

Men at the Harvard Business School: An Unexpected Voice for Redefining Success

 huffingtonpost.com/lisa-levey/men-at-the-harvard-busine_b_5960260.html



Lisa Levey, Contributor

Principal Libra Consulting - Diversity Consultant, Author

10/09/2014 03:53 pm ET **Updated** Dec 09, 2014

Something exciting is happening along the Charles River in Boston, Massachusetts. The voice of men at the Harvard Business School — future business leaders of tomorrow — have joined with their female counterparts to support gender equality, including better work-life balance for all. During National Work and Family Month, this is surely cause for celebration. In the fall of 2013, leaders of the Women’s Student Association (WSA) at the storied business school created the Manbassadors in an effort to formally invite men to join them in actively promoting gender equity at the business school and beyond. Nearly one in four men joined the cause.

The mission of the *Manbassadors* is to engage male students in an ongoing dialogue about gender issues. One initial focus has been work-life integration. In the spring of 2013, the *Manbassadors* sponsored their first event titled, Living + Working (Or, “How to Be a Rockstar at Home and at Work”.) During the introductions, finding meaning in one’s personal and professional lives was highlighted as a critical issue that transcends gender. More than 200 gathered to hear how two power couples have managed raising children while pursuing dynamic careers.

Judy and Stephen Pagliuca, who both graduated from the business school in the early 1980’s, as well as the Harvard Business School Dean of the Faculty Nitin Nohria and his wife Monica Chandra shared their very personal work-life stories. Stephen Pagliuca, a founder of Bain Capital shared during the conversations, “We realize today there has to be a balance. No one is indispensable. Institutions have their role but families endure. You can get carried away that your life is the institution.”

Patricio (Pato) Bichara, a 2nd year business student and active *Manbassador*, talked about the importance of work-life balance and its impact on men as they simultaneously get more involved at home and encounter a work pace that is not sustainable. He ventured that many men are looking at a different definition — a broader definition — of success and moving from a narrower focus on title and money success to the idea of personal life success encompassing a good job and time for family and friends. When asked about his

highest hopes for the *Manbassadors*, Pato described helping to shift the corporate paradigm so that personal issues are a more fundamental part of the career decision making process and understood to be linked to business success:

Companies will increasingly understand that a better personal and work life balance helps to make employees happier, more passionate, and more productive - which means more success for the company too.

In typical business school fashion, the goal is to prove that a more sustainable approach to work for employees is correlated with better financial returns for organizations. Luckily, a foundation of evidence already exists that can be expanded and strengthened.

In the late 1990s, I was a member of a consulting team working with Mariott to implement workplace solutions that benefited both the work-life balance of employees and the company. Harvard Business School professor Leslie Perlow, a veteran work redesign expert and the author of *Sleeping with your Smartphone: How to Break the 24-7 Habit and Change the Way You Work* chronicles how questioning deeply held beliefs about how we work leads to better results for employees and employers.

But solving the work-life dilemma won't be easy, even with work redesign experts right down the hall. Consider that Robin Ely, an organizational change expert and the Senior Associate Dean for Culture and Community at the Harvard Business School, was retained by a mid-sized global consulting firm for her deep expertise on gender. The client's goal was to better understand how to reduce the turnover of women consultants and increase their partner promotion rates. Robin and her team found 'the culture of overwork' that negatively affected both men and women was to blame rather than the work-life challenges of women professionals. A proposed solution was work redesign and the evolution of management practices.

Yet we know old beliefs die hard and inertia is extraordinarily powerful. The senior management team at the client rejected the analysis, attributed the lack of women in leadership to women's struggles with work-life balance (which they posited did not impact men despite evidence to the contrary) and identified the solution as greater flexibility for women. Extreme hour leaders — which has become the norm in many organizations — unintentionally reinforce traditional gender roles by forcing their partners (still overwhelmingly women) to do all the flexing at home. The Third Path Institute is a non-profit seeking to identify alternatives to the extreme leader model. They work with Whole Life Leaders who use their desire for a more integrated approach to work and life as a catalyst for developing more effective ways to work that fit the realities of the 21st century.

Having spent nearly two decades consulting to highly successful global corporations on women's leadership and advancement, I believe until we confront overwork - and illuminate its many unmeasured costs - progress for women in leadership will remain stalled. In the absence of evolving management beliefs and practices, most women will

continue to disproportionately spend their professional capital to manage work-life demands. Meanwhile, most men will continue to spend theirs to maximize traditional measures of professional success such as title and compensation, no matter the work-life costs. In combination, these gendered patterns will continue to powerfully reinforce the status quo.

But the launching of the *Manbassadors* shines a powerful ray of hope on the possibilities for the future. If Harvard business school students — men and women alike — can use their formidable skills to confront overwork as a structural problem, a business problem needing a business solution, then we might just have taken a giant step toward the reality of gender equality.