

Unpacking general
equality:

The importance of
intersectional analysis

LM Consulting

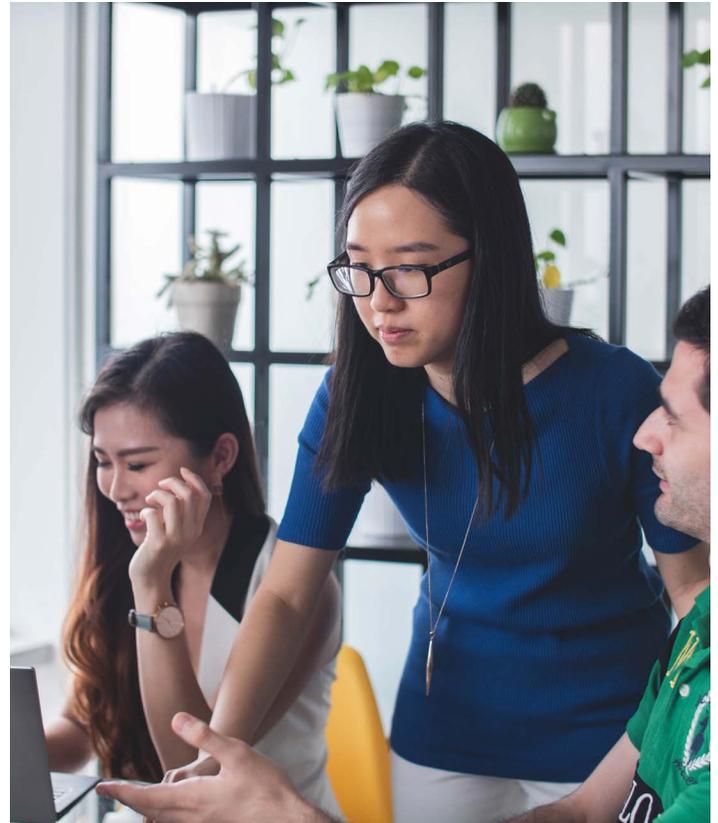
The importance of intersectional analysis

Gender equality can seem like one big homogeneous bowl of intentions demonstrating that we care about women. In many cases, that is an apt description: companies do care about women, people within companies care, and there is a general understanding that when women win, everyone wins.

Beyond this simplified vision, though, we need to understand that gender equality is as multi-faceted and multi-dimensional as racism. A deeper consideration reveals that women sit at many different intersections. Failure to explore these deeper issues denies companies the opportunity to achieve more in terms of gender equality. Acknowledgement of the prevalence, variety, and nuance of intersection, on the other hand, creates more meaningful and long-lasting impact.

A starting point for examination of the intersections professional women span is disparities in earnings. The gap between what Black women, white women, Asian women, and Latino women earn is huge, and differs with geography. In America, Asian women are top earners; in Europe, white women are. Latinas in America are the lowest earners; in Europe that sad position is occupied by Black women.

The standard benchmark then, is a goal that women be paid and treated the same as men (specifically white men, who sit at the top of the food chain). This assumes that all women occupy a single grouping, to be measured against white men, and entirely misses the stratification of different groups of women. The idea that all women have the same opportunities – that a rising tide will affect all women -- ignores the re-



ality that feminism has done nothing specifically for Black women.

We know that historically, white women have not helped Black women come forward. We know the limits of a trickle-down effect in this space when we don't include race in the equation of feminism. Even as growing numbers of well-meaning white women work on issues racism and diversity, their lived experiences do not afford them the broadest possible perspective simply because they have not sat at the same intersection as Black women.

This has predictable results. The voices that get heard are those with the loudest microphones, who are by definition not those who suffer the most deeply. This unavoidably skews a company's plan for addressing gender equality.

If the group you have tasked with studying gender in your workplace is led by white women, or by one or more Black women who are “almost” white, nuances have been lost. Ignoring colorism and the very different rites of passage experienced by light-skinned versus darker-skinned Black women further complicates and dilutes your analysis. Understanding the multiple layers of gender equality requires deeper exploration, and actually learning about the different issues faced by each woman in your advisory group and your broader corporate community.

A better structure for change centers on the perspective, needs and experience of Black women. Today’s common trickle-down approach is not working; a “trickle up” or “follow up” paradigm would be more



effective. Broadening your efforts and transitioning your leadership focus to helping those who suffer the most will, by default, also help those who suffer to a lesser extent, because you have addressed more challenges, not fewer.

The fundamental opportunity that is missed when we focus solely, or primarily, on white women and amplify their voices to the exclusion of others is that the gaze is not as broad as it needs to be to effect change. Problems faced by women who sit at different intersections are not addressed if the view is too narrow. We need to move beyond sympathy and into the realm of cold, hard facts. This is typically difficult in a business situation because instead of revolving around a traditional set of quantifiable facts and tangible figures, we must learn to incorporate the equally (or even more) significant realm of personal experience. Movement beyond the current concept of looking at “all women” or even “all Black women” as a particular, standardized group takes work. It is challenging to broaden one’s focus and realize that sympathy or even empathy do not suffice. The path to a deeper and more useful understanding is communication. Companies, employers, staff all need to intentionally create opportunities to talk, and to listen. You might not know what your company needs to do better, but someone in your organization does. It is likely not the person with the most powerful microphone.

Critically: this is not a moment or an excuse to place the entire burden on your Black female colleagues. It is not fair to expect them to craft the perfect three-step plan for the company to achieve gender equity in the workplace. All of that is still the job of leadership, who must shift to a position of listening and learning to do that job well. It is not acceptable to stop short, asserting that your efforts are enough. This is a process, not an event.

No one expects a company, or a person, to be perfect, but we must demand that leadership accept responsibility for listening and evolving. Clear actions are the beginning of a growth path, but must be continually followed with dialogue and improvement. Listen to your people, try to understand their experiences, accept that this is very complicated, challenge yourself to explore the multi-layered intersections and realities of gender equality. Only then can a company honestly assess its processes, policies and culture in a way that allows for meaningful change in strategy, keeping always in mind the goal of workplace equity.

It may be painful, but is not difficult, for a company to rate its own gender equality strategy. If you are not consciously incorporating intersectional analysis into your plan, it is time to change. The first step is self-assessment. If the decision-makers within your work-

ing groups are senior staff drawn from a particular professional level and above, you are most certainly missing the contribution of Black women and other women of colour because they are underrepresented in leadership and are more likely to occupy junior roles within the firm. Over-reliance on senior staff by default perpetuates a narrow view by pre-selecting and pre-validating the opinions you will hear. Seniority is also usually correlative to experience and education, which creates an elitist approach to development of gender equality strategies. There is a better way.

For more information on breaking through these barriers to meaningful change, making a tangible difference, and creating a more equitable work environment, please reach out to LM Consulting by email at contact@lmconsulting.com



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