

The Impact of Faith, Heritage and Upbringing on the Way Women Leaders Influence Others

Supported by



A Roundtable Discussion:

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Foreword

By Anj Handa

“Nearly three-quarters of American women – and over a half of British women – believe that at work, their voices aren’t treated as seriously as a man’s. Clearly, a problem of such magnitude needs solving urgently. It’s damaging to those involved and damaging to the greater economy...” Global public speaking coach, Chris Davidson, Hear and Now book.

Thank you to the Near Neighbours programme in supporting us in bringing together women leaders from a range of faiths and backgrounds. It is such an important piece of work.

I have researched the subject of women in leadership for the last fifteen years and have come across a range of studies on differences in communication style between the genders, but this added dimension of heritage and faith offers a unique angle.

During the roundtable event, we explored whether these additional factors come into play, apart from gender. It was the start of pioneering research.

Of the faiths that were represented, two women identified as Hindu (Punjabi and Gujarati backgrounds), one Muslim, two Catholic, one Anglican, one Anglican Presbyterian and one Church of England.

Introduction

Global Language Solutions provider thebigword hosted the group of women leaders for this influential roundtable event. The discussion was based on whether faith, ethnicity, upbringing or social background have an impact on the way women communicate in their professional lives. The remit of the panel was to explore whether these additional factors impact the way women leaders influence at work.

The event was created by Anj Handa, Founder of Inspiring Women Changemakers, a dynamic movement of women leading transformational change, with the support of the Near Neighbours programme, a national initiative which aims to bring people together in communities. The panellists were women leaders drawn from a range of professional backgrounds as well as diverse personal backgrounds.



They were Liz Wright, a three-time Paralympic medal winner; Aisha Iqbal, a Political Reporter for the Yorkshire Post and Radio Presenter on Fever FM; Anj Handa, a Lobbyist, Speaker and Founder of Inspiring Women Changemakers; Rachel Engwell, the sole female Equity Partner at Grant Thornton in the region; Leanne Bottomley, the Global Head of HR for thebigword; fiction writer Alka Chauhan, Katherine Grasham, whose remit is Children, Young People and Families at the Diocese of Leeds; Justine Osmotherley, sole female Equity Partner at Clarion Solicitors; and Emily A. Tidball, Presence and Engagement Coordinator at Faithful Neighbours.

Gender, Faith and the Boardroom

At the start of the discussion, aims of the roundtable event were outlined. While members of the panel belonged to different faith groups, the reference to faith was framed within a wider spiritual context, encompassing morals and values and the economic and political empowerment of women.

It was agreed at people rarely discuss their faith within the workplace. Rather, their identity tends to be based on other roles that they play e.g. their job title, their family status etc.

Due to the makeup of the group, other cross-cutting themes, including sexual orientation, inter-racial marriage, and marital status and disability, threaded through the debate.

Recruitment, retention and progression

High-performing organisations understand the importance of diversity, knowing that they must attract and develop talent. Given the right support and culture, anyone can become a leader, the best version of themselves. However, these conditions are often missing. In this section, we will explore where things go awry.

Leadership

How people perform is a function of how they feel. Extensive research shows that people want to experience autonomy, mastery and purpose and work, but some company structures hinder their people – including their women leaders – from flourishing.

Emily described the impact of stewardship, which arose during a strategy meeting with her Bishop. It's the ability to manage what you have been given and take responsibility for it, which, in turn, helps you to stand up for yourself.



You are a steward of your resources and do need to have difficult conversations. It's about looking after what you've been given and that helps me to confront things more. It might be hard at the time, but it's important to do so."

Emily Tidball

Discrimination and assumptions

Social status and social mobility: A discussion was had on aspects of social mobility, including accents. Early on in their careers, a couple of panel members were told that if that wanted to progress at work, they would need to modify their Northern accents.

What's in a name? Non-British names also affect employment opportunities. Alka, a writer, has been asked to write under a British pen name to have more appeal. Leanne recalled a former colleague who was addressed as Mickey, rather than Mukhtar.

Anj spoke of her decision to call herself Anj at work and Anju at home. As a former headhunter she described how candidates with names that were difficult to pronounce were routinely put to the bottom of the pile by recruiters.



“A concern could be if you were hindered in some way from progressing because of someone higher up within the organisation.”

Rachel Engwell

Culture and stereotypes:

Religion brings people together, but it has often resulted in stereotype and prejudice as a marker of ‘difference.’ Ignorance and pre-judgement are part of prejudice.

Members of the panel from Christian backgrounds spoke of how they had to square the circle of following a faith (e.g. Catholicism) and at the same time being able to embrace diversity in terms of sexual orientation, for example.



“I find it interesting, because even though I don’t practice Islam, I find that I become the de facto spokesperson in the office. I don’t really have the practical religious knowledge, although I do have the cultural knowledge.”

Aisha Iqbal

Bullying: One member of the panel had experienced bullying at work based on their religious views.

Appearance: The panel agreed that appearance played a large part in the way they are seen and heard as leaders, whether that was down to youthful appearance and height; skin colour and the assumptions that are made about women from certain cultures with regard to autonomy and independence; or disability and the ability to perform certain tasks.

