

# Leadership

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# The leadership void

## Women are the best leaders for today's turbulent times

**A**s we walked into the reception, the buzz was overwhelming. These were the top seventy leaders of a successful multi-national business. Everybody was in comfortable casual gear, not just having taken their ties off, but authentically and comfortably casual.

They were tucking into pastries and fruit along with coffee and tea, and everybody appeared to naturally enjoy everybody else's company.

This was more than networking, this was camaraderie in action. It soon struck us that it was impossible to identify who the 'boss' was.

I had met Louise before, but that was just the two of us in her office. She had made a huge, positive impression on me at the time, however, I was looking forward to seeing her in action with her team in a 'live' environment.

There was the beautiful sound of laughter combined with an atmosphere of excitement. Before long, the auditorium doors swung open

and everybody marched in without being told or marshalled. It was a stunning room with floor-to-ceiling windows and the sun came out right on time to greet us.

### Warm and authentic greetings matter

We immediately went to the rear of the auditorium and sat where we would have a first-class view of the proceedings. Louise instantly spotted us and rushed over to greet us and she couldn't help but share her natural enthusiasm and passion. She was wearing jeans and a swish pair of white trainers—authentically casual, we now knew where they got this from.

As everyone settled down at the 8/9 tables, Louise strode to the front, teasing and talking to all she passed and was soon welcoming everyone and setting the scene for the day. She was informal and friendly but by now, she was certainly in charge.

Louise laid out an inspiring vision for the future and did not hold back when describing

what challenges lay ahead. She trusted everyone in the room and they responded with their undivided attention and full engagement.

The more we trust our people with important information, the more empowered and committed they feel.

We felt part of the team and were as focused and excited as all in the room were.

Louise pulled no punches in terms of the urgency of the mission and at the same time, was obviously and genuinely confident that the seventy or so of them were the right people at the right time to sort the problems and deliver the vibrant future.

### It's tough at the top

We have seen a number of high profile female political leaders come under exacting scrutiny, from Hillary Clinton to Theresa May and Angela Merkel. Some of the criticism has been unnecessarily harsh and, at times, brutal. Whilst it has to be said that they have made some missteps,

in the main, the reporting has been hugely intolerant and unforgiving.

There is much research confirming that women leaders in business also receive a far harsher critique than men in similar positions. This plays a big part in the paucity of women at the top of businesses—who wants to be treated unfairly?

There are also many male political leaders who are currently being called out for their less than sparkling performances; Donald Trump, Jeremy Corbyn and Vladimir Putin, to name but a few.

The truth is, once you accept a big leadership position, you must be prepared for both the praise and the blunt criticism. It should never be a popularity contest. You just cannot and should not try to please all of the people all of the time, but it would be nice to be treated fairly as well.

### Connecting women

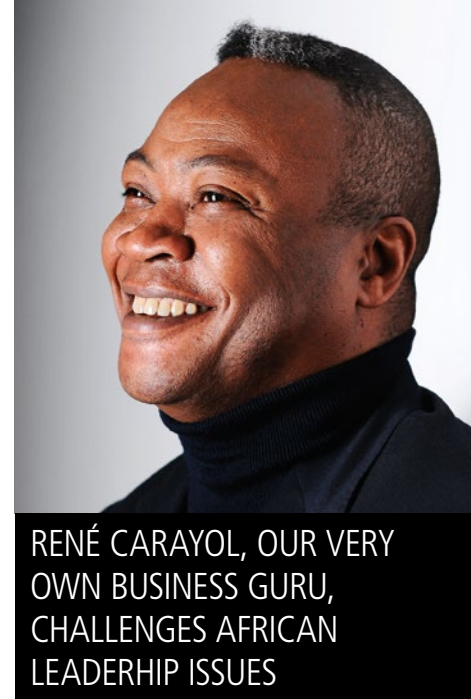
I had the privilege of being invited to comper a really important and well-thought-out initiative by Vodafone's technology team here in London.

The purpose of the event was to "Help drive engagement in a candidate-led market where demand outstrips supply for female talent in technology.

Statistics show that 70% of the global workforce is made up of passive talent, who are not actively looking for a role and it's an even higher percentage where we're looking to increase the number of female hires in the technology space. We are, therefore, creating additional platforms to connect with prospective candidates, which will eventually help us build high performing/diverse teams in Vodafone."

It was a first-class evening, the event started at 5 pm and finished at 8 pm. As this was the kick-off event for a series of engagements throughout the year, it was as much about learning about what works best for the future as it was about establishing enduring relationships.

We had a packed house, mainly due to the tight targeting of the right potential attendees and inviting them to bring similar-minded colleagues and friends.



