of guilt many women professionals nurse. It is pervasive, meaningless and debilitating. When I ask a hall full of women professionals the question as to how many think they have received better education than their mothers, all hands go up. When I ask the same group the question, "Do you think your child is getting better access to education than you ever did?", hesitatingly, the same hands go up again.

The fact of the matter is that your child is getting far more than you ever got. So, I ask the question, why the guilt? Why the meaningless desire to live your child's life? If the child does not do his homework, you blame yourself, if he sneezed thrice today, you feel devastated, if the neighbor's kid got two marks more in mathematics, you feel your child's place at the IIT is gone forever.

You have to believe that your child is getting a far better deal than you ever got; your child is starting on a footing that 70% Indians cannot dream of in the next 50 years.

I believe that the middle-class is over focused on their children and this obsession is neither good for the parent nor for the child.

Women professionals around the world are far more at peace with their parenting capability than their middle-class, Indian counterparts. To the latter, I quote Kahlil Gibran: "Your children are not your children, they simply flow through you".

If you have something large to achieve, go do it. Do not sit there moaning the crooked line on your child's drawing and blaming your organization for it. Your kid would be just fine.

I told you before, to get to the top of the corporation, you got to train like a national-level athlete. You cannot get there if your child becomes your obsessive compulsive disorder.



A lot of women complain about work-life balance (well, men do too). I can tell you, my life is my work and I do not pay conscious attention to the so-called balance. It is balanced, period. But one thing I have always done consciously all my life, I have sought my spouse's full support and guidance and help. And I have sought this before hand, not while a promotion, contingent upon a transfer, is dangling in front of my face. We have worked things out as we have gone along with give and take. Sometimes, of course, I do not do as well on the home-front, I do foolish things. Then I get beaten up by my wife for that and I return to my senses and the balance is restored - it is par for the course. But, I do not blame "work-life balance" for what I could not become. To go to the top, whether you are a man or a woman or something else, you must travel a lot, sometimes work weekends, you must network outside your workplace, you must learn on your own initiative, you must engage continuously and finally, you must give an awful lot more than you get. These have less to do with your organization; they have more to do with your own deep driving desire.



Before I close, I must talk to you about the real and the perceived glass ceiling. Too many women in modern India have proven that there is indeed a glass ceiling, and also that it can be busted. We have no dearth of role models before us.

Even as there is a glass ceiling in some places, please be assured that was it not for that one against the saree - it would have been there against something else. We all face it in some form or fashion. It is a right of passage for most.

The future, someone said, is a brick wall; it is meant to keep out folks who do not seriously want to get beyond it.

The opportunities in corporate India are exploding today; yes that is the right word. There just aren't enough good people in any which sector. If you are good enough, and your organization isn't, bad for the latter.

So, my message to all you today is; please be comfortable with your gender. I would not have said that to your mothers.



I would fail in my responsibilities if I left without a word to all the men out there.

Actually, it is a small story. Once I was visiting the 12th century AD ruins of Belur-Halebid in Karnataka and looking at the magnificent carvings on stone. In one sculpted panel, the guide drew my attention to a line-up of women equestrians. He explained that Indian temple architecture invariably conveyed prevalent social norms and therefore it was commonplace in India of yore to have women warriors! Then he went on to recite a Sanskrit sloka: "*Jatra Pujyante Nari, Tatra Ramante Devata.*"

Translated, it would mean, "The Gods roam the land where women are worshipped".

So, men-folk, please wake up, take note and make way for the Gods.

Thank you for listening to me today, best of luck with the deliberations of the leadership summit.

(Subroto Bagchi co-founded MindTree, one of India's most admired companies. He works there as Gardener. For more details, visit www.mindtree.com)

