

# The end of the all-male panel?

By Alison Maitland

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All-male panels are becoming a bit of an embarrassment. Event organisers who line up only male speakers, and companies that feature men-only executive teams on their websites, are increasingly likely to be lampooned on social media.

One popular site on Tumblr, the micro-blogging platform, is called “allmalepanels” and features photos submitted from all over the world of male-only events or teams, accompanied by sarcastic comments such as “Only men can build a better economy at the Business and Climate Summit, Paris”. It's a fairly crude style of protest, but it makes you think about some of the absurd line-ups that still occur.

There are several sites now dedicated to this issue, including @EUPanelWatch on Twitter, which uses the hashtag #manel. A BBC blog on the phenomenon has attracted a lot of attention.

It strikes me that bouquets and brickbats should be handed out the other way round at diversity or gender events, where men are usually in very short supply. So I'd like to award a bouquet to the organisers of a conference on gender-balanced leadership in Dublin last month for their success in getting men to speak out on the topic alongside women.

The opening addresses fell to Ireland's female justice and equality minister and the male CEO of Ibec, the Irish business organisation. The closing session featured Ireland's male minister of state for justice and equality and the female director of policy and corporate affairs at Ibec. In between, there were six male speakers and 15 female speakers including the moderator. Men therefore made up nearly a third of the total – not perfect, but getting there.

All of this matters, because progress on gender equality won't happen without men being involved. The composition of panels sends a not so subtle message to the audience: all-female panels at diversity events perpetuate the bias that these are “women's issues” rather than business issues.

I was fortunate to be part of gender-balanced panel at the conference on the

subject of “Engaging men”. My fellow panellists, Robert Baker, senior partner at Mercer, and Dan Twomey, Dell's CFO in EMEA, shared their interesting experiences of becoming involved in driving diversity, while I spoke about initiatives around the world to get men leading change.

In the most successful initiatives I've seen, influential women have kicked things off by inviting supportive male leaders to become more directly involved. Australia's Male Champions of Change, for example, began when Liz Broderick, the sex discrimination commissioner, approached male CEOs and asked them to form a coalition for change. One of their actions has been to decline public speaking invitations unless there are women on the panel.

In Robert's case, he was invited by the all-female board of PWN Global, a leading professional women's network, to join the board and take up responsibility for engaging men, which he has evidently done with enthusiasm.

He set out four reasons why men are typically motivated to get involved in diversity and inclusion: it could be their sense of fairness, or having daughters, or realising that gender balance is good for business, or having a boss who tells them to get involved. Or of course it could be a combination of the above.

He also listed barriers to getting men more involved, including:

- Apathy
- Lack of knowledge of the topic or what to do
- Lack of consequences for failing to take action

Sadly, some men are also put off by criticism from male peers. One man, appointed to a diversity role, was accosted by a male colleague who asked him: “What did you do to deserve that?”

Robert says men will have to adapt to the new world if they are to succeed. Growing interest from investors, as well as pressure from governments and from peers, could help to accelerate change.

Dan became involved through a programme known as MARC (Men Advocating Real Change), set up by Catalyst, the US non-profit organisation that works to expand opportunities for women and business. The online MARC community describes itself as “a place where men can be themselves and openly discuss whatever is on their minds with respect to gender issues at work”.

Dan and colleagues took part in a programme that changed his perceptions. “I walked in thinking I didn't have much to learn, and I walked out shell shocked.” He said the programme raised the men's awareness at a very personal level. Everyone could find some aspect of diversity to which they could relate. In his case, it was about privilege, and how easy it is to take this for granted. More senior men and women from Dell are now getting involved. The programme sparked a desire to move from being a “supporter” of diversity to wanting to drive change, he said.

It was a powerful example. My guess is that the impact would have been even greater if there had been more men in the audience. Most people would still not expect a male finance director to campaign for diversity and inclusion. When the message comes from an unexpected quarter, it can have a particularly galvanizing effect in making people more interested in change.

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