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The value women bring to the boardroom

Women's leadership is making headlines. Witness the furor aroused in recent weeks by *Lean In*, Facebook CEO Sheryl Sandberg's provocative book examining the "systemic and cultural inequality" of women. Rose Mercier's compelling article makes an important contribution to the discussion. Matching careful analysis with stark statistics, she presents irrefutable evidence of the value women bring to the boardroom, if allowed in. And, importantly, she tells coaches and organizations how to "create a new normal", one that "reflects different experiences that should be consistently factored into our decision-making." May the discussion lead to change, and soon.

—Sheila Robertson, Journal Editor

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The case for more women on boards

By Rose Mercier

The persistently low percentage of women on corporate, public, and non-profit boards continues to confound regulators, governments, advocates, educators, researchers, think tanks and the public. Is it surprising then, that women are also hard to find on sport organization boards? Of course, this is a generalization. Certain sport organizations actively pursue gender balance and others entrench gender diversity in their bylaws (the Canadian Curling Association and Ringette Canada are two examples. But, *in general*, these are exceptions.

Why does it matter?

Boards (or whatever the name used to describe the small group that is chosen or volunteers to act on behalf of others) make decisions:

- What values do we want our organization to operate by?
- What is our strategy for the future?
- Which goals should our club or association pursue?
- Which goals are most important?
- How should our money be spent?
- What programs or services should we offer?
- Who should we select to lead, coach, officiate or organize?
- What do we consider to be unacceptable behaviour?

These decisions, at every level they are made, have an impact on women and girls in sport. They ultimately determine how easy—or hard—it is to participate, or get involved as a coach, official, or leader, and how supportive the environment is when you get engaged.

In a January 29th article in *The Globe and Mail*, Kim Campbell (Canada's first and, regrettably in her opinion, only female prime minister) spoke about having six of 13 provincial premiers who are women: "Their visibility will change the landscape of Canadian politics and our sense of what is 'normal' in public life." Campbell says we need to care about gender parity in decision-making because "women's lives reflect a different set of experiences that need to be represented deliberately in our democratic deliberations."

Coaches, and everyone who is part of a sport organization, should care about who makes decisions in their clubs—provincial, regional, national, and international federations for the same reason: Girls' and women's lives do reflect different experiences and they should be consistently factored into our decision-making. Decisions made year over year create 'normal' in sport.

Creating a new normal

What is seen as "normal" in a sport association is defined by its organizational culture. Decision-making helps shape that culture. As Clayton M. Christensen notes in a *Harvard Business Review* article: "In other words, culture is comprised of processes, or ways of working together, and of shared criteria for decision-making, which at one point in the organization's history were explicitly debated, but which have been employed so successfully so often, that they come to be adopted by assumption."

Lessons from elsewhere

A growing body of research reveals the importance of diversity in decision-making. In 2007, Lois Joy and Nancy M. Carter reported that Fortune 500 corporations with more women on their boards substantially outperformed those who had the fewest on three bottom-line measures: return on equity, return on sales, and return on invested capital. The April 2012 Catalyst report, "Increasing Gender Diversity on Boards," reported that "A growing number of governments and businesses across the globe are recognizing the importance of gender diversity on boards...the general consensus is that including more women on boards is good for business."

Since 2008, at least nine countries, among them Norway, Spain, France, and Italy, have legislated some form of quota (33-50%) for diversity on corporate boards.

A further 20+ countries—the United States, Britain, Australia, and Germany among them—have adopted some form of regulation. Australia and Britain have corporate governance codes that require boards to disclose their policy, targets and progress toward diversity. The U.S. Securities and Exchange Commission requires corporations to disclose whether diversity is a consideration when directors are named and how their diversity policy is evaluated for effectiveness.

And there are other countries where voluntary efforts are the norm, like Canada, where the proportion of women directors on Financial Post 500 boards has stayed at 10% since 2009. (In contrast, the proportion of women directors in France has grown to 16.6% in 2011 from 9.1% in 2009.)

