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Unconscious bias against women

THELMA NGOMA

WOMEN leaders work primarily in a masculine environment. Inside each organisation their work is based mostly on male-dominated values, but outside they are mothers and wives where they are required to display different values.

This is according to panellists at Henley Business School Africa event on how to redress gender-balance in leadership and management.

The discussion was hosted by Ginny Gibson, deputy dean the Henley Business School UK with panellists including Old Mutual Investment Group business development executive Arthi Rabrikisson, Avocado Vision managing director of the sales training Jules Newton, masters student and organisational development specialist Vasintha Pather and Ray White of 702 Talk Radio.

The consensus was that sometimes the DNA within the corporate environment can be masculine. It is common for wording to be used such as "going into battle" and "fighting the competition".

Rabrikisson said although women were soft spoken, they were still able to deliver in a masculine DNA environment. "We need to be ourselves. Those around us need to be flexible and not impose their gender experience on others."

Gibson introduced the topic of unconscious bias which she believed was at the root of the problem. Unconscious bias is the concept of making decisions based on unconscious desires and impulses.



DOING BATTLE: Women leaders often don't support each other. PICTURE: GETTY IMAGES

Rabrikisson said that reciprocal coaching at Old Mutual, in which women coach men, had been successful.

"This has enabled our managers to understand leadership from a woman's point of view and address possible unconscious bias that managers may have."

The panellists agreed that many women who sit on male-dominated boards are lonely. They are not always treated equally.

"A good leader has no gender. However, a concern is that women leaders tend not to socialise outside of work as their male counterparts do," Newton said.

Pather said there was a feeling that women leaders often didn't support each other. We need to change the way we see

ourselves and how we see other women leaders.

"We are trying to fit in and we are finding it difficult. This is because women do not want to have to act like their male counterparts. Both men and women need to address these biases.

"The downside is that men are missing out because women bring value to boards that is different because we are wired differently."

Gibson said: "Women and men leaders need to get to know and understand each other better. It is not about gender but about one's ability. Women on the other hand are sometimes held back by fear. We need to be ourselves, be authentic and communicate."

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