

Female quotas would target the wrong women

Lucy Kellaway On work

If you are reading this column during office hours on Monday, you can think of me sitting at a large table engaged in deep discussion about dividends, internal controls and appetites for risk. With me will be my fellow directors of a FTSE 100 company, 11 of us in all: nine men and two women.

I've just punched the numbers into my calculator and so can confirm that our board is 18.1818 per cent female. This is pretty good compared with the average FTSE 100 company – which is a more slender 12.5 per cent. But it's not good enough. Last Thursday, David Cameron said he wanted to see all boards of big companies 25 per cent female by 2015.

For me personally, this hunger for women directors is a thoroughly good thing. It is nice being a non-exec. And it's even nicer being on a board where I'm not in a minority of one. Having another woman to accompany me to the ladies' loo during what the chairman refers to as comfort breaks is a pleasure not to be underrated. If, in time, we are joined by a third, then that would be jollier still.

But from a business point of view, the obsession with women on boards seems all wrong. The two of us, by virtue of our sex, have had no tangible effect on shareholder value in our four years in the job. That's not because we are seen as token women to whom no one listens. It is because the role of the non-exec is an odd one. We grapple with corporate governance and try to give sound advice and guard against calamity. But we don't run the company. At least in good times, I sometimes think we are less important than the women on the phones in the call-centres. They are the ones who are actually making the money.

The hot debate should not be about boardroom quotas versus voluntary codes of conduct. It shouldn't be about the boardroom at all – or at least not about the non-executives. What matters are the women on the staff, and making sure that the good ones get to the top. Whether there are one, two or three female non-execs who pitch up a few times a year for board meetings strikes me as a peculiar thing to get into such a stew about.

A while ago I asked the men who were on our board in its earlier, all

male days, how much difference it made having two women around. They hummed and hawed for a bit and said that we approached things in a slightly different way. And that we were a good example to the women lower down in the company.

I'm not sure about either point. It is, of course, vital that board members don't all jump to identical conclusions about everything. But in my experience, gender is less important than profession: a male journalist and a male accountant probably take more sharply opposing positions on business issues than do, say, a male and a female accountant.

And as for the role model thing, that's even more doubtful. In my day job as a journalist, I'm not remotely inspired by the one female non-exec on the board of Pearson (which owns the FT). In fact, I've just had to Google her to find out her name. But the fact that our chief executive is a woman is another matter altogether: I do find that inspiring, in an abstract kind of way.

Equally, I don't kid myself that my own inanely grinning face in the annual report is a good example to the bright, ambitious women working in the company on whose board I serve. I'm happy to say that there are rather a lot of them, and they were doing rather well long before I came along.

Not only is the fuss over women non-execs beside the point, it may end up being counter-productive. Many of the news stories last week named and shamed the companies with no women on their boards. Now all these companies need do to stop such stories is ship in a couple of vaguely plausible female non-execs – which is an awful lot easier than changing anything important – such as how they treat their women managers.

You could say that it is the job of the female non-execs to insist that women are faring well in the business. But it shouldn't work like that: it shouldn't be up to a particular non-exec to represent a particular group of employees. It is their job to represent the shareholders. If it is in the interests of shareholders to have more women in senior executive positions, then it's the job of the whole board, whatever sex they might be, to make sure that happens.

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