Chapter 7

Women & Management: An International Perspective

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Current economic realities pervade everything we do. They cannot be overlooked or escaped. Economies around the world are going through major adjustments and times are indeed tough, both for industrialised and for developing nations.

In tough economic times, it seems that equality initiatives, equal pay for work of equal value, and affirmative action or employment equity initiatives; unions cannot make equality a priority in collective bargaining when job security is the critical issue; we have to be competitive, and/or we have to wait for the economy to improve.

It is my contention that equality measures are consistent with economic well-being. And, they are an essential investment in the future of both our labour force and our economy in this era of globalisation and international competitiveness. We are constantly bombarded with messages emphasising the need to change if we are to cope with economic realities. We are challenged to be more productive, more efficient and more cost conscious.

Economic Efficiencies

However, change cannot be limited to economic efficiencies in their traditional interpretation. Effective change also propels us towards equality for women and men in the workforce. And, as someone in the “equality business”, someone who is counting on changes in the way work is designed, organised, managed and carried out, I cannot help but be optimistic that opportunity may be knocking, even in these tough economic times.

Canadian Experience

Let me review some of the major developments in our workforce over the last few decades, using Canada as an example. Women make up 45 per cent of the labour force in Canada today. Women are not a temporary presence in the paid workforce. Yet, as in other industrialised countries, their talents are grossly under-utilised and they remain concentrated in a narrow range of occupations. Women are over-represented in a few fields, like clerical and health-care jobs. And, they are under-represented in many occupations, particularly scientific and technical professions and the trades. The occupations in which women are over-represented tend to be characterised by low pay and limited opportunities for advancement. These jobs also account for a disproportionately large share of what is commonly referred to as “precarious” employment; part-time, short-term and temporary jobs, or work that is performed on an occasional or on-call basis.

Data on the situation of women in the paid labour force also reveal “compression”. Women are over-represented in the lower levels within occupations, even in many areas where they outnumber men. For example, in Canadian elementary schools, nearly three-quarters (72 per cent) of all teachers are women. However, women hold only 20 per cent of the principal and vice-principal positions: the management positions.

The concentration and compression of women in the occupational structure, as well as the enduring, and well-documented gap between women’s and men’s earnings reveal that women’s talents continue to be undervalued, under-utilised and under-rewarded. And, now more than ever, in view of economic pressures, we have to question seriously whether under-utilising the talents of half the population really serves our economy and society today, and whether it will equip us to face the future.

Changing Workforce

Prosperity demands the development of the full potential of the entire work force. This means finding innovative ways to tap the potential of a changing workforce. In Canada, demographic trends indicate that women and new immigrants will constitute the vast majority of new labour force entrants by the turn of the century, which is less than nine years away!

It is clear that the needs of this changing workforce must be met, especially if the predicted shortage of highly qualified labour becomes a reality and employers must compete more aggressively for skilled workers. In Canada, the Department of Employment
and Immigration foresees that, between now and the
turn of the century, nearly half of all new jobs will
require more than five years of education and training
after the completion of secondary school.

If employers want to attract and retain the “best and
the brightest”, they must recognise that women are 50
per cent of the pool and they are staying in the labour
force for 30 years or longer. This means making an
investment in the future to attract women to the full
range of occupations. This also means providing and
encouraging training for women in new occupations and
occupations that have traditionally been
dominated by men.

This means encouraging young women to study
maths and sciences in secondary schools so they will be
prepared for further education and jobs in trades,
technology and other increasingly crucial areas of our
economies. This also means changing workplace
policies and practices — changing the workplace to
align it with this new reality.

The need for change is clear. Our ability to compete
in international markets depends on many things, but
in view of the changing nature of the workforce and
the projected need for skilled, highly qualified employees,
attention to human resource development is critical. It is
mystifying that some employers work diligently to
equip their workplaces with the latest in high technology, yet they maintain
distinctly low-tech attitudes when it comes to the
people who work for them.

In the 1990s, failure to invest in the education and
training that will equip women to contribute fully will
have severe consequences for the individual employer
as well as for society. Even in tough times, effective
equality measures can be implemented. Even when the
total number of jobs declines, there is still a good deal
of turnover in the labour market. People retire,
relocate, go back to school or get promoted, and they
take time out for any number of personal or other
reasons. This turnover creates opportunities. But
employers must be ready to take advantage of these
equality opportunities since management decisions are
the key to change in such circumstances.

