Topic: Breaking the status quo – What’s YOUR disruptive idea?

The notion of disruption captures today’s innovation zeitgeist. Nowadays, it seems everyone claims to be a disruptor—particularly young people with an entrepreneurial mindset. Let’s think beyond disruptive innovation in management and look at disruption more generally as something that breaks the status quo—be it in business, politics, science, or society. Pick the one of these four fields you are most passionate about, identify a problem of greater magnitude and come up with a disruptive idea to solve it. Your idea must aspire to inspire top-notch leaders worldwide. Do not free ride on the buzzword “disruption” but rather be bold and develop a truly novel and radical concept to win our prestigious award.

We Owed You Better: The Women’s Corporate Ladder

The Problem: A Man’s World

I had the privilege of growing up in a woman’s world: my classmates, student leaders, teachers, and principal were all women. But I left this world ill-prepared to deal with the actual world: where men hold a monopoly on decision-making power.

Institutionalized gender disparity exists at the highest levels of every profession. The dearth of women in positions of power leads to decisions made by men that cannot effectively address problems faced by the other half of our population. More troubling though, our institutions are set up to perpetuate this gender disparity.

This issue arises from the fact that institutions of the market and state were built by and for men, while the institution of the home was cultivated by and for women. Given this division of society, women face the dual burden of competing against men in their careers as well as being forced to compensate for men in the home.

To succeed in the corporate world, women are told to sit at the table, act selfishly in our choices, and lean in. They are told to channel the masculine markers necessary to dominate in this world. They are told to be someone they are not.

While good intentioned, these solutions do not work because they ask women to overcome barriers by better adapting to the institution as opposed to abolishing barriers and better adapting the institution to women. The onus is thus on the woman to adapt herself to a man’s world. And when a woman does succeed against all odds, she is exalted as an example of what can happen if only you adapt, setting up future generations of women for failure. We cannot expect gender parity given this model of a one size fits all institution.

The inability of women to reach the top of the corporate ladder is not a failure of women, but a failure of institutions. The question is not how do you succeed in a system that wasn’t built for you. We have seen time and time again that some women can and do succeed. The question is, how can every woman have the opportunity to succeed in a system that wasn’t built for them. The answer to me is quite simple: the system must change.

So how do you disrupt the status quo to bring about a new system where all top roles are accessible to women?
Disruption: Changing the Ladder

Clayton M. Christensen describes disruptive technologies as a product or service offered to a new set of customers. I envision this new set of customers as women in the corporate world and I believe they’re ready to buy a different corporate ladder.

Breaking the status quo for women in the corporate world requires disruption of the current system in order to create one that is built not just with men in mind. This can be done at three points along the corporate ladder: one, at the bottom of the ladder, before female leaders step on post-education; two, at the middle of the ladder, where female leaders fall off because they have a baby; and three, at the top of the ladder, where female leaders sometimes make the decision to prioritize their families instead of continuing to the top.

Specifically, I propose a gender-sensitive approach to the MBA, mandatory maternal and paternal leave, and the restructuring of our current school schedule. In order to fully explore the potential benefits of these changes, the suspension of disbelief with respect to their political feasibility, unfortunately, must be employed.

The Bottom of the Ladder: A Gender-Sensitive Approach to the MBA

The MBA is viewed as a necessity for top-tier managerial positions, and seen by women as a way to break the glass ceiling, making it an appropriate starting point for the corporate ladder. Interestingly, we see the problem of gender disparity manifesting itself right away in terms of pay and advancement, begging the question, what happens before women have even entered the workforce?

A study of MBA grads from top schools around the world revealed the following: high-potential women make $8,167 less than men in their first post-MBA job, are more likely to start their careers in an entry-level position, and receive fewer mission critical roles that predict advancement when compared to men. While men outnumber women in top-tier MBA programs across both Canada and the US, they also perform better in those schools. Top schools such as Harvard and Columbia report that men, on average, have higher GPAs. So what accounts for these differences and how

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do we address them? Could a gender-sensitive approach\(^9\) to delivering the MBA increase women’s performance both during and after the program?

In a landmark, informal study performed at the Harvard Business School (HBS),\(^{10}\) they decided to do something radical: teach to both the males and the females. They underwent a transformative “gender makeover,” changing “curriculum, rules, and social rituals to foster female success.” With these changes came dramatic results: based on interviews with more than 70 professors, administrators and students, the school had become a better place for women with increased female participation in class, record numbers of women winning academic awards, and a much-improved environment.

