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ELLEN KULLMAN

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In its quest to achieve gender parity in corporate leadership, **PARADIGM FOR PARITY** set what can be considered an audacious goal—50-50 gender parity by 2030

THE FUTURE STARTS NOW

Photograph by fabiocamarastudios.com

WHEN ELLEN KULLMAN WAS in engineering school, some professors would say to her, “You’re the only woman who has ever taken this class.” Kullman, the former CEO of DuPont, thought to herself at the time, “Great! I’m first.”

Years later, Kullman, now a cochair of Paradigm for Parity®, a coalition working to close the gender leadership gap, says, “At the time, I didn’t think of that as a negative. I thought of it as a positive, that I was breaking ground.”

It took many years and a multitude of experiences in the workforce for Kullman to realize that being the only woman in a STEM class, or one of a handful in a field such as engineering, was not only a negative for women as a whole—it was also a negative for the individual and her company.

One of those experiences came early in her career, when she learned that a male coworker who had a similar position, but less accountability in terms of P&L, earned more money than she did. “The difference was he was at a higher level in the org chart, a level that was eligible for the bonus pool.”

Kullman went to talk to her boss about it. “I told him, ‘My job is actually bigger and I think I should be at that level [on the org chart].’ He literally said to me, ‘You don’t have a wife and children.’”

BY
JACKIE
KRENTZMAN

Kullman vowed to make her best effort to ensure equal pay for women in the organizations she worked at.

But it took a few decades before Kullman and the many other women who had the same experience gained the political capital, economic clout, and confidence to push back against this sort of thinking and realistically demand change.

In 2016 Kullman and dozens of other female CEOs and business leaders formed Paradigm for Parity (P4P), a coalition of business leaders, including a number of Fortune 1000 CEOs, committed to solving the corporate leadership gender gap. Today, Kullman serves as cochair with Jewelle Bickford, partner at Evercore Wealth Management, and Sandra Beach Lin, retired president and CEO of Calisolar Inc. Paradigm for Parity’s goal is to achieve full gender parity by 2030, with the near-term goal of women holding at least 30 percent of senior roles. Today, more than 80 companies have committed to achieving parity and pledged to implement the Paradigm for Parity 5-Point Action Plan (see sidebar).

Michelle Murphy, chief diversity officer and VP, global talent, at Ingersoll Rand, says that Kullman’s personal experiences

in the field make her the ideal leader for this initiative.

“Growing up through the engineering ranks to become CEO, Ellen has firsthand experience of the challenges and excitement of growing her career in an industry and corporate workforce traditionally dominated by men,” says Murphy. “Ellen, like many women I know, began her career thinking things would be different and better for women over time. When that didn’t happen after 35 years in the workforce, she decided to make it happen. By cofounding the P4P coalition, Ellen is ensuring that women leaders of tomorrow will have a different set of opportunities than she and her contemporaries did. The same intellect and tenacity that forged her career will be applied to make our P4P goals a reality.”

The pipeline fallacy

FOR MANY YEARS, THOSE FIGHTING FOR gender equity in leadership positions in the workplace focused on the pipeline—if you could bring more women into a given field or company division, that alone would naturally increase the flow of women to upper management.

But the numbers didn’t bear this theory out. Nor did the evidence.

“I think my generation of leaders realized that the pipeline was not the answer when our adult daughters began facing many of the same barriers we faced when we were their age,” says Kullman.

Kullman, who grew up in Wilmington, Delaware, was an outlier in her academic and professional career. She received a BS in mechanical engineering from Tufts University at a time when women were scarce in the field, and a MS in management from Kellogg School of Management at Northwestern. She worked for Westinghouse and General Electric before joining DuPont in 1988. She moved

The Paradigm for Parity® 5-Point Action Plan

1 Minimize or eliminate unconscious bias.

Initiate unconscious bias training. Engage women and men at all levels, starting with the CEO and senior leadership. Ensure that your company leaders comprehend, own, and address the conscious and unconscious biases that prevent women from succeeding.

2 Significantly increase the number of women in senior operating roles.

Make full gender parity (50/50) your ultimate goal. As a near-term goal, target that a single gender will not account for more than 70 percent of a leadership level, from the executive management group downward. Move to 60 percent as a medium-term goal.

3 Measure targets at every level and communicate progress and results regularly.

Set measurable goals and hold yourself and your senior team accountable. Communicate results to your wider organization and board. Expect meaningful progress each year, with the aim of parity by 2030. Work with investors as they increase the pressure to measure and monitor diversity progress. Share statistics with other CEOs and consider publishing results over time.

4 Base career progress on business results and performance, not on presence.

Give women and men control over where and how they work, whenever feasible. Acknowledge the needs and expectations of millennials, an important talent pool. Find ways to work more flexibly to meet the needs of all employees. Create cultural change so that working flexibly is embraced, and not an underused and overtalked-about benefit.

