



# DIVERSITY IN THE PALEO EXECUTIVE SUITE

TEXT: ANNETTE REISSFELDER PHOTO: DREAMSTIME.COM

*Over the past decades, women have become increasingly vocal about the glass ceiling in companies, politics etc. – but what happens when women make it all the way to the board? And: is the glass ceiling really a phenomenon that men aren't exposed to? Some reflections on who is likely to encounter glass ceilings, why that is, and how to outsmart that construct.*

I have worked with a handful of women in Germany who had made it to the board of DAX 30 companies. Great personalities, remarkable success stories - no doubt reaching the board was the crowning of their professional ambitions, right? Not quite: I met all these women at a point where they were more or less considering throwing in the towel. They were unimpressed with decision-making processes and other behavioural patterns demonstrated in board meetings. They felt they weren't making the impact they had hoped for and had lost their clout, while disappointing

the expectations of their influential supporters. And they resented falling back into immature behaviours themselves, among other issues. What kept them hanging in there was the loyalty they felt for the company, and for key mentors who had opened doors for them. Now, understandably, they hesitated to let them down and give up. These were all women, and the boards in question mostly male, but I'd like to highlight a different divide:

#### **Behavioural mismatches**

Today's glass ceilings are more about diversity than about gender. Of

course diversity in gender, nationality, age, and social class is important to reflect the changes in the consumer society within which companies operate. But limiting the diversity discussion to these easily observable characteristics is a trap, because these are unchangeable. This can lead to a victimisation mentality, and make us overlook underlying, more fluid dynamics. For in a corporate world that "theoretically" embraces diversity, it is often behavioural mismatches that feed rejection of individual players. This can and will change when the behaviour changes... It's always inspiring to look at those who "made it" despite being visibly different, and ask what allowed them to leave their mark, all while keeping their authentic voice.

People who have succeeded despite being "somehow different" are naturally a minority. They often are high achievers with excellent social skills and a natural presence. In many ways, they have all it takes to succeed in the new role – but mental roadblocks can

undermine their chances to succeed. Women in powerful roles, especially, are often not primarily driven by personal ambition; they want to bring a different style to the board, one that is more collaborative and less heroic. This was the case with the women mentioned earlier: their ambitions were encouraged by the chairmen of their respective boards, who needed a few others to sing from the same sheet to reach the tipping point for real change in the communication culture to occur. Bringing in these women with demonstrated track records of managing culture change in their business units, looked like a very sensible move. But those chairmen also realized that from now on, they had to stand back and let them sink or swim; their “new recruits” had to win the respect of the other board members on their own. It is worth noting that these coaching relationships started several years ago. I wonder if they’d still happen today, and if the same women would be promoted. Because I see an inherent danger in board quotas: I’m not so sure that the quota discussion is helping top managers promote women who are not “streamlined”... Like with many good intentions, this one can backfire, and result in bringing in more women who are determined to make it whatever it costs. And that, ironically, can mean *less* diversity in board discussions!

### Changing your winning ways

Many managerial talents are promoted precisely BECAUSE of their different (refreshing, enthusiastic, open) style and energy. While they were working in their own area (especially if this was sales or production, where it is figures that count), their personal

style gave them a strong following within their team, and fighting and winning fights by “managing up” successfully only reinforced this clout. Their bosses were happy too: they didn’t need much of their attention, and produced the desired results. Win-win.

Of course, when they are promoted, they feel encouraged to do “more of the same” in the next environment. Except that now, their positioning is different: they work among peers. And

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although they are obviously aware that these peers come from different functional departments, it is easily forgotten that because of their professional angle, they will have different perspectives, different priorities, and therefore different opinions. In this situation, they now feel in a double bind, damned if they do (risking pointless conflict) and damned if they don’t (becoming a “yes-wo-man”, and frustrating the expectations of their promoters). Given this background, it is easy to misinterpret as a rejection a colleague’s comment to the effect that he doesn’t see how your way of doing things is better than “*what we had here before, and that we managed just fine without you.*” And if we do make this misinterpretation, we miss all the rest of the information inherent in this little message...

It certainly is confusing that the same characteristics that enable success at one level can stop us cold at the next, and positively irritating that we might need to let go of what has served us well up to now. It is hard to change our winning ways! So, naturally, we’d assume that after a promotion, we’d just be using them more, since we were clearly rewarded for them in the past... But it is perhaps safer to assume that this doesn’t need to be the case, doubly so at board level. Observing what behaviours of others are

working, and choosing the ones that resonate with us is a good start. This is easy to do if we remember that there is no value in asking ourselves who is “causing” the problems; instead, ask who has the strongest motivation to fix things, because they are most dissatisfied with the status quo: clearly – the newbie.

