



The Next Level of Intelligence for Women's Initiatives: Changing the Why to Achieve Impact

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Nextions

In a recent meeting with leaders from women's initiatives in law firms, corporations and educational institutions, I asked the leaders (mostly women, but there were a few men scattered among the group) this question: "Why does your organization need a women's initiative?"

The following sample of answers covered the gamut of responses:

- To get more women into leadership positions.
- To increase the retention and advancement of women.
- To create more opportunities for women to succeed.
- To create better work-life balance options for women.
- To get the leadership of the organization to take women's issues more seriously.
- To stop the attrition of senior women.
- To keep the organization focused on giving women more opportunities.
- To decrease the compensation gaps between men and women.
- To get the senior men to realize that they need to mentor/sponsor as many women as they do men.
- To make sure that the organization maintains the structure and budget necessary to keep women's issues an organizational priority.

In a separate and unrelated meeting with managing partners from law firms and senior executives from corporations, I asked the group (almost all men) the same question: "Why does your organization need a women's initiative?" Interestingly, the answers did not vary much from the answers that I had received from the leaders of the women's initiatives except for a few "right thing to do" and "makes business sense" responses added into the mix.

If both of these groups generally agree on the "why" for women's initiatives, this alignment should result in visible success, right? Actually, the presence and activity of women's initiatives rarely correlates with increased

opportunities, advancement or leadership positions for women. Although women's initiatives do sometimes translate into increased hiring of and opportunities for women at the junior levels, the impact of initiatives for senior women is negligible at best. Women's initiatives can also offer a supportive network for women in the organization, but even as the support strengthens women, that support does not translate into actual advancement of women.

So, what do women's initiatives need to do in order to achieve the impact they seek to achieve? They need to begin by changing how they answer the question: "Why does your organization need a women's initiative?"

In *The Next IQ: The Next Level of Intelligence for 21st Century Leaders*, I illustrate how diversity and inclusion efforts have stalled not so much because we don't know how to achieve diversity and inclusion, but because we have articulated a why that does not inspire people to fight the pull of the status quo enough to create change. Most organizations know how to achieve more opportunity and parity for women if the leaders of the organization are moved to make the necessary changes. We have the commitment from the leaders, and we know how to create the change, but progress has been slow because the impetus for change – the "why should we change when we are generally doing fine and change is so difficult" – has not been persuasive enough.

Therefore, while women's initiatives have relied on the "right thing to do" or "our clients are asking for change" or "everyone else is doing it so we should too" type of incentives for change, the gap between the activity and achievement of these initiatives continues to grow. The why of women's initiatives is currently rooted in the assumptions that 1) without these initiatives the leaders would not prioritize the issues enough to increase opportunities for women, and 2) that women need the additional support of networking/connecting with other women in order to build a base upon which they can succeed. Both of these reasons may be factually true, but they are persuasively ineffective. Both of these reasons excuse the leaders from taking full leadership responsibility for leading an organization where only half the population has a reasonable probability for success.

The why of women's initiatives needs to shift from programs that are trying to drive change in organizations, to becoming a source of remedial support for leaders who are not as successful in leading women as they are in leading men. This shift reframes the deficiency (the problem) as existing in leaders, not the women who are striving to succeed. If you are leading an organization, and only half of the people you hire are capable of succeeding under you, are you succeeding as a leader? If you are leading an organization and a primary voice of the client/customer/consumer is not integrated at all levels of leadership, are you succeeding as a leader?

The Next IQ argument is based in research that unequivocally demonstrates that individual intelligence is significantly enhanced when informed by multiple perspectives. Leaders cannot lead effectively in today's dynamic marketplace if they cannot seek, sustain and learn from different perspectives on their leadership teams. A leadership team of all men (or all men with a token woman) is not as intelligent (literally) as a more diverse leadership team. It is not about the "right thing to do" or the "business case." It is about intelligence. It is about effective leadership.

What if the question "Why does your organization need a women's initiative?" evoked the following responses from the leaders of organizations?

- Because we are not as smart as we can be without women's voices on the leadership team, and we need to make sure that we make the organizational changes necessary to remove all barriers to the advancement of women.
- Because we are failing as an organization if we cannot grow our women the way we grow our men, and we need to start succeeding in this area if we want to stay relevant and competitive in today's marketplace.

- Because we are not as competitive or attractive as an organization when we don't have women represented at every level.

- Because our leaders are failing at advancing women, and we need to put support systems in place for our leaders to succeed.

Would the above responses to the why change the way that women's initiatives are viewed? Would the initiatives even continue to be referred to as "women's initiatives" or would they be reframed as "leadership development initiatives?"

As long as women's initiatives focus on women pushing for change, we allow leaders to define gender inequality as a problem that needs to be fixed by women. When we shift the focus to "fixing the leadership," we challenge the status quo in a way that the leadership cannot ignore because it is no longer the women that need the initiatives. It is now the leadership of the organization that needs the initiatives to help them lead all of the people they are entrusted to lead.

In the recent media coverage of women in the workplace, we have been inundated with everything from "can women have it all" to "more women on a team creates better results." What we have not heard is how the leaders of organizations (whether they are male or female) are deficient in the leadership skills they need to lead workplaces where the best and brightest minds of any gender can succeed.

In order to shift from activity to achievement, women's initiatives cannot continue to be about women fixing the women problem. Women's initiatives need to become the catalysts and accountability mechanisms for fixing leaders. That is The Next IQ – the next level of intelligence for anyone who wants to lead in the 21st Century – in action. When we insist upon more intelligent leaders who accept the responsibility of leading necessary change, the opportunities for women will organically increase – not because women are asking for more opportunity but because leaders themselves are demanding it.