5 Identify women of potential and give them sponsors, as well as mentors.

Meritocracy is an often used and, more importantly, misused belief because our biases affect our view of performance and merit. Women of all backgrounds need career sponsors and access to networks of influence. Men, who are still the majority of leadership, have a critical role to play in advocating for women, both internally and in the wider corporate world. Look for the best within your organization and help them to succeed by assigning each woman a mentor and a sponsor.

up the ladder and was appointed CEO in 2009 and board chair the following year. Kullman has been named one of the 50 Most Powerful Women in Business by *Fortune* and one of the World's Most Powerful Women by *Forbes*. In 2018, she was the recipient of the Diversity Woman Mosaic Legacy Award.

Early in her career, she realized that being a "first" came with disadvantages. In the late 1970s and early '80s when she was interviewing for jobs, some organizations would tell her that they had women's groups that met—the precursor to today's employee resource groups. Kullman told them no, thank you, I don't need that. "I really felt that my own initiative and performance would carry the day," she explains.

Then, when she began showing up for work, she saw, and sometimes encountered personally, gender bias. She became determined that when she moved into management she would close the gender gap.

In the early '90s when she was conducting her first glass-ceiling audit at DuPont, she began learning that the company was paying women less, largely because they

took longer to get promoted into a given role. A woman promoted at a slower rate than a man over 10 years would experience a large disparity in pay.

This didn't sit right with Kullman. So she went to each woman who reported to her and said, "Hey, you've done a great job! Here's a big raise."

The company's reaction?

"They told me, 'You can't do that,'" recalls Kullman. "I replied, 'Well, actually I can.' They then said the women were going to know that they're underpaid. I told them I think they probably already do, and I'm not going to tell them—I'm just going to give them a big raise."

CEOs onboard

OTHER ORGANIZATIONS ARE ALSO WORKING to narrow the gender gap. Paradigm for Parity stands out because it demands that CEOs make a strong personal commitment to gender parity. Oftentimes, the chief diversity officer or the human resources office pushes for change, but neither has the same clout to get widespread buy-in or

"By using our collective clout, we can make a real difference."

convince senior management to implement the necessary steps to bring parity.

"By CEOs leading the charge, the company is saying, 'This isn't the flavor of the month. This is something we are going to commit to and make real progress,'" Kullman says.

Elizabeth Amato, senior vice president, human resources, at UTC, one of the members of the coalition, agrees.

"It's important for CEOs to sign on to the pledge because the tone is always set from the top," she says. "If the CEO and his or her team are not behind this, it won't happen. When the CEO makes the pledge, the entire organization knows it's important."

Paradigm for Parity is getting CEOs to join by appealing not to their sense of what is right, but rather to their interest



(Above, left to right) Sandra Beach-Lin, Ellen Kullman, and Jewelle Bickford

in the bottom line. The coalition is very data driven, and the numbers support the business case for gender equity. A 2016 Credit Suisse research report found that companies with 50 percent women in senior operating roles had, on average, a 19 percent higher return on equity. A 2018 McKinsey report revealed that companies in the top quartile for gender diversity on executive teams were 21 percent more likely to outperform on profitability and 27 percent more likely to have superior value creation.

“The bottom line is that who is in leadership roles matters,” says Kullman.

Paradigm for Parity’s goal of gender parity by 2030 is ambitious, Kullman acknowledges. However, she notes that a few of the companies in the coalition are already at or above 28 percent gender parity in the executive ranks. “And there are others, like Accenture, that have been very public about the fact they’ll be at gender parity by 2025—even in their senior ranks,” she says.

Murphy of Ingersoll Rand and Amato of UT agree that 50 percent parity is no pipe

dream and that their companies are well on the way.

“Yes! 50 percent parity in leadership is doable by 2030,” says Murphy. “We have determined the number of opportunities typically open and available each year and know that there is an available talent pool of highly qualified women.”

“I believe 50 percent parity by 2030 is doable,” says Amato. “In business, we set goals, create plans based on data, track progress, and adjust as needed. That’s what we’ve done here, and we’ve already seen results. At UTC we are already at almost 30 percent parity. There is no doubt in my mind that P4P accelerated our results.”

By stating such an audacious goal, Paradigm for Parity is putting out there a conversation starter that can spur open discussion around the issues and challenges.

“It creates great dialogue,” says Kullman. “I remember one person who said to me, ‘There’s no way I can get to 50 percent. They just don’t graduate enough people.’ I said, ‘Well, why don’t you recruit at MIT?’ They’re like, ‘Why?’ ‘MIT matriculates 50

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percent women,” I said. The person was shocked to hear that.

“I think people are used to using excuses or anecdotes for why it can’t be done. That’s why we want to be very data driven, and we want [to do the training and due diligence] to get unconscious bias out of the picture.”

In a sense, if Paradigm for Parity achieves its 50 percent parity goal or just inches (or leaps) closer, its work will be a success. Raising awareness and in some cases making people and organizations uncomfortable about their gender balance will help move the needle.

“I think all of us [at Paradigm for Parity] learned over the years that we could be part of the problem or part of the solution,” says Kullman. “And that by using our collective clout, we can make a real difference.” *DW*