“Women in Asia: Understanding diversity and Building Skills.”

Introduction

As the last and only male panelist, I feel a great weight on my shoulders speaking about women, and diversity. From a male’s perspective, it can simply be summed up as follows: Men just do not understand Women!

But on a serious note, What is it about Women in Asia that Australians need to understand in terms of diversity, and building skills in order to have an Asia-competent leadership and do effective business in Asia?

Diversity is a complex issue. No one can truly understand diversity because we will never stand in the shoes of the other. The starting point, however, can be to ask the other and not make assumptions about the other.

In Asia diversity is hardly a subject of discussion. I do not think the issue is about a lack of difference of thought and perspective nor is it about non-inclusion. Rather it is about understanding women’s experience and role in different cultures. It is also simplistic to assess that the underlying reasons for gender inequality between the West and the East are similar. The issue of gender imbalance in Asian corporations and businesses is deeply rooted in one’s race, culture, religion and/or philosophy.

In the professional workplace, anecdotally speaking I have found there to be an equal number of female partners to male partners in the larger Asian professional services firms. Women in Asian family businesses have a significant

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leadership role in managing the wealth of the family and their philanthropic endeavors. Women in Asia have also reached the pinnacle in politics.2

Notwithstanding the comparable inequality of opportunities for women in Asia and in the West, we can contribute to a better outcome for diversity when doing business in Asia and take positive steps of inclusion.

To illustrate my own perspectives, I will refer to two Chinese proverbs and share with you a framework to assist you in building appropriate skills for engagement with people and businesses in Asia. I call this framework - the 5Rs of Engagement.

A point of contrast

In 2015, the United Nations Department of Economics and Social Affairs estimated that Asia 3 has a population of 4.393 billion people. 4 49.6% of the world’s population is female. The percentage is similar in Asia. Despite the population ratio between men and women remaining equally balanced, there remains an imbalance of representation in all facets of leadership across the globe.

In a study by Catalyst done over a decade ago on Advancing Women in The Workplace: What Managers Need to Know5 it surveyed 413 Asian women in the US in entry and mid-entry corporate roles about what they thought were impediments for them as Asian Americans. Catalyst found that Asian women felt overlooked by their company’s diversity programs and policies.

Many Asian women consider that they lacked key professional relationships (e.g. sponsors at the higher level) which acts as a significant barrier to their advancement prospects. Another significant impediment is the cultural background of Asian women, which could be at odds with a dominant corporate culture. For example, women who have migrated to Australia from Asia are more likely to adhere to their Asian cultural background at their work place and place greater importance on abiding by the rules such that they often don’t directly challenge how things are done.

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3 China and India have over 1 billion people. Indonesia; Pakistan; Bangladesh; Japan and Philippines have over 100 million people. See Asian Countries by Population (2016). Retrieved 18 June 2016 from http://www.worldometers.info/population/countries-in-asia-by-population/.
Today, in Australia, women make up 15.4% of CEO positions despite making up 45.95% of the labor force today. A recent snapshot by Catalyst found that:

- women hold 27.4% of key management personnel positions but one quarter of organisations continue to have no women in those positions;
- women hold 33% of senior management roles; and
- women represent 23.6% of directors on Boards.

The changes made to the ASX Corporate Governance Code have seen an increased of the percentage of women on ASX 200 boards from approximately 9% in 2006 to 23.6% as at 31 May 2016. By developing a constructive pathway for women’s advancement and setting achievable targets, there is empirical evidence of positive improvements being made towards gender diversity in corporate Australia.

While more women in Australia are joining the boardroom due to recent legislative efforts and other affirmative initiatives of diversity and inclusion, an analysis by Deloitte has sadly confirmed that 90% of the world’s board seats still belong to men.

In Asia, at the higher end of the spectrum women have made greater strides in gender representation in government leadership. Women have become heads of governments. For example:

- the first female head of Government was from Sri Lanka – Sirima Bandaranaike (1960);
- India - Indira Gandhi (1966);
- Philippines - Corazon Aquino (1986);
- South Korea – Han Myung Sook (2006);
- Indonesia - Megawati Sukarnoputri (2001);
- Thailand – Yingluck Shinawatra (2011);
- Taiwan – Tsai Ing-Wen (2016).
- Australia’s first female Prime Minister was elected in 2010.

