



## Innovatus: 'Women in Power – Why It Matters' by Gillian Wilmot

On the 17<sup>th</sup> September 2014, senior women's networking group Innovatus met for the sixth time. In the genteel surroundings of the Institute of Chartered Accountants (with countless portraits of bewhiskered chairmen lining the stairs), we were lucky enough, on this occasion, to have Gillian Wilmot as speaker.

Gillian is a mover and shaker: she has this year been chosen as Winner of the NED Awards in the Unquoted/Private Equity category and listed in the Female FTSE Report's 'Cranfield 100 Women to Watch'. Her executive career spans 30 years with leading businesses including Marks & Spencer, Boots and Royal Mail.



### Leadership

Speaking of her passion for good leadership, Gillian made the point that “boards set the tone for an organisation's culture” – absolutely critical because “culture eats strategy for breakfast”. When boards get the culture wrong, companies do not survive.

Examples of disappointing behaviour abound: at a remuneration event the previous day, Gillian had “been the only woman in a group of 16, and not one of them spoke up to challenge the escalation in executive pay”; but “businesses need a licence from society to operate, and if they forget that they become completely disconnected”.

As an excuse when bad practices are exposed, “we didn't know what was going on” absolutely will not wash. “Some board behaviour makes you wonder how much we've moved on... so much bluster and posturing is all about who's got the biggest antlers!”

In companies where politics and power games are key elements of the culture, “people who don't fit the old stereotypes don't thrive or stay”. Women leaders tend to be more open-minded, and “bring in hitherto uninvited groups”.

As an aside, Gillian noticed, in the midst of crisis, that the RBS board were identical in appearance, “all dressed in dark v-neck pullovers, all saying the same things, all ignoring

dissenting voices”. The zoning out when different tones of voice are asking awkward questions is common. “Good chairmen compensate for this; bad ones don’t”.

Given that “common sense tells us that the most inclusive societies are the strongest, and it can’t always be about competition”, the best organisations “are meritocracies; and you don’t get promoted unless you also mentor, coach and succession plan”.

Some men make an effort and think they’re being inclusive, but “even this week, the Chairman of two FTSE companies said that he thought women couldn’t have children and a successful career”.

Gillian is convinced that “the only way to drive change is from the inside; and it shouldn’t only be exceptional women who are exceptionally determined who get to the top”. When asked (as she frequently is) what women leaders do that men don’t, she says “senior women have been through an extraordinary process of quality control; if only everyone else had...”



## **Unconscious Bias**

Gillian, pointing out the same behaviour style in men and women is characterised in different ways, gave us a list of adjectives:

An “impressive” man is a “formidable” woman, the subtext being that she is overbearing; an “ambitious” man is a “pushy” woman; a “passionate” man is an “emotional” woman; “clear-thinking” and “incisive” in a man is often called “opinionated” and “impatient” in a woman.

In Gillian’s experience, the brief for NEDs often plays to bias, with “gravitas” a universal criteria, and “when is that ever applied to a woman?”

Referring to a Lloyds of London article from 1992 about women’s progress towards the boardroom which has recently been reprised with a feature on the same individuals, now in their 60s, Gillian noted their ‘uniform’: a dark suit that is code for ‘serious’. We still feel the need to fit the visually dull stereotype – leaving aside the vexed question of high heels – because “people appoint people who look like them”.

In response to a question about recruiters’ role in this process, Gillian pointed out that they’re servicing the client – it’s a straightforward business relationship – and they’ll deliver what they think they’re being asked to produce. Because of this they won’t think in a sophisticated way about producing briefs that don’t preclude women and ethnic minorities.

Frequently, women have a less linear CV than male colleagues “and having a career path that’s easily understood is very helpful. Finance Directors with recent executive committee experience do well, male or female”, because their offering is straightforward.

## **Boardroom power shifts**

Mentioning an excellent recent KPMG report ([‘Cracking the Code’](#)) that debunks many of the myths surrounding women and power, Gillian was clear that “we all agree that we need more women NEDs, in roles with real power to make decisions and make change”. The chair is the role with most clout, setting the tone and controlling the appointment process: “no-one is ever appointed that the chair doesn’t like”. More women in this role will lead to greater diversity and more meritocratic recruitment.

The CBI advocates setting targets for the number of women on the board, and Gillian concurs, having “changed my mind. I used to think not, concerned that the ‘law of unexpected consequences’ would mean the rubbishing of some women appointees as not having got there on merit..... but progress is glacial and the present situation is crap. We have to do something.

“Quotas are the best of a bad job, and if we had to set them, they would need to be 50:50. Unfortunately, however you set them, you’ll end up with problems, such as boards with a combined Chairman/CEO, or those FTSE100 businesses whose board members have been there forever and have no intention of moving on”.

## **A foot in the door**

Regarding recruitment, the “idea of not enough women coming through is actually about ‘I don’t know any’”. We need “to network, market information and improve collective visibility”. Being visible as a candidate is crucial: “to get from the longlist to the shortlist you have to pass a double test: recommended by someone at the headhunters and known by the client”.

To make the process even tougher, the bar is often set higher for women: “for all the progress, client behaviour hasn’t changed, and female candidates have to tick all the boxes when ‘being a good bloke’ will often swing it for a man”.

While things are different, and fairer, in the public sector “because there is proper process”, unfortunately, “the private sector doesn’t usually consider this experience valuable when making appointments”.

“There’s an asymmetric arrangement for some women I know; they get tougher assignments, and when they make a success of it everyone expresses their amazement. We worked out between us that, on average, it had taken 20 years to get from first non-executive appointment to chairing the board”.

*“We’ve all been brought up to be polite... sometimes, you’ve just got to bash the bloody doors in!”*







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