

Sex survey 2018: Mars and venus in the boardroom

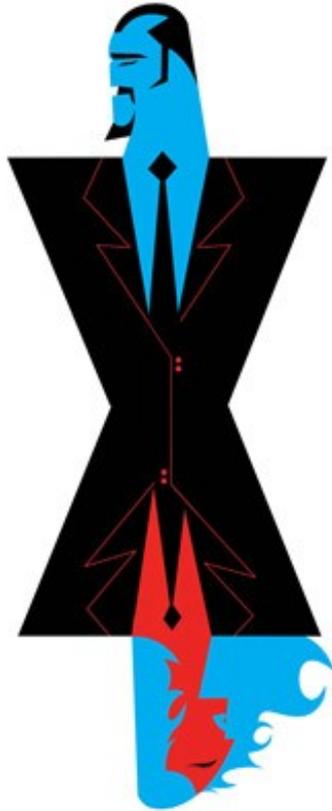


Illustration by Siddhant Jumde

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It was a long-overdue reunion with peers from a company I left years ago. We were all top management, some still with the same multinational. Stories came spilling out—deals, power games, office politics. The dissection veered to the shenanigans of two male members of the senior management who were having blatant 'affairs' with junior staff. The liaisons, officially not disclosed to management as policy dictated, had spawned favouritism, mistrust and a series of exits in the affected teams. So why did the discomfited company leadership prefer to ignore the problem instead of nixing it?

Indeed, why do organisations hesitate, or look the other way when certain relationships are open secrets? Simple. Sanitising sex in the workplace is a Pandora's box. It takes enormous spine, persistence and institutional will.

For starters, the workplace is society in microcosm. It has a more polished, public and agreeable face, perhaps, given the high stakes in career and financial success. Still, if you cut to the chase, your organisation is a diverse, complex hotbed of prevalent aspirations, lifestyles and values. So the social, psychological and cultural tendencies—including in romance and sex-willy-nilly flow into the workplace.

Fuelling this further, next-gen workforces are ushering in new concepts of work-life. The lines between the 'professional' and the 'personal' are blurring to bring the 'whole person' to the work and workplace. Integral psychologist Ken Wilber calls it the 'teal' or evolutionary wave, which sees the workplace "as a place where we are called to discover and journey towards our true self and unfold our unique potential". So the shift is towards authenticity—and the veneer of pretentious behaviour is being chipped away. In a way, this is the time to lift the veil to usher in a shift from the passive, reactive, hands-off stand to a proactive, direct and developmental approach to manage the issues of sex, gender balance and gender intelligence in our institutions.

Organizations invariably fail to match intent with behaviour. 'Official' policy or codes of conduct are belied by actual attitudes on the ground. What the 'informal' organisation allows is what most employees take cues from. Most often, a 'majority' mindset rules organisational cultures. Women form barely 15 per cent of senior management, and less than 10 per cent of CEOs are women. Thus, top management everywhere still perpetuate male role models, competencies and behaviours.

As campaigns like #MeToo, The List, Name and Shame have shown us, unchecked organisational behaviour can tolerate-if not endorse-a climate of sexism, patriarchal predisposition, predatory tendencies and gender insensitivity and discrimination.

So how can workplaces make that transition to a high performing, gender safe, inclusive one? Doubtless, no employer is a fan of romantic or sexual interplay in the workplace. Such relationships-while mostly benign and furtive-are a potential risk and liability. They are like dormant volcanos that may erupt out of the blue, and unleash serious reputational, financial and organisational upheaval. But trying to over-regulate, over-police, or exert intrusive control too is counter-productive. Such overextension of authority-especially with a generation where loyalty and commitment to any employer is at best tenuous-may provoke talent, and not just the sexually involved ones, to simply leave.

Certainly, employers acknowledge the reality: the office is a community and a potent social hub for finding physical, mental, emotional-in other words, relationship-fulfilment. People will carry their private lives to the workplace-and their workmates into their personal lives. That said, how do you ward off the noxious effect of a consensual relationship gone sour or inappropriate conduct that may invite a harassment complaint?

Thus far, companies have focused on hygiene: maintain a policy on 'personal relationships'. Here too, the primary emphasis is on 'disclosure'. Let management know, so that it can create appropriate 'professional' distance between the involved parties. A few companies mandated that one party leave the enterprise, but the majority were fine as long as there was no direct reporting relationship between the two and their professional lives were not entwined enough to hurt the system.

But workplaces must leap towards transforming their beliefs and cultures bottom up and top down. This entails taking on board both the majority (male) and the minority (female) attitudes, conduct and habits. In the clash of the sexes, if women feel excluded, forced to fit in and devalued, men get defensive, guarded and blamed. It will take much contrarian effort to create 'safe, balanced and gender intelligent' workplaces where both men and women can be equally authentic.

Notwithstanding that romantic or sexual interactions may be triggered by an array of reasons, two key moves by employers can keep the overarching culture healthy. First, making the most of India's law on 'Sexual Harassment of Women at the Workplace (Prevention, Prohibition and Redressal)', enacted in 2013. Use the robust mechanism as a systemic countervailing force against all forms of harassment. Make awareness, counselling and coaching tools to build trust. Men might, for instance, learn to keep a lid on inappropriate language or moves while women may choose to recognise differences between 'mala fide intent' and trivial, unintended lapses.

Second, go aggressive on education and getting men and women to appreciate the power of their difference. Research proves that men and women have intrinsic 'brain' and 'hormonal' differences, which may be leveraged for impact manifest in the workplace. While men are quick, decisive and outcome-focused, women have intuitive abilities, better consequential thinking, ability to read body language and so on. When their different strengths lead to profit and performance, gender balance will become a strategic asset.

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