Elizabeth, a Paralympian, spoke of the difficulty that people with physical disabilities face in securing work and made an interesting point about people masking their faith/sexual orientation/mental health to get in a foot in the door.

She informed the panel of a concept known as ‘passing’ which is when people with disabilities attempt to cover up their disability to varying degrees to ‘pass’ as able-bodied people.



“There’s a term in the disability world called ‘passing’. It’s interesting that ‘passing’ or ‘masking’ comes into play on so many levels, including religion.”

Elizabeth Wright

Industry sectors: We are all equal in eyes of God but necessarily in eyes of men. The panel discussed having a seat at the table where men tend to make policies in their likeness.

Emily described how she is currently considering taking a priesthood but feels that much of the teachings have been written by men and she doesn’t want to be pushed into a certain direction.

Masking and Conforming

The panel discussed matching behaviour of women to men particularly the higher they progress within an organisation to be accepted. The group discussed how this can result in some women responding defensively to challenge.



“There’s no need for women to emulate masculine behaviour. We can influence by handling challenging conversations with emotional correctness.”

Anj Handa

Defensive behaviour usually manifests due to underlying insecurity and the pressure that women leaders on themselves about what other people think or expect of them.

Justine agreed with this perspective, discussing how she manages conflict situations at work as Head of Family in a law firm. Emotional correctness, adaptability in challenging situations and having confidence in your views are key factors in the ability to influence.



“I treat others as I want to be treated. This is part of my leadership style.”

Justine Osmotherley

This matching behaviour or appearance to the perceived social norms of a group is a form of conformism that the panel felt was unhelpful and that as they have matured and progressed in their careers, they are less willing to engage in themselves.

Conforming doesn’t simply extend to in-work behaviour, it can also influence how women participate in out-of-hours that are not to their liking or even cause discomfort, such as golf days or after-work drinks.

Aisha described how she would go with the flow, simply so that she would not miss out of potential work assignments.

“My cultural values are Asian/Muslim. There was a time I’d go along to the pub even though I didn’t drink then, because otherwise I’d potentially miss out on work opportunities.” Aisha Iqbal

The panel also discussed where they have stayed silent about their views for fear of offending others.

“Dinner party taboos are religion and politics. Everyone has such diverse views and [religion] is an emotive subject.” Justine Osmotherley



“I don’t talk about my religion because you don’t know who you’ll offend. I worked in Belfast for years and you’re not allowed to talk about your religion there...”

Leanne Bottomley

Self-worth

Self-worth is known by many names, e.g. self-confidence and self-esteem. Whichever name we choose to give it, self-worth is basically an emotional response to the situations going on around us. These responses either positively or negatively affect our confidence in our own attributes and ability.

Our foundations for self-worth are programmed from childhood. As children, the way our peers, parents or guardians, teachers and other influencers in our lives interact with us bring feelings of pride or shame and can influence the way we present ourselves in the world as adults.

These early memories of shame, guilt, vulnerability and fear are set from an early age and many of us carry them throughout our lives, even into old age. Interestingly, Christian members of the group mostly referred to guilt, while the South Asian members of the group spoke about shame (*Sharam*).



“In my last job, although I was openly Christian (because I had to be as part of my job), I wasn’t open about my beliefs. It was a Christian church and I’m Liberal. It was about the fear of not knowing what someone would say to you.”

Katherine Grasham

Enablers

Technology: Alka Chauhan spoke of technology as being an enabler, helping women from diverse backgrounds to get their voices heard through social media, blogging and self-publishing. Yet it isn’t without challenges.



“I’ve battled with it in my writing. I was to do everything correctly and include the values I’ve grown up with.

But will anyone want to read about it?”

Alka Chauhan

Anj agreed with this perspective, citing her own experience of leading a global media and political changemaking campaign.

Indeed, all three panellists of Asian descent agreed that writing has always been a way of expressing views that they would be unlikely to discuss within a family context due to differing religious and cultural views amongst older and younger generations.

Networks: A discussion was had about the value of internal (company-wide) or external networks (e.g. Inspiring Women Changemakers) to create safe spaces in which such themes can be explored.

Positive Character Traits

According to the VIA Institute of Character:

“Spirituality falls under the virtue category of Transcendence. Transcendence describes strengths that provide a broad sense of connection to something higher in meaning and purpose than ourselves.

Spirituality is believed to describe both the private, intimate relationship between humans and the divine, and the range of virtues that result from the relationships.”

The panel discussed faith in a broad sense. While all panellists belonged to a faith group, it was clear what they truly held dear were the fundamental moral principles that underpin all major religions. These are: Respect for others, for life, for dignity, for freedom of religion and conscience, and for freedom of thought and expression.

Rachel said: *“I’ve seen other women in leadership roles become bullish...but your roots determine how you conduct yourself, to speak in an appropriate way.”*

Conclusion

Above all, panellists demonstrated positive character traits such as kindness, compassion, truthfulness, courage, and other virtues associated with the best aspects of society.

The overwhelming message was that they took the best elements of their faith and discarded the rest. Faith simply provides them with a framework for their values.

As Katherine nicely concluded:

“We’re like diamonds. Religion is just one of our facets.”

Report prepared by Anj Handa, Inspiring Women Changemakers.

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