

How to handle being 'the only' in the boardroom

 By Leigh Andrews

10 Dec 2018

From queen bee syndrome to unchecked micro-aggressions and struggling to deal with being 'the only' in the boardroom, Corinium's Women in Digital and Data Forum touched on many topics that may be subconsciously holding back our businesses from becoming more inclusive.



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Neebashnee Kristnasamy, head of projects and the digital transformation programme at Sanlam Private Wealth, shared the first keynote presentation at Corinium's Women in Digital and Data Forum.



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Based on [McKinsey's 2017](#) 'Women and the world of work': Western Europe data, the statistics are harsh – the percentage of females entering the workforce is 43%, yet just 3% make it to C-suite level. And of those, just 1 in 17 are women of colour.

It's not all bad news though, as *The United State of Women* confirms that since the launch of The 3% Conference in 2012, the number of women creative directors at ad agencies and in creative leadership roles has increased to 11%.

But that's slow progress on a global level, and unfortunately, what we say and do in this regard is often different. From a practical level, it's clear that women continue to be vastly underrepresented in the workforce, especially at senior level.

Here are a few reasons why...

Dispelling myths of working women

Kristnasamy says we tend to talk about gender diversity more than before, but in most cases, it's all talk, no action. Without action, the situation stays stagnant.



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Kristnasamy says women in the workplace are limited from the outset, as there tends to be an unconscious bias which is very hard to measure.

Unfortunately, this is where we hear the buzz of the '**queen bee**' **syndrome**, because if you're the only one in that space, sometimes you can feel your position is under threat as they're 'after my job'.

To get around this, Kristnasamy says we need to make an active decision to promote other females.



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Stop micro-aggressions from becoming macro-aggression

Also, remember that discrimination is usually on more than gender – we need to actively strive to become as inclusive as possible.

That's when Kristnasamy mentioned micro-aggression and macro-aggression. Only a handful of hands went up across the room when she asked if anyone was familiar with the term. [Learn Liberty](#) defines it as follows:

“Micro-aggressions, defined as real or perceived everyday verbal, nonverbal, and environmental slights, snubs, or insults that communicate negative or hostile messages to marginalised or 'perceived marginalised' people. This usually takes place in one-on-one conversations.”

An example of micro-aggression? “You're so pretty/smart for a black girl.”

This signals a lack of respect and understanding and the acting out of an inequality of power. These micro-aggressions, in turn, build up and become macro-aggression, in the form of discrimination against an entire race, gender or sexual affiliation.

Kristnasamy added that when we think of sexual discrimination, many of us think of the #MeToo movement and how mind-blowing it was to see so many women across the globe chiming in with their stories.

Being the “only” in the boardroom

So what do you do if you’re the only female or the only person of colour on the team or worse, in the company or overall industry? Kristnasamy said it’s not as special as it sounds.



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You stand out as you’re not the norm, and being the only female represented can cause women to feel they are under greater pressure to perform, and that they are more closely watched and held to higher standards of performance, whether that’s true or not – it’s usually another unconscious bias.

Explaining what to do to get around this, Kristnasamy said we need to be unorthodox and speak out in terms of policies and norms in our workplaces, so we don’t just cater for a dominant group.

Kristnasamy also said, “You do you,” as doing so gives other women the space to be themselves, and empowers them in the process.



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Doing so means you’re allowing everyone to be heard, and individually making the effort to ask questions and speak up.

We also need to work to recognise unconscious bias at that moment when something is said and in the moment you respond.

Lastly, Kristnasamy said it's important to respect the fact that your employees have a life beyond the office. True work-life balance is hard to achieve, but many of us are more productive when we're away from the desk. Productivity isn't necessarily linked to physical presence and a time commitment.

Kristnasamy ended by showing the following video

The video brought home the message of the session, to take the concept of your life, realise there are bigger challenges out there to be faced, and you can do it.

Watch for more coverage of the Corinium Women in Digital and Data conference in my next few [#FairnessFirst](#) columns.

ABOUT LEIGH ANDREWS

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