CGO Insights
Linking gender and organizational effectiveness

Briefing Note Number 18 *July 2003*

The Equity Imperative: Reaching Effectiveness Through the Dual Agenda[1]

Work is changing; organizations are changing; the world is changing. And the workforce is more diverse than ever. The potential benefit from this diverse set of perspectives and experiences, however, is constrained by organizational practices that are built on the assumption that workers have no responsibilities or interests other than paid employment, and that equality—sameness for everyone—is the fairest way to manage people. This mismatch between the organization of work and the needs of the workforce creates inequities for workers and detracts from effective functioning for organizations. Our thesis is that by dealing with these inequities—*the equity imperative*—we serve a *dual agenda*: to provide equitable, though not necessarily identical, conditions that allow employees to live up to their full potential, hence creating effective organizations. But to do so requires a reframing of the relation between equity and effectiveness. In particular, when considering how the diversity of employee needs can best be met, one has to get away from an individual accommodative approach and reconsider, in a systemic way, the organizational norms, values, and structures that created an inequitable workplace in the first place.

In an early statement of this alternative view,[2] we talk about learning from diversity. By this we mean more than managing diversity, or even valuing it. Rather, learning from diversity shifts the emphasis from the people who are different to the organization of work itself. That is, if you have a category of people who are not succeeding to the extent you think they should, do not look only at them and see what you can do to help them. Rather, look at the system—the organizational practices that are making it difficult for them to live up to their potential. If you do, it is possible to see things you have not seen before—such as taken-for-granted assumptions about the work and how it is done—that can be changed in ways that benefit everyone, not just the "different" people who brought up the issue.

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Case Example: Learning from Diversity

A New England Telephone case illustrates this approach. At the time of the AT&T Consent Decree, New England Telephone had to get women into supervisory positions. New England Telephone had always taken their supervisors from the ranks and had a very elaborate—and very expensive—supervisor training program. The men who went through this training performed extremely well as supervisors. But when New England Telephone trained the women in this way, they were not successful. At that time they had a very forward-looking manager who did not blame the women, but called in a sociologist to look at the problem. The sociologist discovered that the reason the men were doing so well had nothing to do with the wonderful training they were getting, but had to do with informal on-the-job help they received once they were supervisors. The women weren't getting this help. With that insight, the company saved a lot of money by not having to do this very expensive training any more. They could put into place what was really effective — helping people on the job. Once men and women had the same on-the-job assistance, they both performed well.

This example shows why it is necessary to identify the norms, values, and routines that exist in the workplace. To make progress requires examining and questioning the institutions of the workplace and the practices they reinforce. Such an approach leads to a whole new way of thinking about equity. And since we emphasize the diversity that comes from different degrees of involvement with family and other responsibilities outside of employment, it means looking at the relation between work and family not as two separate spheres, which has led to the underlying gendered division of labor in the industrial world, but as an integrated whole.

The assumption of separation between the spheres of work and family has given rise to the notion of what is often called the myth of the "ideal worker."[3] The ideal worker in each sphere is assumed to be someone who has no heavy responsibility in the other sphere. Thus, an ideal worker in the occupational realm is someone for whom work is primary and who either has no responsibilities in the domestic sphere or has someone else who handles those responsibilities. And the same is true for the domestic realm. We unconsciously assume that the best

caregiver—the one who would get the best outcomes—would be a person who could focus exclusively on that task and not have responsibilities in the paid sphere.

Moreover, each sphere has its own definition and set of beliefs about what it means to be effective. Thus, we have a body of knowledge about how to produce things and a body of knowledge about how to grow people. Because the two spheres are assumed to be not only separate but at odds, these bodies of knowledge rarely inform each other. In fact, we tend to think that skills in one almost *disqualify* you from being good at the other—so if you are a caring, sensitive person we might assume that you will have a hard time succeeding in the workplace and if you are a hard-driving, bottom-line thinker that you might not be the best at parenting.