In 2014, the dean of HBS made a remarkable public apology. In a ballroom filled with 600 alumni and guests, Dean Nitin Nohria conceded that there were instances when women at HBS felt “disrespected, left out, and unloved by the school.” He told a hushed room: “I’m sorry on behalf of the business school, the school owed you better, and I promise it will be better.”\(^{11}\) Perhaps it’s time we encourage MBA programs to think critically on the way in which they deliver education so as to provide this “better.”

**The Middle of the Ladder: Mandatory Parental Leave\(^{12}\)**

While much work has been put into extending paid maternity leaves and keeping women connected to the workplace while they are at home so they stay on the corporate ladder, studies reveal a more complex story:

> At every stage in their careers, women do more housework and child care than men—and there appears to be a link between the amount of work people do at home and their leadership ambition. While 43 percent of women who share responsibilities evenly with their partner aspire to become top executives, only 34 percent of women who do a majority of housework and child care have the same aspiration. This trend holds true for men: the more work they do at home, the less interested they are in very senior leadership.\(^{13}\)

Why not share the burden of responsibility so that both parents are set up for success?

Canada is a good case study for paternal leave. In 2006, the Quebec Parental Insurance Plan was introduced, which included leave that applies exclusively to fathers. According to Statistics Canada, the proportion of new fathers in Quebec who claimed or intended to claim parental benefits

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\(^9\) A gender-sensitive approach could include the following: professors required to call on male and female students equally in class; an equal number of male and female protagonists featured in examples and case studies; a professor using examples in class, with male and female pronouns used interchangeably with the same frequency; an equal number of male and female of equal seniority speakers during the course of the year; and separate workshops offered to males and females on how to find and cultivate sponsorship relationships in the workplace.

\(^{10}\) Kantor, 2013.


\(^{12}\) For simplicity sake, but also to capture the overarching picture, this model is based off of a two-parent model with a mother and a father. Regrettably, the analysis was not done for a mother-mother, father-father, or other non-mother and father model.

increased from 27.8% in 2005 to 85.8% in 2015. This is compared to the rest of Canada over the same period, an increase from 10.7% to 11.9%.14

If paternity leave is a financial option, fathers will take it, thus redistributing the share of work at home. Not only does paternity leave help at the beginning of child-rearing, but benefits extend into the later years as well, where fathers who took paternity leave “were more likely to feed, dress, bathe, and play with their child long after the period of leave had ended.”15

But encouraging paternal leave without coupling this encouragement with tangible policies will not fix the problem as we saw in Canada. Imagine a world in which both maternity and paternity leave were mandatory and paid for in a way consistent and appropriate in that economy. The implementation models could be creative, but the outcome would be the same: 1) more men involved in sharing the workload at home and 2) a reduced stigma attached to parental leave.

If this feels like a serious limit on personal choice, consider the extensive number of countries that have mandatory military service. These countries signal to their citizens that military programs are an integral part of their society, so much so that the limit on freedom is justifiable. Do we not consider the responsibility of raising the next generation just as integral to society as the military?

Not everyone will have a child and not everyone will directly benefit from this policy, but the collective cultural change would create a place where no woman is forced off the ladder.

**The Top of the Ladder: Changing School Schedules**

The final rung on the ladder to address is what happens when children are grown and women have to choose between raising a family and reaching the top. Here, we can look to Gloria Steinem for inspiration: “The first problem for all of us, men and women, is not to learn, but to unlearn.” We need to unlearn a system that once worked when women stayed at home to raise the kids, but no longer applies. It’s a remarkably simple ask: change school schedules.

While bold and radical, admittedly, this idea is hardly novel. In her famous essay, “Why Women Still Can’t Have It All,” Anne-Marie Slaughter recounts:

> My longtime and invaluable assistant, who has a doctorate and juggles many balls as the mother of teenage twins, e-mailed me while I was working on this article: “You know what would help the vast majority of women with work/family balance? MAKE SCHOOL SCHEDULES MATCH WORK SCHEDULES.”

And I say this idea is hardly novel not only because it is mentioned here, but because a quick search reveals women have been saying it for years. But then why has this policy never been formally and publically explored by our politicians? Might it be because it does not significantly affect the people with the power to make the change?

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Closing Thoughts: A New Ladder

While each of these ideas have been floated or talked about in isolation, I think packaging them together is what offers a truly novel approach to addressing society’s collective failure to support women to the top. Together they represent a bold and radical vision: a system built with women in mind.

G.D. Anderson writes that “Feminism isn’t about making women stronger. Women are already strong. It’s about changing the way the world perceives that strength.”

Women are already strong. They don’t need to be stronger in order to climb to the top of the corporate ladder. They need a new ladder, one that everyone can climb.

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