

Keep the pink cupcakes. Give us real change...



By [Donna Rachelson](#)

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South African business has a serious diversity problem - only 3.3% of [listed companies](#) have female CEOs and 85% of CEOs are white, despite an increase from 2018. According to an [analysis](#) of thousands of 360-degree reviews, women outscored men on 17 of the 19 capabilities that differentiate excellent leaders from average or poor ones. There's mounting research that women are better leaders.



Donna Rachelson, author and CEO of Branding & Marketing YOU

According to those who work most closely with them, women make highly competent leaders. In fact, the study showed that women are thought to be more effective in 84% of leadership competencies that are most frequently measured, particularly taking initiative, acting with resilience, practicing self-development, driving for results and displaying high integrity and honesty.

However, when women are asked to assess themselves, they are not as generous in their ratings. This aligns with my understanding from hundreds of conversations with women in the workplace.

Women's Month is observed in August to honour a profound act of dignity and unity, when in 1956, women of all races from all over South Africa marched to the Union Buildings to protest the pass laws. In my view, we should honour the actions of the women of 1956 and our leaders by improving the lives of South African women instead of turning August into a time to succumb to pink platitudes and pink cupcakes on desks 'to recognise our women'.

It is baffling that we are still having discussions about the benefits of more women in leadership positions, when volumes of research make this point. And yet here we are. The problem is that we don't seem to be moving the dial. In August especially, it's great that we talk more about the value of women in society, but we need more action.

Make a bold move

It's time for South African employers to look at their businesses. It's time to make at least one bold move. Start to measure something you haven't previously measured. Actively investigate whether there are institutional barriers for women that have crept into your organisation.

What are you doing as an employer of women? What is the gender pay gap in your organisation? Do you have flexible working options? Are women being recruited, promoted and retained in your business? Is your workplace one in which women are free from unwanted attention? Do women have a voice in your organisation?

Creating a workplace which works for women has the bonus of working for men too. Workplace cultures that place an emphasis on respect are good for business. Diverse workplaces are more creative, happier and more productive.

My challenge and yours is to do something tangible this Women's Month instead of participating in patronising marketing activities that celebrate women in a frivolous way. This comes across as trying to make women feel better about the fact that nothing significant is happening rather than getting to the crux of the issue.

The crux is that we are still justifying whether women make good leaders. Let's embrace men in the conversation. It is no longer an opinion that having more women at the top is generally more profitable for businesses, or that diversity adds tangible value and impacts supply chains. Let's start holding organisations accountable.

What's holding women back is not lack of capability; it's the lack of opportunity. Business leaders need to consider what is causing this lack of opportunity – is there unconscious bias at play?

In 1956, 20,000 South African women stood powerfully silent for 30 minutes and then started singing a protest song *Wathint'Abafazi Wathint'imbokodo!*, which represents courage and strength: you strike a woman, you strike a rock.

It is a travesty to reduce this day in our history to cheap marketing gimmicks. Instead, let's celebrate great South African leaders – both men and women – who inspire others to do more than they thought possible in business, in education, in politics, in life.

Six things businesses can do this Women's Month:

1. Ensure targets, reporting and accountability reflect a commitment to ensuring more women in senior positions. It should be rare for women to be the only female at their managerial level.
2. Ensure that hiring and promotions are fair and don't make assumptions about what women with families want or don't want.
3. Recognise unconscious biases and everyday discrimination, which appears subtly and is amplified towards people perceived as having less power and ensure that senior leaders become advocates of diversity.
4. Foster an inclusive and respectful culture that provides opportunities for women to showcase their achievements and ask for promotions on account of their work.
5. Offer employees flexibility and consider creative ways to bring women who have taken a break in their career back

into the workplace.

6. Underscore that sexual harassment is unacceptable and will not be overlooked. HR teams need detailed training, so they know how to thoroughly and compassionately investigate claims of harassment, even if senior leaders are the harassers.

ABOUT DONNA RACHELSON

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