This gendered separation of spheres makes the work-family issue particularly difficult for women, since family is so conflated with women's work and with femininity.[4] In terms of equity, it is easy to see that conflating idealized masculinity with employment is going to create equity issues for women. But conflating idealized masculinity with the doing of work is also problematic for the work itself. In today's knowledge-intensive world where the importance of teamwork and collaboration is increasing, wisdom about people is critical to business success. Work practices that are constrained by gendered images of competence may not access this wisdom and may, in fact, undermine an organization's ability to meet its goals. That is why relaxing the separation and integrating the two spheres of knowledge has potential benefits for the work itself. Thus, the dual agenda: it is possible to challenge conventional wisdom about ideal workers (equity) and ideal work (effectiveness) and make changes that can benefit both.

Case Example: A Dual Agenda of Equity and Effectiveness

A small business underwriting group had just gone through a reengineering and a move resulting in longer commutes for employees. The group had lost staff as a result of this reengineering, in particular, a number of administrative staff. The employees were not only faced with longer commutes, but also stress and long hours, partly because they no longer had enough administrative support to help them with some of their clerical work. The business was also having some trouble. This particular unit was not meeting its goals, neither in terms of numbers of loans processed nor in the quality of the loans it processed. The poor quality brought up the question of the judgment of the underwriters. What brought the employee and business issues together, at least on the symptom level, was the problem of sleeplessness. The employees complained that they were having many sleepless nights: they were not meeting their numbers and felt overwhelmed. It was affecting their family life. When the managers heard about the sleeplessness they immediately saw a connection because they knew that if one is not sleeping well, one's judgments are not going to be sound. And bad decisions on loans have a direct impact on the bottom line.

Once that connection was made, it was possible to rethink ongoing practices and to rethink assumptions, even the assumptions that underlay their reengineering effort, which had to do primarily with cost cutting. And so, on a trial basis, against the whole philosophy of reengineering, they hired temporary help and taught the remaining administrative assistant to write acceptance and rejection letters. Freed from this task, the underwriters could spend more time on the work of underwriting. The result was that the unit performed better—so much better that the company made the temporary help permanent. The underwriters had fewer sleepless nights, were better family members, and, with better judgment, made better quality loans. And once the company was open to the possibility of change, they could rethink other existing structures and relationships that served a dual agenda—in particular, they changed the relationship between underwriters and field representatives, which eased a number of existing relational and operational bottlenecks.

As this example shows, integrating, rather than separating, the spheres means changing norms about how work is done: what is real work, what is valued work, and what are the skills and behaviors needed to do it well. Getting to these types of work practices is not straightforward. We are asking people to examine work practices that are rooted in deeply held assumptions about ideal work, ideal workers, and the "natural" separation of work and family. These work practices and norms appear to be gender-neutral. They are not. Because of assumptions about the gendered division of labor linked to separate spheres, these "normal" work practices are linked to gender identity and deeply embedded beliefs and assumptions about how the world works. Surfacing these kinds of assumptions requires that we engage a different type of organizational change methodology, one that will give people time and space to think about the mental models underlying their business practice, to experience how it feels to question these assumptions, and to imagine what work could look like if these assumptions were dislodged.

The goals of the dual agenda approach to change are: 1) to identify work practices that have implications for equity and effectiveness, 2) to make their costs and consequences visible, 3) to identify leverage points for "small wins"[5] change that would benefit both the people who are doing the work and the work itself, and 4) to help organizations implement those changes. We call this method Collaborative Interactive Action Research (CIAR).[6]

Identifying work practices with implications for equity and effectiveness occurs in the Collaborative Interactive process of collecting data. Making the costs and consequences of these work practices visible and identifying leverage points for change happens in the Research and Ac-

tion part of the process. For an intervention to be successful, it must be rooted in the concrete, everyday work practices and experiences of workers at a particular worksite.