The importance of managerial attitudes and
behaviours attracted considerable attention in the
recent task force on barriers to women in the Federal
public service in Canada. This task force concluded
that the “corporate culture” poses obstacles to the
advancement of women. And, their recommendations
for fundamental change were based on the belief that,
“no significant change occurs ... without visible,
clearly-articulated, persistent commitment from the
top”.

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**Flexibility**

I am now going to focus on the two aspects of change
that I see as providing hope for the future and as
consistent with equality objectives and economic
survival: flexibility and partnerships. Flexibility means
adaptability; the capacity to respond. It also means
designing and implementing policies that meet a range
of needs and circumstances relevant to the changing
workforce.

To illustrate the application of “flexibility”, we might
look, for example, at the growing need for employees
to balance their work and family responsibilities. The
organisation of work generally remains based on a
notion of the traditional family, with the father
working for pay and the mother at home looking after
the children and the household. This is, in fact, very
much an atypical situation in industrialised economies.

Nearly 60 per cent of Canadian women are in the
paid workforce. In 61 per cent of two-parent families,
both adults work outside the
home for pay. There has also
been a dramatic increase in
the number of sole support
families, the vast majority (82
per cent) of them headed by
women. As a result of these
trends, more and more
employees must find ways to
fulfil both their obligations at
work and their
responsibilities as parents. For
many, this is a delicate
balancing act.

In addition, as in other industrialised countries, the
proportion of Canada’s population aged 65 or older is
skyrocketing. It is projected that by the year 2036, the
over-65 age group will account for one-quarter of the
country’s population. In 1986, only 10.7 per cent of
Canada’s population was aged 65 or over.

Furthermore, as life expectancy increases, the health
care and social support needs of the elderly are
expected to grow. Thus, greater numbers of employees
must also find ways to combine work and
responsibilities related to the care of elderly relatives.

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**Alternative Work Arrangements**

I would like to emphasise the importance of
developing strategies to ensure greater sharing of
family responsibilities by men and women. It is
generally recognised, and supported by the findings of
time use surveys, that women continue to bear primary
responsibility for child care and domestic duties. Thus,
they tend to bear the “cost” of taking time off work to
look after a small infant, or to tend to a sick child, or to
take an elderly parent to a medical appointment.

In Canada, the search continues for innovative ways
to ensure that employees, women and men, have
enough flexibility in their terms of employment to successfully combine work and family responsibilities. Such flexibility might be provided, for example, through what we call alternative work arrangements. This may involve a work schedule that comprises less than full-time hours; perhaps a job-sharing agreement, or part-time work with pro-rata benefits. Or, it may mean a schedule of full-time hours which allows an employee to work longer hours per day for fewer days.

Leaves of Absence

A second category of responses is leaves of absence. For example, pregnancy leave is included in minimum employment standards legislation across Canada. In addition, parental leave, time off to allow the mother and/or the father to care for a newborn or newly adopted child, is increasingly common. Last year, 10 weeks of parental benefits were added to the National Unemployment Insurance Scheme, complementing the 15 weeks of pregnancy benefits already available.

Workers With Dependents

A third type of response to the changing needs of employees involves support for workers with dependents. For example, some employees have access to subsidies for respite care, enabling them to take a needed break from their care-giving responsibilities for elderly and disabled family members. A few workplaces have childcare centres on-site or in a nearby location. In addition, some employers provide information and referral services to help employees find out about childcare services available in the community.

One of the major trade unions, the Canadian Auto Workers, has negotiated with the “big three” North American Automobile Makers, Ford, Chrysler and General Motors, a contribution by the employer, of 1 cent per hour worked, to a childcare fund. The Autoworkers have used these funds to establish a childcare centre for their members in one Canadian city with a number of automobile and related plants.

This overview illustrates the variety of responses to work and family issues. The diversity of employees' situations and the nature of family responsibilities, which vary throughout our working lives, underscore the need for flexibility in employment benefits and workplace policies and practices to enable women and men to successfully balance the demands of work and family life. Flexibility enables companies to attract and retain the most highly-qualified employees and there will be payoffs for organisations that recognise that the family lives of employees are not parked outside the doors of offices or factories.

Partnerships

In addition to flexibility, the other aspect of change that I see as critical to both economic well-being and equality in employment is partnerships. Employers, unions, policy makers and other concerned parties all have crucial roles to play in the development and implementation of successful labour market strategies that incorporate the principles of equality. Last year, I had the honour of chairing a discussion at the International Labour Organisation (ILO) in Geneva. We were a tri-partite group of representatives from about 20 industrialised countries, brought together to address questions related to equality for women workers.

