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Written by Gregg Smith on May 25, 2010 | Print Blog

Could Gender Quotas Work in Corporate America?

A policy of one German company would be a tough sell in the U.S., despite the lack of women execs

feedback



Milestone for gender equality: Ann Mulcahy passed the Xerox CEO baton to Ursula Burns

In 1968, Virginia Slims cigarette ads celebrated a tradition defying generation of American women with "You've come a long way, baby." Over 40 years later, we are still debating if we have bridged the gender gap.

Recently, Bloomberg News Anchor Lori Rothman asked me about gender quotas and if I thought they would be successful in the United States. Her question was primed by Deutsche Telekom, which markets its phone under the T-Mobile banner in the United States, and its decision to introduce gender quotas in the management ranks. Noting that 60 percent of business graduates in Germany are currently women, the company has mandated 30 percent

upper and middle management jobs be filled with women by 2015. "It is a matter of social fairness and a categorical necessity for our success that we develop more women managers," said Rene Oberman, CEO of Deutsche Telekom.

Thomas Sattelberger, Deutsche Telekom's chief human personnel officer said, "A glass ceiling is however clearly still stopping too many talented females from making it to the top. Introducing the women's quota will enable us to break through this ceiling."

The decision by Deutsche Telekom to create a female quota caused quite a stir in Europe. Predictably, some felt it was yet another sign of social engineering, but for others it seemed like a logical response to the under-utilization of females in the workforce. Both are partially correct. Ultimate and permanent change is preceded by deliberate action and rational improvement.

Corporations must seek to maximize the capabilities of all employees.

Culturally, quotas will not be successful in the United States. Although an imaginative and audacious move by Deutsche Telekom's CEO, American culture is one where we see ourselves as members of a meritocracy. We believe whole-heartedly that anyone can grow up to be president. President Barack Obama's election is proof positive to many that anyone can get to the top, if they are prepared and work hard. The other barrier to using quotas in America is the fact that courts have not looked favorably on them, except as a remedy for the most blatant forms of discrimination.

Rothman pointed out that women have made lots of strides in the US with the selection of Ursula Burns as CEO of Xerox; Indra Nooyi as CEO of PepsiCo and Irene Rosenfeld as CEO of Kraft. She suggested that perhaps "the real challenge in the U.S. was around comparable pay." The battle for equal pay for equal work still goes on, but the bigger challenge is moving women into more senior leadership roles. While women have come a long way and seen incremental progress in corporate America, they still have a long way to way to go to achieve parity with men.

Women are CEOs of only 13 of the Fortune 500. In 2009, women held 14% of the board seats for the Fortune 500. Furthermore, African American female executives only held 3.3% of the seats on public boards! African

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American women appear to be at a double disadvantage (race and gender).

As a husband and father of a daughter, I am encouraged by the advancement of women to the corner office. It was exciting when Ursula Burns became the first African American female selected to be the CEO of a Fortune 500 firm. I also understand that her opportunity was partially driven by the opportunity afforded Ann Mulcahy as the prior CEO.

Burn's selection was on every broadcast station, cable television business show, newspaper, magazine, blog and Black Enterprise's cover! The reason is simple, even in the 21st century: The selection of a woman as a business leader is still a singular event that captures our imagination.

Women are making incremental progress in corporate America and we can expect more with the steady influx of women entering college and graduate school. So let's celebrate the ascendancy of Ursula Burns but remember—we still have a long way to go, baby!



Gregg Smith is managing director at Boyden Global Executive Search in New York

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Gregg Smith also wrote:

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