
Inspiring Women

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On the week that saw Muirfield Golf Club finally open its membership to women and the celebrations surrounding International Women's Day last week it's been a month where gender equality has been high on the agenda.

I was lucky enough to attend the Management Today 'Inspiring Women In Business' conference in Edinburgh last week; and in many of the brilliant speakers' repertoires it stood out to me just how much some things have changed. I think most of us today would be shocked at being given a desk outside the rest of your team's office just because you were female – even though you were doing exactly the same job because that was 'where the women sat' (Sky's Karen Stilman recalling her first STEM role as a graduate).

Having often been sceptical of these events before, I was both inspired and touched by the (at times) raw emotion and brutal honesty of the speakers. From very different industries, backgrounds, career paths, ethnic backgrounds, family situations and of course personalities, what struck me most was this undercurrent of strength through vulnerability amongst the way the speakers spoke and handled their interviews. There were also some common themes which emerged time and time again.

- – For many of the speakers their career path had not been perfectly mapped, but was the combination of being prepared and willing to step up to a new opportunity and challenge. The observation here was often that what stopped women in this situation was not as simple as confidence or experience; but being brave enough to take the risk that you may not succeed (or be perfect at first!) and the self-belief to know that you can try. There was often cited the role of key supportive managers and sponsors who pushed the speakers on to take that step.
- – That there was a benefit to developing breadth of experience both within a business (and even across sectors) rather than taking the most direct route to seniority – that gaining competence, knowledge and experience are critical especially when changing roles and moving sectors. There is real value in having done every job in the business.
- – That learning to channel self-belief and recognising the unique value which you add by bringing your authentic self and experience to a role can be more important than simple ‘confidence’ in battling bias in its many guises.
- – That both men and women have a role to play in creating success in their businesses; that men also have an important and positive role as ‘agents of change’; and that there was a real focus on gender diversity and equality rather than traditional feminism.
- – That it’s complicated, and that ensuring true diversity in any organisation (whether gender, ethnicity, age or education) requires

continuous, long term commitment from all managers and senior leadership teams alike. As such, creating the right support, training and focus for those in management roles is also crucial.

- – The importance and value of mentorship and sponsorship in helping to create a genuinely diverse pipeline of potential candidates for senior roles in any business; from STEM sectors and financial services to Greggs or even fashion (where they have the opposite problem and are trying to attract more male candidates).
- – That being a working Mum is a difficult balancing act, often at a point where you are facing a more demanding role. But that making it work for you successfully comes down to understanding and being clear with yourself, your family and your colleagues about your own values and priorities. It was great to see so much honesty and diversity of views / experience on this subject throughout the day.
- [Jaqui Low's](#) sheer bravery in taking on challenge after challenge; and her team rule for when things really don't go your way (one which I will definitely be stealing) – 'You get a day to huff. Then get back to it'.

For me there was real value in hearing a range of views (at many times conflicting!); in debating the issues openly and honestly, and in hearing a real range of different experiences. The format created a uniquely safe space and I found myself having real and in depth conversations with delegates and speakers alike throughout the day as we all reflected on some of the topics covered.

It set out to inspire; and for me the tone of the day was summed up by the inspiring bravery of Emma Lawton. She's a Creative Director who was diagnosed with Parkinsons at just 29. For many reasons her story really touched me. Not just her courage in speaking about living with such a devastating diagnosis; but her determination to battle the symptoms to keep working and the ingenuity and support of the many people who have helped her do this. She spoke eloquently about the value of being open and honest with those around you at work

when dealing with the really tough things which can suddenly happen in any of our lives (male and female alike). That there is no right thing to say but that there is such value in simply asking how it is going today. One uplifting highlight was the fantastic creation of bespoke wearable tech to help her write and draw again despite the tremors – you can watch the full film here <http://www.bbc.co.uk/news/magazine-38208814>.

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