

Inspiring Women Changemakers

'Soft Launch' Report

Prepared by Anj Handa, Founder.

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Inspiring Women Changemakers – Background

Inspiring Women Changemakers is a vibrant movement for women leaders who want to make a positive social impact. Women like you, who lead by example at work or in society.

You have achieved status at work, but it's not all that defines you. You're concerned about wider issues and want to make a difference, in collaboration with others.

Professional women like us are used to challenge; and we know that the old approaches aren't working. We're tired of the reports that tell us the same old stories; of the decision-makers that don't always act in our best interests; and of those that attempt to suppress our voices.

As part of the Inspiring Women Changemakers movement - through our combined networks, creative ideas and expertise - you can help to accelerate change. Collectively, we have great power to influence the issues that matter to us. Join in!

"It's not enough to be intelligent, we also want to be influential"

(Diane Cheesebrough, Deputy CEO, The Big Word)



The Event

Thirty women at Director level and above, from a range of sectors, signed up to attend the 'soft launch' of Inspiring Women Changemakers (IWC). The event was generously hosted by Clarion Solicitors. Equity Partner Justine Osmotherley, and her team deserve special thanks for making it happen.

The event was held at Clarion's Leeds office on 19th October from 5pm to 7pm. Justine, IWC's founder Anj Handa and Diane Cheesbrough, Deputy CEO of The Big Word shared their personal stories and described how Inspiring Women Changemakers has already been working in practice.

In the short round-table sessions, delegates were invited to discuss the issues that they are passionate about with like-minded women and help shape the future direction of the network. The questions they considered were:

1. What frustrates you?
2. What would you like to see change?
3. What could you do?
4. What help/resources would you need?

The evening was rounded off by drinks and networking, with a powerful [rendition](#) of Whitney Houston's 'Step by Step' by singer Sue Hibberd, who recently led the 'One Voice' Choir at first direct arena on World Peace Day.

In general; the discussion can be summarized as follows:

- The desire to 'do' – we've had enough of the same old debate on gender diversity and would like to disrupt this in a positive way
- Why language matters – the (sometimes judgemental/disparaging) way we speak to ourselves and about others
- Amplification – and how to support each other in getting our messages heard
- The potential for a mentoring initiative for young women, initially across Leeds
- Identification of speaking opportunities, especially within educational institutions
- Merit v diversity quotas

More detail below.

Gender equity at work

Better representation

We're fed up of seeing the same old reports on gender diversity. We know that there's an issue, we've also observed that the situation is becoming worse, not better.

Broadly, we agreed that we would like to see women recruited to senior posts based on merit (not quotas) to address gender imbalance on Boards.

However, we also need to be proactive ourselves at putting ourselves or each other for non-executive Board roles.

Maternity

We discussed the subject of maternity, including: virtual demotion after return from maternity leave; a reluctance to hire women who have been 'stay at home' mums and therefore out of the labour market for a time; and HR policies/attitudes towards fathers who would like to play a more active role in childcare.

Imposter Syndrome

Imposter Syndrome: *'...referring to high-achieving individuals marked by an inability to internalize their accomplishments and a persistent fear of being exposed as a "fraud."* Clance, P.R.; Imes, S.A. (1978)

'Imposter Syndrome' may occur at certain points or throughout our careers, despite our professional status. There's a difference between inner esteem and outward displays of confidence. In a [blog](#) on 'covering,' I describe how we sometimes downplay parts of our identity, such as speech, dress and so-called 'soft skills' such as listening skills and empathy.

Leaving our true selves at the office door in this way is unhelpful. It can make us feel incomplete, or feel that we have to work harder [than men] in order to be taken seriously.

What can we do?

- 1) Adopt 'Trojan horse' approaches to disrupt the status quo by discussing one angle (e.g. Health and Safety) then introducing a wider agenda (e.g. Mental Health).

A Case Study: PPG Architectural Coatings UK Limited

Until recently, Sarah-Jane Mills was the lead lawyer for PPG in the UK & Ireland. She led the EMEA Women's Leadership Council and was the Gender Champion on the EMEA Diversity and Leadership Council, working with others to support PPG's diversity initiatives.

Following participation in PPG's global leadership programme, she realised that every other region but EMEA had a Women's Leadership Council – so she launched and led the EMEA Women's Leadership Council for five years.

She encountered some initial resistance, but the 'trojan horse' approach of improving gender diversity within the business led to the introduction of processes and new approaches that supported wider diversity initiatives.

The company was able to roll these out to recruit and retain perceived 'harder to help' groups, such as people with disabilities and ethnic minorities.

- 2) Make a mental commitment to support one another, through Inspiring Women Changemakers and our other networks. There was a recognition that we each need to release judgement about other women. We all encounter similar challenges and can learn from and support each other.

Language and Influence

Language and influence was a theme raised by each group: how women are spoken to; disparaging words used to describe them; how they are frequently interrupted; and so on. This is clearly a matter close to our hearts.

To do the topic justice, I have written a [blog](#) entitled, 'How to get your voice heard... and stop being interrupted!' The blog includes a short downloadable guide on strategies for gaining influence.

What can we do?

[A Case Study: 'Amplification' in The White House](#)

At the beginning of President Obama's first term in 2009, around two-thirds of his top staffers were men. Women staffers often felt their voices were either not being included or ignored. To overcome this, they came up with a strategy called "amplification."

Amplification worked like this: Once a woman in the room made a key point, the other female staffers would repeat it, giving her due credit. This forced the men in the room to recognise the contribution and denied them the opportunity to take the plaudits.

This approach became common practice: there is now an equal split of men and women among his top aides and half of all White House departments are headed by women.

[Social Impact](#)

We are concerned about a range of societal issues that are wider than gender in the workplace. Introductions to organisations.

Support through the network could include sharing of good practice, evaluation tools and introductions to relevant organisations, policy-makers etc.

It's not necessarily about funding – with our collective networks, resources and commercial expertise, we can achieve results without having to depend on grants.

Younger women and Girls

There was a universal desire to support, involve and mentor girls and young women – from school age through to aspiring leaders. Many did not know where to start with speaking opportunities in schools, colleges and universities and the network will enable this.

However, there was a recognition that in some individual cases, public speaking skills will need to be developed before speaking engagements are arranged.

What went well?

- Open and honest discussion, sharing personal stories
- Good starting point, great to network with other senior women facing similar frustrations
- Great contacts

Here are some quotes received following the event:

"Brilliant evening! I love the notion of a movement of change makers. This is a real USP, a different way to drive change. Congratulations."

"A fab event and the beginnings of a wonderful new journey."

"I've never been to an evening like this before, when I've come away with that tingling feeling when you just know that something exciting is beginning."

What's wanted/needed?

- Involvement of younger women
- Skills matrix – delegate details prior to before IWC events & more detailed skills matrix for partners
- Inspirational women speakers
- Longer sessions
- Showcasing of actual or potential projects where members can get involved
- Support: time, energy, expertise, technology

Actions following the event

November 2016

- Follow up with Aspire-igen and new University Technical College in Leeds to discuss speaking/mentoring opportunities.

By Jan 2017

- Production of public speaking skills webinar.
- A masterclass and round-table working on Influence and Language to take place in early 2017 with inspirational speaker. Darshna Soni, Channel 4's Home Affairs Correspondent, has expressed an interest in supporting this event.

If you would like to know more about the event, future direction or learn how you can get involved, visit www.anjhanda.com or email anj@anjhandaassociates.com.

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Some women are meant to change the world, while others are meant to hold it together - Jodi Picoult

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