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In South Africa, August is traditionally the month in which we celebrate women and the role they have played in our society. In business, this is often accompanied by reflections on boardroom and workplace diversity, and an acknowledgement that while there is progress in some areas and in some specific businesses, there is still a long way to go to achieve universal and deep gender diversity in business – specifically in senior leadership roles – and also to achieve pay parity.

How good it is then to note that in this year's DealMakers awards, Lydia Shadrach-Razzino was the DealMaker of the Year, Raisibe Morathi was CFO in the winning Deal of the Year, and Alet Coetzee, CFO in the winning BEE Deal of the Year.

In my view, we will not make significantly different progress in transforming the diversity of our work forces unless we reframe the way we think of diversity. We have to move away from looking at diversity as a scorecard reporting or a regulatory compliance issue, and recognise that true diversity is a competitive advantage. In my experience, the more diverse opinions one has around the table, the more engaged and creative the discussions on a topic are. Certainly, this makes managing those conversations trickier, since good people will have good ideas that they want to air, and will vigorously debate others, but the outcome is always more robust.

Then it is important to know what one is trying to achieve when embarking on a transformation journey, and to communicate this clearly and authentically

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to all one's stakeholders and especially one's staff. For some entities, this may be about leadership transformation, for others, the focus will be on race, gender, skills or pay parity. It may be a combination of these and other things. Proper communication will ensure that everyone knows what the direction of travel is; what success will look like; why leadership has chosen particular focus areas; what is expected of them; and how leadership intends to manage the intricacies and emotions of the journey.

It is, I think, also crucial to think about diversity in all its forms: gender, race, age, qualifications, skills, tenure and the like. If one just pursues one form of diversity to the exclusion of others, one misses the opportunity to create the engaged and creative discussions I mention above.

In my experience, even if leadership is committed to building a more diverse workforce, it will not happen easily or at the desired pace unless leadership is deliberate about it. A clear rallying vision; annual targets cascaded to relevant management levels so that progress can be tracked and measured; and opportunities to call out successes are all good tools in this regard.

The transformation journey is one with deep emotional seams, something which probably does not get enough attention now that the focus has shifted so heavily to numbers and scorecard performance. As examples, there are the doubters who believe that transformation can only be achieved at their cost; those that feel that progress has not been fast enough; and those that worry that even if they are supportive, they will inadvertently use the wrong language and get themselves into hot water as a result. Developing a vision and a common language around transformation; allowing space for people to get to know each other and authentically listening; and responding to people's aspirations, fears and suggestions all help build trust in the process.

While there certainly has been more focus on increasing the numbers of women in the workforce, to keep them in the work force, we need to put more focus

on belonging and inclusion – specific interventions to create an environment where people from diverse backgrounds feel they belong and where they are deliberately included in all the relevant activities they need to be in to perform optimally. When people can go to work and don't have to waste time and energy trying to fit in or in trying to conform, they are able to bring the best of themselves. In my experience, this results in better outcomes for the business, but also for the employees. Relooking at: long established rituals (such as expectations re attendance at weekend sports events or evening drinks); company "banter"; who is expected to play what role at a meeting (as an example, is it often the women who take the meeting notes); and even dress code are all part of these types of interventions, although there are many more.

And in this transformation journey, senior women in leadership have a critical role to play. Some of this is simply the recognition of the aspirational impact of having a woman in a senior position. With that goes the acceptance that how one conducts oneself in a meeting and privately; how one treats juniors; how one talks of competitors or colleagues; even how one dresses, are all watched. So too is the importance of creating opportunities for other women. It took me years to realise that my being in a leadership position created hope for others that such roles could be held by women. This is not always a comfortable recognition, but it is a privilege to be in a position where one can honour the responsibility that comes with empowered and engendered leadership.

So, in this women's month, my hope is that we recognise the upside that diversity brings, and that we look more creatively at how we can build deeper diversity in our own organisations. This is a battle that I hope all women leaders will own, but it is also not a battle left for others or only for women: we all have a role to play to create the positive, transformed and engaged space we would like to have found as we worked our way up the ladder. 