The processes underlying our method are mutual inquiry, fluid expertise, honoring resistance, and keeping the dual agenda on the table. Every step in the method is based on *mutual inquiry*. Though we come to the field guided by a goal, we do not come with pre-determined solutions. Our interaction, rather, is based on a model of *fluid expertise*[7] in which all parties are active learners *and* teachers. This stance recognizes, for example, that organizational members have expertise about the everyday workings of their workplace and what is needed to work effectively and that we, as outside researchers, have expertise in the dual agenda change process and in helping people surface and question previously unquestioned assumptions about work.

Another aspect of our process concerns the way we deal with the resistance to change. Our goal is to *honor this resistance*. For example, we often find immediate resistance to the idea that it would be good for work to make explicit the connection between work design and people's personal lives. Honoring resistance means our response is not to try to overcome this type of reaction. Rather, our goal is to recognize the resistance as valid, valuable data that it is important to understand and incorporate into our analysis of the work context and its requirements.

Finally, a key element of our process is to ensure that the two halves of the dual agenda stay connected. Because connecting personal life and effectiveness runs so counter to how we think about these issues in most workplaces, it is very easy—especially during implementation—to begin to emphasize one over the other. But to emphasize outcomes in only one half of the dual agenda—either in the direction of employees' well-being or work effectiveness—is a mistake. Indeed, we believe that *keeping the dual agenda on the table* is a key job of the research team and is the single most important factor in achieving successful change.

Once data are collected, the research team meets to formulate a work culture diagnosis that can be fed back to the organization. The analysis consists of taking all the interviews, the field notes, the reports of the roundtables, as well as our own experiences of the work culture, and then, on the basis of these data, asking ourselves questions like:

- What does the "ideal worker" look like in this setting?
- What is recognized as competence?
- What work is seen as "real" work?
- How is time used?
- How is commitment gauged?
- What is the differential impact of these norms on men and women?

The answers to these questions allow us to identify assumptions underlying the routine work practices we have observed. Once these assumptions are identified, we ask, "How are the work practices based on these assumptions affecting people's ability to integrate work and personal life? How are they affecting the effectiveness of the work itself?" In this way, we identify what we call dual agenda assumptions that have negative effects and unintended consequences for both work-life integration and work effectiveness.

Case Example: Identifying Key Assumptions

In our work with a nonprofit research organization that provides grants to the developing world, we collected data from interviews, observations, and a survey. In analyzing the data we asked ourselves questions like: What work is rewarded here? What is considered the "real" work of the institution? What skills are considered exemplary and what are the characteristics and life situations of the people who have them? We found a series of underlying assumptions that constrained work-personal life integration and impeded gender equity without seeming to be necessary for effectiveness. One of these assumptions we labeled "Competence equals new ideas." The work practices that flowed from this assumption meant that new ideas and new projects always took priority; there was much travel to the field in order to introduce new ideas and to work closely with grantees; knowledge generation skills—and the people who had them— were the most prized. All of this fit the mission of the organization, which saw itself as being very innovative and prided itself on what it called "hands-on grantmaking."

While there were many valuable things about the way this assumption influenced work practice, there were also some unintended, negative consequences. Travel was hard for anybody with caring responsibilities and that included many women. Certain critical skills, like synthesizing, supporting, and following through, were undervalued and nearly invisible in terms of being considered "real" work, because they did not produce new ideas. Interestingly, these "invisible" tasks—reflecting a societal-level gendered division of labor—were disproportionately done by women, which meant that women were not as likely to be promoted to professional status.

In addition to these negative consequences for work-personal life integration and gender equity, there were also negative consequences for work effectiveness. The norm of frequent travel that resulted from this assumption subtly undermined the learning of the grantees by having program officers on-site so often. In addition, the lack of synthesis and reflection on ongoing projects impeded the organization's ability to learn from what it was doing to inform future projects. The work practices that stemmed from this assumption also increased workloads in an unrelenting spiral. There was a steady pull to add new projects in order to showcase new ideas, but noth-

ing ongoing was ever dropped. Thus, the need to travel continuously increased, as did the undervalued support work for ongoing projects.