Martina was one of these able leaders who had already made it to a board -1 position in her mid thirties. Therefore the idea that she needed to work on her skills wasn’t immediately obvious to her. Weren’t her demonstrated skills exactly what got her to where she was today? Absolutely. Only these were slightly different skills. It wasn’t until I could demonstrate specifically how the skills that had gotten her into previous management positions

also weren’t the same as those she had needed to succeed at each new level (once we move beyond the level where we are promoted based on our personal efficiency, we are dealing with a different dynamic). She took a moment to understand that her rejection of the fact that it was she, the newbie, who needed to adjust, was just ego-based defiance that she could move beyond. We weren’t set to “change her personality”, or values, but to allow her to manage herself so that she could achieve the results she wanted.

Where before she had been at the helm of a successful change project in her own department, she was now in a game with a different set of rules. This included having to get people on board who she wouldn’t necessarily have chosen, who had different priorities, ways of thinking, and markedly different tolerance of ambiguity. And since she was dealing with peers, she obviously wasn’t in a position to say “well, if how we do things here now really isn’t working for you, why don’t you go elsewhere” - something she had been able to do before to create her high-performing teams. Frustrated to see that her strategies didn’t work too well with some fellow board members, and with the rest not yet openly backing her, she started doubting her move. As a result, her natural presence and charisma suffered. When she started focussing on how she could contribute to helping the others to truly “get her”, the situation started improving.

Once on-boarders acknowledge that their past achievements hadn’t been good predictors of how they were to fare in a new context with a new

culture, things usually improved rapidly. It dawned very quickly on all the women that advanced influencing skills, as well as high-level self-management skills, would come in handy when trying to succeed in such a diverse peer group as a board can be. In my experience, this step is actually easier for women than for men: acknowledging that “more of the same” won’t bring different results. This either indeed leads them to throw in the towel, or to invest in a skills upgrade and look for smarter ways out; women are much faster to make a proactive move.

### Who else encounters ceilings

I also have stories of men who didn’t have a good start to their boardroom experience, and this one made all my “German ladies” smile... Milan, a Czech plant manager in his late thirties, was a high achiever used to making his own decisions, which his strong positioning as a problem-solver allowed him to do. When offered a position on the board, he experienced a dramatic style clash: surrounded all of a sudden by very differently wired corporate players, he quickly polarized the board, and earned himself a reputation as a troublemaker. His frustrated expectations in turn made him personally resent some of his fellow board members, complete with non-flattering evaluations of their motivations (as he construed them...). At the start of our coaching relationship, he had gotten almost to a point of no return. Today, ten years later, he is still with the same company. After turning around his positioning and becoming a much-appreciated inspiration for the chairman, he first got an assignment that took him to a big-

ger country. The next one took him to headquarters, and a position with a responsibility for Europe. Now, he has just taken on the role of VP of Operations in Japan.

From a systems perspective, it is clear that when our perspective changes, everything else changes with it. When we work on our mind-set and skill set, we are able to identify our new manoeuvring space, and use it wisely. But if we don’t, we risk wasting our energy - and reputation - on fights we can’t win. It’s easy to get tricked into believing we are acting from morally superior motivations – and then misinterpret the rejection of a proposed change as the others just wanting to



ANNETTE REISSFELDER

Professional Accredited Coach, ran a management consultancy for manufacturing companies before becoming a coach. Her clients, company owners and senior managers, realize that their personal growth is instrumental to the success of their personal or professional projects. In her work, she combines the roles of coach, mentor, consultant, strategic thinking partner and psychologist. She is fluent in five languages (one of them Czech) and lives between Hamburg and Prague.

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keep the status quo. In this story, we are the “proactive modern hero”, and don’t even need to really find out why exactly our proposition didn’t convince the others – for “we already know”. This is a dangerous belief, because it definitely doesn’t put us into a position where we are able to win others for our arguments.

### Outsmarting the Paleo

In top management, voicing a different opinion without the appropriate level of influencing skills is not just ineffective, but counter-productive. This was always one of the relevant skill sets in my work with women board members. Their mentors in top management who had brought these “diverse players” in observed them struggling, and offered coaching. They arranged for us to meet, and all these women quickly realized how they contributed to their own issues. Being the high achievers they were, they weren’t defensive, but genuinely curious and motivated to see if they could succeed in the new game, now that they understood the potential impact of what we were discussing. Could they successfully “sell” their changes in a way the insiders could work with, and that wouldn’t

be repelled by their immune system? For they realized that “everything needs to change” is not just a deeply unpopular message in any organisation, it is also an unworkable proposition. Those insiders have a lot of relevant knowledge and insight, and devaluing them as just wanting to hold onto their positions and bonuses really isn’t appropriate. Many of their board colleagues will still remember the times when *they* were the ones knocking on similar doors, full of ideas of what to change and implement once they’d get a chance – only to find them locked. This energy is still there, and often can be harvested and channelled in mutually satisfying ways.

