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Gender Diversity in High-Level ING Positions

An intervention for ING Group



The case

The case of women in powerful positions seems to be a mystery of disappearance and uncertainty. Even in positions of gender-diverse employment, it is still rare to see equal representation of women at the top of their fields. In financial corporations, these inequalities in higher positions are less talked about due to a number of factors, among them the desire of the companies to maintain a favorable outer appearance to their clients and customers.

We will be creating a proposal for ING Group, a financial services company, dictating our proposed interventions in addressing the lack of gender equality in leadership positions within the company.

In lower positions, ING boasts gender inclusion and almost equal representation. The numbers are tricky to acquire, but what we can tell is that as the positions go higher up the 'career ladder', there are clearly less women holding these roles. So, why aren't women working their way to the top in the financial sector? Is it because women lack the drive or are they having to surmount a greater number of barriers to get there than men do in their position?

In a 2009 Volkskrant article, several departed top women from ING discussed the 'cold' and 'unfriendly' nature of the workplace, saying how ING does a bad job of welcoming and retaining women at the top. ING was displeased with the report and chose not to forward it to the ING Group Executive Board. "The responsible Personnel Director [refused] to forward the report to the ING Group Executive Board. According to ING, the research is not representative and not positive in tone..." This act of looking the other way to ignore bad outcomes shows why alternative interventions are so necessary.

Disciplinary perspectives

From an engineering discipline, the issue of female representation in leadership positions is familiar given the male-dominated engineering field. Knowing the value of diverse perspectives in idea generation, engineers would emphasize the need to create an open, welcoming environment where women feel comfortable to contribute and share their ideas. This includes a space where they can be supported in furthering their career goals. Similar to designing products, designing an intervention requires thorough research and understanding of the stakeholders. It is vital to design 'with' not 'for' the financial organizations by

involving individuals through interviews and group discussions so that the solution can be more effectively integrated into the existing system.

From a communication sciences discipline, it would be of utmost importance to investigate the underlying reason for women not applying. Research by Ellemers (2004) shows that women who have a high position do not have the urge to help women among them, also known as the 'queen bee syndrome', because these top women themselves have not had any help either. So what is important for the intervention is to investigate why many women do not feel called upon to apply for top positions, but also why not enough effort is being made to attract women (by both the men and the women). This can be achieved by entering the workplace and having conversations with all parties involved, for example organizing focus groups.

From an organizational perspective it could also be helpful to look at how organizations nowadays are organized on the equality level. How do they do their recruitment? How is maternal leave organised? How are the salaries differentiated? This can be found out by organizing interviews with board members and HR people as well as women in top positions about how they experienced this. Also focus groups would help to find out if they think alike. According to King, Ortenblad & Ladge (2018) when they asked interviewees why there is a lack of women in their firms, the most common response was that they believe women are not interested in finance. When pressed further, they identified two reasons: a masculine culture and long working hours. So this is where we have to focus.

Ways to respond

In order to appeal to the interests of the financial corporations, we can argue the importance of women in higher positions from the 'business case' as discussed in Dr. Romy van der Lee's lecture on Women in Academia. That is, having greater diversity on higher boards and in more senior positions can help the company be more successful and more appealing to potential clients. Therefore, companies must improve their workplace culture in order to foster an environment that will lower the barriers for women working their way up in the financial organization.

This includes mitigating stereotype threat and addressing the issue of gender inclusive language. Additionally, we will suggest interventions that the financial corporation can use to

implement policy that will focus on the preexisting issues that women face when considering career advancement.

We wish to focus on interventions to improve workplace culture for women in the financial sector. First, the use of gender-inclusive language in policy and position opportunities presents itself as an opportunity for conveying the possibilities and expectations for a leadership role. Stout & Dasgupta (2011) state that the use of gender exclusive language (e.g. using *he* to indicate *he* or *she*) or masculine adjectives such as ‘bold’ and ‘strong’ might seem harmless at first sight, but that for people that might already feel left out, this could lead “self-selecting out of important professional environments.” When we apply this study to ING, it could be that women are put off by just reading a vacancy for a top position through the use of ‘male’ language. What might be helping women who are considering such vacancies is just the idea that the vacancy is also appealing to them. So since there is a replacement of ‘male’ language, this gender-inclusive language idea could be prevented. So the HR people should be aware of this ‘problem’ and must not write the ‘male’ language in vacancies anymore.