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Statistics are generally helpful to provide a snapshot of the environment and identify gaps therein, however at the grass roots of engagement, there remains a discrepancy between the genders in terms of Respect, Recognition, and Reward.

In sharing my own perspectives on this topic, I speak as a male person who is culturally Malaysian Australian, and racially Chinese. Defining one’s culture and race is therefore an important key to unlock the understanding of diversity beyond merely tagging it to having a difference or limiting it to gender alone.

**Perspectives**

There is a Chinese proverb: *Women can lift half the sky. The proverb is translated to mean women can do everything that men can do.*

In ancient times in China, the matriarch was considered the repository of her ancestral history and is powerful. She ran large households, often comprising of hundreds of staff including children, concubines and their children. She learnt from an early age the skills of the CEO, COO and CFO. These skills, traditions and experiences are also passed down from the matriarch to her daughters over generations.

In contrast, in the Western culture, it is common for the leader or the boss to dominate the conversation. In the East it is not necessarily the case. In a dominant matriarchal family business, the younger Western educated male Asian person is more likely tasked with speaking to the Western businessperson and the petite and/or quiet Asian woman is profiling the people and situation.

It is a mistake to assume that Asian women are less qualified than men because they may not appear to be in the front-line of engagement in business.

There is another Chinese proverb that all wise Asian women know and all Asian men reluctantly acknowledge - *That the man may be the Head but the wife is the Neck that moves the Head!*

The Asian patriarch may be regarded as the head of the household but the matriarch is the one who leads and maintains the operations. That typifies what goes on in Asia. If you want to know what is happening in business, ask the woman.

There is, however, a difference in the interpretation of what this proverb mean. To the West, it is taken to mean that the woman controls the man - she moves his head! In the East, it goes beyond pulling the strings. The Neck and Head are a package that function together. There is a yin-yang duality in the relationship
between the Asian female and male. It is dialectically opposite yet pieced together it brings balance and harmony.

This duality of relationship covers both vertical and horizontal family relationships. It involves the parents, siblings, and spouses across several generations. A large number of big Asian corporations and businesses are owned and operated by the family, and extended family.

It is therefore unsurprising that the Asian family’s involvement in a business transaction is therefore considered to be part of the package. In the West, a written contract is regarded as the outcome of a long and often protracted negotiation process. To the Asian it is only the beginning of a long, loyal and rewarding relationship where parties are expected to be nimble and adaptive. Therefore, it is not unusual for the Asian party to involve their immediate family, including their extended family, in the process.

Dangerous Assumptions

These two proverbs are inter-related. Western men often underestimate the power and/or influence of the Asian wife or mistress. It is a fatal mistake to ignore them. Asian kinship ties are very strong and this allows women as mothers, sisters, daughters, and even mistresses of those in power to exercise unofficial power behind the scenes.

My wife’s experience is that Western men routinely assume in her presence that her Caucasian staff is the boss, presumably because she appears soft-spoken and petite. It is important not to make these assumptions when dealing with Women in Asia!

I also observe an interesting occurrence in Australia with the rise of Chinese entrepreneurs engaging in big businesses. The successful Chinese businessman often brings his girlfriend to an informal meeting. This social behavior is often confusing and alien to the Western culture. It is also a male attitude prevalent in certain Asian cultures.

The girlfriend or mistress is very influential and while it might be, rightly or wrongly, abhorrent to the Western culture, do not make assumptions nor ignore her presence. It is these sorts of complexities that frequently make or break a business transaction because of the ignorance in understanding the influence of Women in Asia even though it is regarded by Western standards as belonging to an anachronistic patriarchal culture.

The mother is also very influential. For example, the surname of the mother was customarily passed down to her children. It is no wonder that the
word “surname” in Chinese “姓” includes the character for female “女”. Asian women usually retain their maiden name after marriage and are commonly addressed as “Madam”.