I believe that people who experience glass ceilings very often do so just because they are perceived as different - and having a functional, cooperative diversity at the highest levels is what companies need in order to keep playing at the top of their game. Having diverse and softly perturbing voices to inform decisions and challenge mainstream thinking is critical, but can serve its purpose only if these voices aren’t stressing the top team into in-fighting mode.

Enabling people who bring this life affirming injection of diversity to have an impact, without triggering the natural instinctive annihilation response, is my professional aim. The immune defences that protect a system against intruders can be outsmarted, for example, by showing that a perceived conflict of interest is not there. It is definitely worth remembering that the higher up we get, the more we rely on who we are, not what we know and can do: As our focus turns to managing relationships and contexts, no longer only people, our impact will be a direct consequence of whether we are perceived as being “in sync”. Trust is based on the same-level “paleo” reactions (aptly called gut reactions) as the rejection discussed earlier. This is why when in direct contact, people react more to the “vibes” they pick up from someone, than to the words they are hearing. And this is why I believe the people referred to as “diverse” in this article are so important to keep on board!

### Managing Your Emotions 2.0

In order for our unique style and ideas work at the board level, raising our self-management skills is key. Unfortunately, managing our emo-

tions is a lot harder than, say, time management... But if we aim high, we had better start early – for our emotions can turn into your own worst enemy. Triggering the wrong things in others will make hormones take over, and potentially, on both sides. Then all that’s left for the brain to do is to produce plausible explanations after-the-fact... like how it was really impossible to achieve more, or how everyone was set to see us fail etc. Not exactly flattering for people who believe they command “free will”, I know. But the research is very clear. We need to take good care of the choices we make – what thoughts and images we allow our brain to play around with; and also, how we teach it to unwind and quiet down.

It is easy to underestimate the power of the undercurrent of threat and the resulting short-term orientation at work in our society, and how this makes us prone to be driven by the primal parts of our brain. Tolerance of diversity is an acquired taste, and the more anxiety and change-laden the atmosphere, the more relentless the rejection of other voices. Many of our leaders are steering us to the polarization of society rather than an understanding society, which makes us wish to engage in combat rather than compromise. So while I believe that having voices that don’t share the pedigree of “the rest of the pack” in the executive suite is an essential success factor, let’s acknowledge that this is a tall order, given the chemical nature of our brain... Therefore, it will be for everybody’s benefit if these voices are speaking in a way that allows the system to work with them, instead of triggering confrontational responses.

### Diversity – a discovered taste

Pedigree is an imperfect equivalent of the German *Stallgeruch*, which doesn’t really exist in English. It illustrates a phenomenon from our evolutionary past, and reminds us that tolerance of others who are different is a recent addition to our neural wiring. Our baseline is to reject the unknown. When we allow our reptilian brain to run the show, we resent all things strange. “Strange” or “foreign” used to be intuitively associated with danger, so being conservative about who to welcome around the fire or accept food from could be a matter of life and death. Rats for example, are very caring with their own lot, but have no time for outsiders: experiments have shown that when single rats were washed and sprayed with the smell of a different tribe before being put back into their original cage, their mates would bite them to death in seconds. Today, we aren’t always aware that we experience elaborate disguises of this same primal “shortcut”: fear-driven automated reactions. This is thanks to our rational neo-cortex: once we have acted based on our intuitive reaction, and hormonal levels slowly return to normal, our neo-cortex takes over and thinks up some refined explanation. This logical explanation may temptingly reflect the truth, but we shouldn’t let ourselves be fooled about who was really in control....

The moment our “reptile brain impulses”, which are driven by hormones (not reason), take over, outgoes our ability to reason, taking liberalism with it. The obvious benefit (and the reason this is so popular) is that this reduces complexity short-

term. On the other hand, it makes us potentially vulnerable in the medium term, because now we no longer learn to make sense of those “other” influences, and we fail to give this mental muscle the training it requires. As a result, we may fall into simplistic dichotomies more easily, including “us and them” or even more extreme “me vs. the rest of the world” thinking. When we deal with each other on reptile-brain level, people who are perceived as outsiders will be judged as untrustworthy, and will experience rejection - just a more civilized version of it than what we showed in our tribal past. Yes, we no longer kill intruders, but we do try to make them leave!!

To close, let me highlight the link between diversity and liberalism one more time. This is the reason I feel strongly about having diverse opinions – and strong individuals - involved in the decision-making at the top levels of companies. The ultimate goal of bringing diversity of experience, and thus of opinion, to the top echelons of companies is to make their decision-making more robust. The intake of relevant reality is simply better when everybody uses their own brain, than when everybody tries to read the mind of the most powerful people in the room. The business section is full of reports of companies that have failed to discuss critical issues in the necessary complexity, and/or at a level where they could be dealt with. The current situation at Volkswagen, and the underlying management failures, may serve as a particularly fascinating and instructive case study of how such liabilities can backfire - at great cost to the organisation on all sorts of levels. /BW