

Commentary: Bosses, pull back the curtain on pay gap for women

Joanne Cleaver

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You're closing the gender pay gap? Show us the proof.

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The gender gap is a credibility gap.

That's the real reason why few women make it to top leadership, at companies, nonprofits and just about anywhere else.

Last week, a Lean In/McKinsey & Co. report, "Women in the Workplace 2015," reiterated the same statistics as reports released year after year by Catalyst, the U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics and various women's groups — and offered a familiar analysis: Women start strong and fade fast; they have ambitions to reach the top but don't get there.

Repeating the same numbers over and over is not inspiring change.

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What will it take?

I got a glimpse of what works a few months ago, while sitting on the sidelines of a meeting of a hundred women at a New York accounting firm. The women were all in the room for an update from the leaders of their women's initiative (a program intended to coach women through career advancement with the aim of retaining them to partnership). The managing partner of the office, a man, was there too.

After a cheerful summary of new programs and opportunities was delivered by the manager of the women's initiative, the floor opened for questions.

A hand shot up and the owner of that hand — a middle-aged woman — stood up.

"I keep hearing about the pay gap," she said. Her voice wavered at first, but steadied as she continued. "Movie stars are talking about it. The industry is talking about it. But we don't hear anything from ..." and she looked straight at the managing partner, "you."

It was graveyard-quiet in the room.

She went on. "I don't want to know what anybody else makes. But I do want to be sure that I'm making the same, especially considering that I've been here for 15 years. So what are you doing about that? How do I know that we women are being paid fairly?"

The managing partner was dumbstruck. He had nowhere to hide. Then he was rescued by someone from human resources, who popped up and assured the questioner, and everybody else, that the firm was probably going to run compensation audits to detect and correct any pay disparities. "We should do a better job of explaining this," she said.

Well, yes.

So should every employer.

There have been so many programs, for so long, with such paltry results, that it's only logical that women would be skeptical.

In one of its few fresh insights, the Lean In/McKinsey study put numbers to the disbelief. The study reported that 74 percent of company officials say that their CEOs make gender parity a top priority. But only 37 percent of women — precisely half as many — believe that their chief executives make advancing women a top priority. Among women surveyed, 31 percent believe their direct managers are on board with the company's purported gender priorities.

Good intentions don't automatically translate to good results. Or any results.

Transparency builds trust. The more that employers show their work, the more credibility they will have with women.

Show women not just fancy programs, but how, exactly, managers nominate candidates for key executive development programs.

Show women not just a menu of benefits intended to ease work-life conflicts, but also exactly what happens to your career when you take advantage of those benefits.

Show women not just logos, banners, advertisements and stock photos of ladies in business suits, but how companies do better when they collaborate with women-owned businesses.

Show women not just executive posturing about equitable pay for equitable work, but the analysis and accountability that ensures that pay policies translate to actual equal pay.

The accounting firm with the impertinent questioner just stepped up its pay equity program. It told its female staff what it's doing. And it's sharing its plan and early results with other accounting firms.

That's how change happens.

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