In order to further create an inclusive and welcoming environment, we focus on Ellemers’ article (2004) and the ‘queen bee syndrome’. It seems that some women at the top don’t ‘allow’ women beneath them to grow with their help. To change this, it would be smart to have lectures for the junior women given by women in the top positions. The top women are able to offer advice that is helpful to entry-level women making major decisions. Women interviewed in a study by Chin et al. (2018) cited valuable advice from senior-level women in helping encourage them to make bolder choices than they would have been comfortable taking. “The senior-level women we interviewed encouraged younger women to take risks early in their careers. These risks can involve trying out different business units, roles, locations, and even industries to build a broad foundation of experiences that will serve them in future leadership roles.” This way women can both learn and connect with their superiors, but also in a way that isn’t direct mentoring which adds an additional burden to the senior women.

On a more literal interpretation of creating a ‘safe workplace’, McLean (2003) asserts that creating a more welcoming workplace culture for women involves a zero-tolerance policy towards harassment. This means creating stricter policies and tracking explicit indicators that may indicate signs of harassment. McLean counters corporate claims of

existing policies being sufficient (supported by a relative absence of harassment complaints, the companies argue) and lists factors to monitor: “Do not interpret a lack of formal harassment complaints as an absence of problems. Potential indicators of sexual harassment include a sudden request for a transfer, refusal to work with a certain individual, high absenteeism and sudden changes in the quality of an employee’s work’ (McLean 14). This intervention method targets the tricky social issue of workplace harassment and provides an opportunity to interview groups of women to ask about their experiences and how they can be made to feel safer.

Preferred policy intervention

Of these interventions, we would recommend ING Group take on a combination of tactics focusing on both gender-inclusive language in promotions and opportunity listings as well as focusing on HR training and company-commitment to deter workplace harassment. Together these interventions will hopefully lead to a more welcoming culture for women in financial services, especially in top positions. Taking the specific interests of ING into consideration, we know that this implementation will have to be financially conservative, given their choice to cut funding to a previous program aimed at coaching newer women in the company as seen in a report by Van Uffelen (2009).

By implementing policies directed at creating less gendered qualification listings, ING Group can take a directed approach to encouraging more women to apply to promotions and other advancement opportunities. This is, however, a two way-method. Not only does the language of the listings need to be more gender inclusive to attract female applicants, but the decision committee must stand by such standards. Kalev et al. (2006) states that "Social psychological research shows that giving people information about out-group members and about stereotyping may reduce bias" It is vital that those making the applicant decisions are also trained on recognizing gender bias in qualification criteria. According to a study by Van den Brink (2011), "Stereotypical images of excellence, masculinity and femininity can mean that female talent goes to waste (‘false negative’) but also to the predominance of male talent (‘false positive’)." Thus it is necessary to critically analyze the ideas of what characteristics make a “successful leader” and be able to understand and watch out for gender bias in this process. This can be done by teaching hireres about implicit bias and stereotypical images of success and how these compare with male/female stereotypical connotations.

Furthermore, in creating a more welcoming workplace environment that women feel safe in, financial companies such as ING can improve on retention of women in order to allow for the possibility of future promotion. In a recent review by Van Uffelen (2009), recently departed women from top positions at ING said “They regard ING as closed, little human and politicized”. One way to target this culture is to have the organization itself reaffirm their commitment to anti-harassment in order to encourage a safer environment for women. A study by Krivkovich et al. (2018) affirmed that women in higher positions are more in danger of harassment, especially in male-dominated fields. "...research has found that women who do not conform to traditional feminine expectations—in this case, by holding authority, not being heterosexual, and working in fields dominated by men—are more often the targets of sexual harassment." This same study goes on to suggest ways in which this can be mitigated. “HR teams should receive detailed training so they know how to thoroughly and compassionately investigate claims of harassment, even if they involve senior leaders. And companies would benefit from putting an audit process in place to ensure that investigations are thorough and sanctions are appropriate.” By both adding training for HR teams and implementing a checking feature of auditing the process itself, this will both improve on existing understanding and watchfulness and well as provide an incentive to follow through.