The discussions of participants at the ILO meeting were based on the view that the principle of equality between women and men is generally accepted, and rarely if ever contested, in industrialised countries. This ILO meeting illustrated the “stage” we are at. We no longer refer to equality in terms of “whether or not” and “if”. Rather, it is a matter of “how” and develop and implement innovative strategies to ensure equality for women in employment, and “how” to monitor the effectiveness of these efforts.

Collaboration Required

This meeting also stressed the importance of collaboration, the co-operative efforts of labour, employers and governments, in determining practical measures to address equality issues and in ensuring that they are implemented in effective ways. In the workplace, joint action by unions and employers leads to a more complete understanding of complex issues. The knowledge and the broader perspective that will be gained from working together cannot help but lead to practical and effective solutions.

Sexual Harassment

As an example, joint action can combat sexual harassment in the workplace. Sexual harassment undermines women's full and equal participation in employment. This is true whether a woman is subjected to harassment by a supervisor, who has the direct power to withhold benefits, promotions or other
opportunities, or by a co-worker, whose unwanted sexual attention can also poison the work environment and make tasks requiring their co-operation difficult or impossible.

Whether the harasser is a supervisor or a co-worker, or a customer or a client, harassment creates a stressful and hostile work environment which interferes with productive work. Unions and employers both have important contributions to make to policies against sexual harassment, to the development and implementation of mechanisms to prevent and redress incidents of harassment, as well as all-important educational and promotional efforts to increase awareness of the issue and prevent occurrences of harassment.

Integration of Women

As another example of the importance of partnerships in the development of strategies for equality and economic well-being, I want to talk about the integration of women into occupations traditionally dominated by men. Achieving women’s access to the complete range of occupations is critical in the context of a labour market strategy that will ensure that we can benefit from the full contribution of women and men with the skills and qualifications to do the work.

There are many roles for each of the workplace partners to play in reducing the barriers to women’s full participation. Hiring and promotion practices may have to be reviewed and revised to eliminate systems and procedures which unintentionally disadvantage women. In Canada, employers under the jurisdiction of the federal Government are required by employment equity legislation to undertake this process, in consultation with the unions that represent the employees.

Governments may also facilitate, rather than legislate or regulate, changes in the workplace by collaborating with employers and unions, and by providing information that increases public awareness of equality issues and contributes to a climate for change. In Canada we are in the process of implementing a comprehensive, long-range plan to build a skilled and internationally competitive workforce. Increasing emphasis is being placed on government working with all stakeholders. The dominant view is that the co-operation and commitment of all groups is critical: employers, workers, educators, social action groups and all levels of government.

Consultation Required

Similarly, an ambitious, long-range plan is underway to overhaul the federal public service and the need for consultation with employers, unions and the public is recognised as integral to this undertaking. Both the labour force development strategy and public service reform are marked by the commitment to remove barriers to the advancement of women. To ensure a healthy economic future, it is recognised that women must have equal opportunities to contribute fully.

This is particularly important in the area of training and skills development. A variety of diverse initiatives are in progress to encourage more girls and women to pursue studies in mathematics and the sciences, preparing them for careers in areas dominated by men. Retraining is also an increasingly pressing issue, especially for women who have been out of the paid work force for a number of years to raise a family. For women, the lack of opportunities to develop skills means lost job opportunities and an increasingly difficult task of coping with sophisticated changes in the workplace. For a company, a poorly trained workforce means reduced competitiveness, lost markets and lost productivity. For an economy, it means losing a competitive advantage and for a country it means a falling standard of living.

In conclusion, equality measures are becoming increasingly recognised as having an important role to play in improving the health of the economy in the face of a shortage of skilled workers. It is critical that we ensure that everyone is given the opportunity to develop their skills, and that everyone is supported in their efforts to make a full and effective contribution in the labour market. Changing the way we manage and the way we work, by building a more flexible, responsive work environment, and involving all labour market partners in the process of change, is clearly the way to go.

Experience has shown that commitment to equality is not always translated quickly into action, or success. Gaining equal opportunities for women in paid employment is a long process. Steady progress is the key and persistent efforts will make the difference. We cannot accept that progress toward equality should be driven by business cycles and given more or less priority depending on the state of the economy. The stakes are just too high!