

Leadership and Diversity: Coming Apart at the Seams



Liz Levin (President of Liz Levin & Company and WTS International Advisory Board chair), Photo © John Livzey, 2014

Author Irene Peter said, “Just because everything is different doesn’t mean anything has changed.” Peter’s observation describes perfectly the current situation for women and minorities in the boardroom, transportation, other public sector entities, and the private sector.

Things have changed, but maybe not as much as many think.

“From my perspective it’s better than it used to be, but it certainly isn’t where it *should* be,” explains Liz Levin, president of Liz Levin & Company and WTS International Advisory Board chair. “Companies and firms understand that the world needs diversity, but they also struggled to know what to do to get there. The public sector has done better than the private sector. At the entry-level position through mid-level management, women are doing better. But at the leadership level and on boards, it’s still predominantly male-dominated. So at the very top we don’t have the kind of diverse leadership that could help initiate the kind of change we need.”

A 2012 study by *Forbes* magazine supports her perspective. According to “Diversity & Inclusion: Unlocking Global Potential: Global Diversity Rankings by Country, Sector and Occupation,” the US ranks ninth in terms of workforce diversity. Though that sounds positive, breaking down that figure bolsters Levin’s view of unequal distribution. Not surprisingly, females are extremely *underrepresented* in transportation. Out of fourteen categories measuring women’s roles, transportation ranks eleventh, above only public administration, mining, and construction. Things in the boardroom are worse.

The study reveals, “The C-level and senior management positions are woefully bereft of diversity. Out of 1.5 million chief executives in the U.S., just one-quarter are women and only one in ten are ethnic minorities... Taken together, the data reveals the power of long-established cultural norms in shaping individual career choices, and that, in turn, affects companies’ global diversity efforts. Tackling these diversity challenges in the U.S. and abroad is going to be extremely challenging.”

Levin could not agree more.

“By and large, we still follow the white male hierarchical model. So the next step is going to be the introduction of new models in our organizations. If we do that, diversity will be much more successful. Without the infrastructure to empower diversity, diversity can’t thrive.

“We need to look at leadership—from the CEO to the board—and make sure there is far more balance and representation. There has to be an interest in incorporating the style of diverse populations into decision making. That must be a top priority. I also think women and minorities really need to claim more territory. People still say that women and minorities are ‘not working hard enough.’ I think we work plenty

hard and make substantive contributions. But the culture just doesn't respect them as much. Finally, we should also be out there voting to bring about the changes we need."

Levin also points out, though, that there are still victories for women, even at the highest levels. Recently, CH2M Hill CEO Lee McIntire announced that CH2M Hill International Division President Jacqueline Hinman will be the company's next CEO. For Levin, this is bellwether news.

"I am thrilled with Jacque's appointment as CEO of CH2MHILL. She is wonderfully talented and represents the future of our industry. And it is time!! This is exactly the kind of appointment that advances global, profound change for women and our industry."

Irene Peter said, "Just because everything is different doesn't mean anything has changed." While the situation for women and minorities has changed, only through structural, organizational change can profound advances be realized across the board.

President of Liz Levin & Company—a management consulting firm serving the transportation, design, and environmental community—Levin also serves on the Board of Directors of Normandeau Associates. She is the former chair of the Massachusetts Government Appointments Project (MassGap) and served on the MassDOT and MBTA Boards of Directors. From 1998 to 2000, she served at WTS national president.

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