

## Women in Business

# How to make company culture more welcoming for women



Groups that nurture and empower their gender diversity gain in revenues and adaptability

**BETSY ATKINS**

In the past few weeks attempts have been made to clean up the working environment at the ride-hailing company Uber. Former US attorney-general Eric Holder has been hired to investigate the group's culture. The chief executive Travis Kalanick has taken a leave of absence, and several new board members are on the job, including Arianna Huffington.

But these steps forward were followed by a step back when, at a meeting to unveil Mr Holder's report, board member David Bonderman made a joke about women on the board. Mr Bonderman later resigned.

I have served on the boards of many important tech companies, and this sounds to me like old news. Women seeking to advance their careers in the technology industry still find themselves bumping up against a silicon ceiling. Research from the Society of Women Engineers found that 20 per cent of today's engineering school graduates are women, yet just 11 per cent continue working in the field. Women in IT leadership roles make up 9 per cent of the total, according to a survey from Harvey Nash/KPMG.

Changing any corporate culture is a challenge, but bringing diversity to the tech industry is even trickier. Fast-growth "unicorn" companies can quickly outgrow their founding, venture-based start-up corporate governance, and find themselves

facing Uber-style crises. Yet in my experience, technology companies can and do nurture diverse, inclusive cultures.

There are several ways to do this. First, build internal career networks. At Volvo Car AB, where I serve on the board, we have launched a programme in which I meet senior and mid-level women executives to discuss career development. We work with these executives to build on their strengths, clarify their career aspirations, and offer advice on advancement.

Second, make mentoring personal. On the board of Schneider Electric, I make a point of directly mentoring a number of women on the company's senior executive team. Women in management find it tremendously helpful to have someone in the boardroom who takes a personal interest in their career. Ms Huffington will be in an ideal position to do this at Uber.

Third, go beyond mentoring. The tech industry, in particular, has too few role models for rising female talents. Companies should ask board members to sponsor female executives. There is a big difference between mentoring, best understood as periodic advice, and coaching or sponsoring, which involves more active help for individuals as they prepare to take the next step up in their careers. Women who are senior managers or board members can take

mentoring up a notch by sponsoring women with high potential, taking personal ownership of career coaching for their top talents.

Finally, recognise women making a difference. When I served as chair of the board's compensation committee at tech company Polycom, we were active in the annual recognition event for sales staff. I noted that women were leaders in sales – although they made up less than 10 per cent of the sales force, they accounted for 34 per cent of our "President's Circle" top sales performers. Making an added effort to celebrate this talent is crucial in sending the message that sales is not just a "guy thing".

While Uber's woes make the news, they can also serve as a spark for making the support and advancement of women a boardroom mission. Talented women are a strategic asset to companies, and there is a growing body of research showing that groups that nurture gender diversity gain in revenues and adaptability. In any company, you cannot separate balance sheet results from corporate culture. When it comes to reshaping that culture to be more welcoming to women, the boardroom is the ideal place to start.

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