What's happening in sport?

Internationally, Sport Accord, the organization of International Sport Federations, reported in February 2013 on the current status of women in leadership positions. Highlights (or lowlights) include:

- The overall percentage of women on decision-making bodies of Sport Accord members is 13%.

- 25% of SportAccord members have no women on decision-making bodies. A further 45% have less than the target 20%.

The International Olympic Committee (IOC) set an objective that National Olympic Committees (NOCs) and National Sport Organizations (NSOs) reserve at least 20% of their decision-making positions for women. At present, 31% of the sports on the winter and summer Olympic program meet this target.

One wonders why the IOC chose 20% as a target. Why do countries legislate quotas of 33% or 40% for corporate boards? What lies behind the percentages? In 1992, the Swedish government commissioned Gerd Engman to study women's representation in government. She cited research on decision-making, which she interpreted this way: When a group has 10% women, they remain tokens; at 20%, women become visible in the group; at 30%, women's voices are heard; and at 40%, women's perspectives impact and shape decisions.

While most initiatives in sport are voluntary, Australia may be setting a new trend. Sports Minister Kate Lundy has stated that "Good governance, increasing participation and strong sporting performance go hand-in-hand, and, as the corporate world has long understood, good governance requires substantial presence of women on boards." The Australian Sport Commission is requiring boards of all funded sports to comply with its Mandatory Sports Governance Principles, one of which requires that 40% of board positions be occupied by women.

At present, six of 58 funded Australian sports have no women directors and 26 have just one. Only one of the seven top funded sports meets the 40% voluntary target.

What is happening in Canada?

The approach in sport mirrors the emphasis on voluntary efforts in other sectors of Canadian society. Sport Canada has used the Sport Funding and Accountability Framework Accountability Standards to motivate positive change in various areas, including gender equity. In the past quadrennial, sports were assessed as having "Partially Met" if boards included women directors, but only by circumstance, or "Fully Met" if an NSO had policies and procedures to ensure there were women directors. "Best Practice" was a board that annually includes 30% women directors. As of 2011, 55 NSOs (compared with six in 2006) had "Fully Met" and another seven were in the "Best Practice" category. For this past quadrennial, Sport Canada measured some of the gender demographics and those with stronger data scored higher; in effect the result of not meeting some of the accountability standards is a lower score.

What can you do?

As a coach

- Recognize how decision-makers influence your coaching environment and opportunities.
- Look for problem-solving habits that omit consideration of women's life experiences.
- Become knowledgeable about the approaches to gender representation.
- Develop an analysis of how problem-solving changes as the percentage of women participating changes.
- Support women who accept roles on boards, particularly those who are the only female director.

As an organization

- Adopt a bylaw that mandates a specific percentage of gender representation.
- Adopt a board profile that requires diversity inclusive of sport experience, functional area of expertise, geography, age, gender, ethnicity and Aboriginal status.
- Use gender inclusive language in material that describes board opportunities.
- Write terms of reference for the nominations committee that require finding male and female candidates for each vacancy.
- Appoint independent directors to address gender imbalances on the board.
- Develop a pipeline of future directors that has equal numbers of women and men.
- Adopt term limits or maximum number of terms to encourage new leadership.
- Develop a diversity policy with goals and targets; report regularly on progress.

About the Author

During her early career, Rose Mercier was director of education with Swimming Canada, director general of the Canadian Cycling Association, a policy analyst with the International Relations and Major Games Directorate within the Fitness and Amateur Sport Branch and director of the Tait McKenzie Institute for the Canadian Sport and Fitness Administration Centre. A founding mother of the Canadian Association for the Advancement of Women and Sport, Rose was awarded its National Historical Award in 1998. She continues her commitment to women in sport through the CAC Women in Coaching programs, in particular in authoring *Journal* articles. Through Maverick Consulting, her Kingston, Ontario-based consulting firm, Rose's work focuses on facilitating organizational transition through leadership, effective governance, strategic and business planning, and innovative problem-solving.

References available upon request

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