Once these practices and their consequences were named and discussed, it was possible to think of some small but significant changes that would enhance both equity and effectiveness. For example, they redesigned their project team structure to include people (many of whom were women) doing the previously undervalued support and synthesizing tasks. In addition, they changed the norms about travel and came up with a system of priorities so that new projects were not continually added without attention to the impact on ongoing projects. All of this led to a more equitable workplace and better models of learning and knowledge management, both in the home office and in the field.

The old business case had to do with retention and recruitment. The new business case has to do with the quality of the work itself.

The New Business Case for Work-Life Integration

The theoretical framework supporting this dual agenda approach gives us a new business case for gender equity work redesign. The old business case for redesigning work by looking through a work-personal life lens or a gender lens suggests that if work practices are *not* changed, then recruitment and retention for a significant part of an employee population will suffer. *The costs of not making change are recruitment and retention costs.*

The new business case is premised on an understanding of how the assumption of separate spheres undermines work effectiveness. It is bad for business not only because a significant part of the population does not have a traditionally masculine life situation but also because work practices would benefit from wisdom, values, and skills that have been traditionally associated with femininity and the domestic sphere of life. In other words, integrating spheres could open up new, more effective ways of doing things at work. *The costs of not making change are work effectiveness costs.*

In this way, dealing with workplace inequities—what we call the *equity imperative*—is not only the right thing to do, it also leads to greater effectiveness. Hence the importance of the dual agenda of equity and effectiveness in all work redesign efforts.

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Notes

[1]This briefing note is based on a research project that was funded by the Ford Foundation and carried out by the authors together with Susan Eaton, Maureen Harvey, Robin Johnson, Deborah Kolb, Leslie Perlow, and Rhona Rapoport. An earlier version of this article was published in *The Diversity Factor*, 2003,11 (1) and is a revision of Working Paper WPC0004 of the MIT Workplace Center.

[2] Bailyn, L. 1993. *Breaking the Mold: Women, Men and Time in the New Corporate World*. New York: The Free Press.

[3] For other discussions of the implications of this image of an "ideal worker" see: Kanter, R.M. 1977. *Work and Family in the United States: A Critical Review and Agenda for Research and Policy.* NY: Russell Sage Foundation; Acker, J. 1990. Hierarchies, jobs, bodies: A theory of gendered organizations. *Gender & Society*, 4, 139-158; Bailyn, L. 1993. *op. cit.*; and Williams, J. 2000. *Unbending Gender: Why Family and Work Conflict and What to Do about It.* Oxford: Oxford University Press.

[4] It is important to recognize that idealized images of femininity and masculinity are culturally determined and in our society are based in white, Western, heterosexual, middle- and upper-class understandings of gender roles. While these images may not reflect the experience of all women or men in our society, they exert a powerful force on behavior, especially in the work world, where Western models of competence and business success dominate. For one exploration of how different aspects of social identity intersect simultaneously in the workplace with a differential impact on people based on sex, class, race, and ethnicity, see Holvino, E. 2002. *CGO Working Paper No. 14, Complicating Gender: The Simultaneity of Race, Gender, and Class in Organization Change(ing)*. Boston: Center for Gender in Organizations.

[5] Meyerson, D. and Fletcher, J.K. 2000. A modest manifesto for shattering the glass ceiling. *Harvard Business Review*, January-February: 127-136.

[6] For a full description of the projects and CIAR methodology, see Rapoport, R., Bailyn, L., Fletcher, J.K., and Pruitt, B. 2002. *Beyond Work-Family Balance: Advancing Gender Equity and Workplace Performance.* San Francisco: Jossey Bass.

[7] Fletcher, J.K. 1999. *Disappearing Acts: Gender, Power and Relational Practice at Work.* Cambridge, MA: MIT Press.

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