As Australia moves into a renewed engagement and dependency on trade and commerce with its Asian neighbours particularly in the increasing demand for service and knowledge based exports into Asia, it will need to appreciate that there is no longer a Western way of doing things in Asia.

That is not to say that there is an Asian way of doing things but I believe there is a better way of doing things that is founded on a better understanding of the diversity of the culture and the intelligence required to permeate into the deeper workings of the Asian mindset.

The need to understand diversity and how it relates to women in Asia is only a part of the process. It is complex and it will take time for the world to see true equity and equality across all facets of our society. In the mean time, I suggest a framework for engagement and developing the cultural intelligence needed to engage with business people in Asia.

**Building skills – 5 Rs of Engagement**

My own perspectives, therefore, can be summarised within a framework, which I call the 5 Rs’ of Engagement. For Australian businesses to understand and build appropriate skills set to engage with Asia, it is important to understand the profile each of the 5 Rs.

1. Royalty
2. Ruling Party
3. Religion
4. Race
5. Relationship to Influence

**Royalty**

By *Royalty* I refer to those with Royal status, Honorific titles, Hierarchical Class and Social Status. They have Money, Power and/or Influence.

In Asia many big businesses are owned and/or controlled by members of established Families. For example, in Malaysia they are members of the Royal family; Asian Godfathers;¹⁰ People with Honorific Titles.¹¹

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¹⁰ The older tycoons in Asia are often called the “Asian Godfathers”, a phrased coined by Joe Studwell in his book “Asian Godfathers: Money and Power in Hong Kong and South East Asia”.

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Title, however, does not equate to power. But Title is indicative of a hierarchy of power. Ultimate power lies behind the person who controls the purse string. When dealing with Asia, it is important to factor in the profile of the *Ruling Party* and obtain direct or indirect support.

Daughters from these established Families often take the helm of family businesses and they have the greatest sponsors – their Fathers. Sugar tycoon Robert Kuok’s daughter, Yen Kuok, recently launched a secondhand designer handbag online business. She graduated Phi Beta Kappa from Stanford University with a degree in international relations. She is reported as having told her teacher that she wanted to be her dad’s boss because she considered her father represented the ultimate pinnacle of achievement and success.  

*Ruling Party*

By *Ruling Party* I refer to those who wield the true power in politics, in business and in the family. They may be the head of the dominant political party; the ultimate decision maker in a corporation or in a family businesses.

*Religion*

By *Religion* I refer to the mainstream religions prevalent in a particular Asian country. For example, Malaysia is a predominantly Muslim country. But there are other religious practices – Catholicism, Hinduism, Buddhism, Taoism, etc.

*Race*

Race is a frequent topic of conversation at the dinner table amongst Asians living in Malaysia and Singapore. Not all Asians are Chinese. Similarly, not all Chinese are Chinese. The West often pigeon-hole the Chinese as being part of a culture but being Chinese is part of a race, and the culture of the Chinese depends very much on where he or she comes from. The Chinese diaspora is over 40 million people, with the largest congregation of the Chinese living in Thailand. There are Singaporean Chinese, Malaysian Chinese, Hong Kong Chinese, Indonesian Chinese, Taiwanese Chinese, Mainland Chinese, etc.

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In China, following the establishment of the Communist regime, equality between men and women changed when the leaders ensured that both men and women address each other a “comrade”.

**Relationship to Influence**

Cultural differences and language have an impact on how one builds relationship. The 4 Rs are connected to each other by bridging the Relationship to the Influence each R brings to the engagement with Asia.

**Conclusion**

Discussion on diversity is often aligned to considerations of gender equality of opportunity. The problem is that there is no genuine level playing field in Asia given its diverse demographics in terms of race, custom and religion.

In order to effectively engage with Asia, in my view there is, firstly, a need to understand the racial and cultural make-up of Asian men and women. Secondly, when dealing with Asian women, Australian businesses will do well to readjust how they perceive things from a Western perspective and adopt a framework of engagement that could be used to tailor a more effective response.