As a final note in our suggestion, we would like to recognize the possibility that ING would not want to carry out some of these measures because they would require extra time and resources dedicated to initiation and maintenance. In this case, we would suggest supplementing with a diversity committee that could oversee these processes. This would be made up of existing employees, and has been shown to be both effective and cost-saving. According to Kalev (2006) "Diversity committees have been quite effective, requiring neither additional staff nor expensive consultants...On the other hand, diversity training, which 39 percent of establishments had adopted, and which can be quite costly, was not very effective and showed adverse effects among noncontractors".

Possible implementation issues

First of all, a danger when using a focus group is that they will not show full commitment. For example, this may be due to a dominant opinion that the majority of the group holds, discouraging other ideas. Also the feeling of a *social norm*, what we think the majority of the

group believes or does, could be present, and thus there is a “pressure” to conform to this. Because of this, some participants may be hesitant in outing their true feelings or opinions on an idea.

This can be solved by conducting individual interviews, but the risk in this method is that individual interviews are more intensive and require more time from the company. So the question remains: Is ING okay with investing more time and resources into conducting interviews or are they satisfied with the slightly biased results coming from the focus groups? This is something they will have to answer based on their allocated resources.

From an engineering perspective, it is known that all stakeholders must be included when making project decisions. Thus, we must look at potential implementation issues from a variety of perspectives. Taking into account not just the company as a cooperation, but the individuals involved as well.

The fellow employees, for example, may feel as if additional measures create a larger divide between male and female coworkers. As noted by Eberhardt and Fiske (1994) "Others do not feel as comfortable working with them because, by virtue of their differences, they evoke attention to rules and assumptions beyond what is required of normal, daily social interactions." Therefore, it is vital that the organization stresses the importance of these programs from the perspective of collaborative company functioning and not the narrow approach of simply ‘female-equality measures’.

From an organizational sciences perspective it is important to take all the people involved into account. Beginning with the women who are already in top positions because they know how they got there and what has helped them to succeed. According to von Hippel (2015) a benefit of strong representation of one’s gender group in the work setting is the presence of role models because women who are well established in the field can provide inspiration and encouragement to other women considering those fields. We must also focus on the women who are at the lower end of the career ladder in order to get to know what is still stopping them from advancing. Also according to von Hippel a consequence women working in male-dominated fields such as finance may experience conflict between their prescribed gender role requiring communal behaviors and the agentic demands of their work role.

In addition, all the board members and HR workers should get involved in implementing these interventions since they make important decisions in these areas.

Further it is necessary that implementation be done in such a way that it can effectively be maintained. Kalev (2006) points out some potential failure points of well-intentioned regulations. "...because of the elusive nature of cognitive bias, 'conscious attempts at thought regulation'—such as diversity training and diversity evaluations—'may even backfire, leading to exaggerated stereotyping under conditions of diminished capacity, or when self-regulation efforts are relaxed'" This underscores the idea that there must be measures in place to monitor and maintain the interventions so that they don't lead to unintended consequences when only partially carried out or enforced.

Because of the importance of maintaining and monitoring these interventions, we would strongly suggest implementing a diversity committee that can check on the quality of work put into these methods and carry out audits on occasion to create an incentive to follow through. Additionally, we will send out surveys that will allow the employees, managers, and HR directors to provide secure feedback so they can point out flaws or discrepancies in the implementation. We hope these methods will allow ING Group to improve on their inclusion and retention methods for women in their company. We also wish for this to serve as a model to other companies wishing to implement different measures to have greater gender equality at the top. Our interventions are specific to this organization and their context, but other fields such as medicine, science, and engineering face similar gendered issues that can be targeted by conducting additional research into those industries similar to the work we did in the financial sector.

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