In previous articles we have explored what Diversity is, what Inclusion means, and how to recognize and combat the biases we unconsciously maintain. We looked at the practical ways we can design a D&I program, and most recently how to effect the cultural change which this requires.

In our very first article we noted that some of the more commonly known areas for diversity are Gender, Age, Sexual orientation, Gender identity, Ableness, Race and Colour, Culture, Ethnicity, Veteran status or Religion. We explained that achieving a diverse team at any level brings differing experiences and perspectives into the organization, with the potential for an improvement in the range of available ideas and outlooks.

Gender diversity has been a key concern of our society in recent years, with a recognition that women have a much lower representation, and pay, in many fields of work. It seems reasonable to us that we explore the practical side of how to improve gender diversity in our aviation organizations. While many of the techniques apply to any diversity group, there are some specific approaches which are needed specifically to improve gender diversity.

We know that women occupy a lower percentage of leadership roles than men, and that using quotas provides results without eliminating the bias which has been behind the disparity, thus leaving the culture as it was. How does one make the company 'bias proof'?

First, gender diversity needs to be in the top few strategic priorities of a company, and must have commitment from the CEO and each level of management. Within the already-designed D&I program, examine the current percentages of men and women in areas of recruitment, retention, promotion, senior staff levels, project teams, and look also at those same metrics in company suppliers, all the time looking for disparities. For example, what could you do to challenge the reality that pilot and mechanic positions are largely male?

Look at internal communications and see if there are gender-specific terms being used, or whether there is a level of gender-neutrality which maintains a balance and therefore an attractiveness to both genders. Perform a pay-gap analysis. Run a D&I internal survey. Share company gender diversity information in the form of an internal labour map, to identify the demographics for all employees to see.

Review job descriptions and ask whether some requirements would tend to favour men rather than women. Make sure that the job descriptions emphasize the opportunities to learn, and that they do not list any more requirements than are truly essential for the job, in order to open up the pool of eligible candidates.

When hiring, consider using search firms and gender-supportive networks to identify possible candidates, whether for an immediate vacancy or even just with an eye to the future. Are there any existing gender-diverse pipelines to tap? Consider not starting the interview process until you have as many women in the pool as men. Have the interview panel itself be diverse, which will make candidates from underrepresented groups feel more comfortable rather than the 'odd one out'. You might even consider using gender-stripped resumes to give no idea of the applicant's gender until they have been screened in for further assessment. Have performance management appraisals of hiring managers recognize good performance in achieving gender diversity, and in breaking down gender bias.

Compensation, of course, must be fair regardless of gender. Examine whether the pay structure has set pay ranges which give no window for any particular group such as women to be paid less, and consider doing a payroll audit to see if there are any pay equity gaps.

Work-Life balance is important in retaining women in the workplace. Since research shows that a larger percentage of family and household responsibilities still fall to women, flexible schedules, workplace daycare or paid daycare, and telework options can make it practical for women to balance their career with their family obligations. Maternity leave and related reduced work-week options should allow for family needs without hindering the person's career. If there is proper support for childcare, maternity and elder-care, women will not need to choose between work and family. Watch for unconscious biases such as "commitments at home show lack of dedication to a career" or "only females carry the burden of child-raising"!

This is one of the areas where corporations can find unnecessary attrition. Measure women's rate of attrition and try to examine carefully their actual reasons for leaving. Perhaps reach out to women who have left to raise families and see if they are interested in returning to the company.

With executive positions, is there an assumption that executives should be available "anytime", or do these positions respect family and personal life? Our society still has difficulty in seeing work-life balance applying to senior positions, and that may in turn keep many women out of the 'C-Suite'.

At work, consider having joint leadership of projects and task forces, a man and a woman, instead of just one person. Take advantage of temporary roles by placing women equally with men in opportunities for responsibility, to foster learning. With mentoring, while it is useful to have senior female mentors, it is equally important that women have male mentors too – in short keep a diversity of mentors as part of the D&I initiatives!

Do women feel that their leadership styles are a good match for existing executive positions? Is only one style of leadership preferred, or is a diversity of styles recognized as making for more effective decision making, and therefore better corporate performance? What types of experience and leadership requirements are needed for senior positions? Do these job descriptions tend to be biased in favour of men and

men's leadership styles? With succession planning, avoid male-only plans, and encourage women to apply for senior positions. If the company executives are mostly male, what is the company approach to ensure that male executives see women as being capable of senior management positions?

The benefits of gender diversity, as with all forms of diversity, are both people-related as well as business related. They bring better workplace satisfaction, better customer satisfaction, better problem solving, more innovation, and ultimately better corporate performance. ■