RENÉ CARAYOL, OUR VERY OWN BUSINESS GURU, CHALLENGES AFRICAN LEADERSHIP ISSUES

The panel consisted of two men and two women, they were from India, Germany, Sweden and the UK. It proved to be the right call to have both men and women on the panel, as it gave huge insights into how they actually interact on a day-to-day basis.

The questions were really sharp and to the point, and all questions were responded to in a frank and informal manner.

After an instructive and fun hour with the panel, we all moved to an even more relaxed environment in the cafeteria on the same floor for some 'speed mentoring'. With roughly 10 attendees at each table, a team of Vodafone managers did the rounds spending 10 minutes at each table. They shared their stories and took questions from their now eager and fully engaged guests.

Whilst the speed mentoring was taking place, I soon realised that I had five of my mentees at the event. I was delighted to see them all active and engaged.

This was a heck of a coincidence, as they all work for different businesses in different sectors. I was curious as to what had attracted them to the event. I blushed when they all responded—"because you were compering the event".

The feedback from our guests was authentic and positive:

"Wanted to drop you a note to say congratulations on a great event last night. I was really impressed by the authenticity of the discussions and came away with a great impression of the culture at Vodafone."

"It was a really impressive event tonight—great thoughts, a strong panel and very



There is much research confirming that women leaders in business also receive a far harsher critique than men in similar positions

interesting conversation. I definitely think Vodafone should continue running these events and congrats on its inauguration—I hope it will continue for many years.”

This different approach to engaging and building a rapport and relationship with some incredibly able and experienced women, who may not be looking for a move at the moment, proved to be a really solid and positive initial step for Vodafone.

They were a joy to work with from the initial approach to the evening itself.

You cannot hide from your culture.

### What diversity initiatives work best?

The diversity industry has now matured in the UK but has been challenged by many as perhaps somewhat lacking in true recent innovation.

Boston Consulting Group (BCG) has recently surveyed roughly 17 500 employees and interviewed more than 200 senior executives at companies in various industries across 21 countries, seeking their perspective on 39 specific diversity initiatives.

They focused their research on how the company should best allocate its resources—in

“These misperceptions matter because they shape companies’ investments in diversity initiatives.”

### Hidden gems

- BCG’s research highlighted what they termed ‘hidden gems’. These were found to be the real game changers and are worth thinking about further:
- Targeting interventions to ‘moments of truth’ in women’s careers
- Addressing unconscious biases in decisions about recruitment, evaluation, and promotion
- Increasing the visibility of role models in the organisation
- Supporting internal and external networks for women
- Offering professional development, such as talent management programmes and executive coaching
- Engaging male employees

All of these initiatives were raised by the attendees and discussed in our conversations at Vodafone. Whilst all seem obvious perhaps, not enough are doing them or following through and checking on the tangible outcomes.

leadership. They should be given the ‘oxygen of publicity’, both internally and externally. It’s important to raise awareness of what you are doing and getting as many people involved and participating as possible. The vital changes necessary cannot be delivered without the enthusiasm of the workforce and a supportive culture. These initiatives help lay the foundation for transformation.

### Overrated measures

BCG found that these initiatives appear promising on paper, tend to be fairly easy to launch and often involve short-term bouts of focused effort.

Unfortunately, in many instances they don’t lead to real sustainable change:

- Holding one-time training sessions
- Establishing grievance systems
- Adding gender diversity to a long list of leadership compensation targets
- Recruiting senior women role models from outside the organisation

These findings are instructive, as so much has been invested in these by so many. They were found to be helpful but didn’t achieve too much on their own. They tend to be seen as largely symbolic but still make a difference.

### Baseline measures

The research found that there are basic measures that all companies should have. These initiatives do have merit but they are either baseline factors that do not make a meaningful difference in women’s day-to-day experiences or insufficient measures when launched in isolation. In addition, too frequently, companies do a poor job of implementing them:

- Mentoring women
- Addressing the gender pay gap
- Company engagement in public debates and membership in female advocacy organisations
- Disconnected cultural initiatives
- Employee surveys to generate feedback

This is like the starter pack and they are ‘no-brainers’, but require careful and focused implementation and need joining up and a sustained effort.

They usually generate a lively debate, get the organisation thinking and starting to challenge the prevailing culture.

## We have seen a number of high profile female political leaders come under exacting scrutiny, from Hillary Clinton to Theresa May and Angela Merkel

time, managerial focus and capital—to generate the biggest diversity gains.

They found that, unfortunately, many companies simply don’t know the answers to these questions, so they use a trial-and-error approach, trying a lot of things and hoping to see good results.

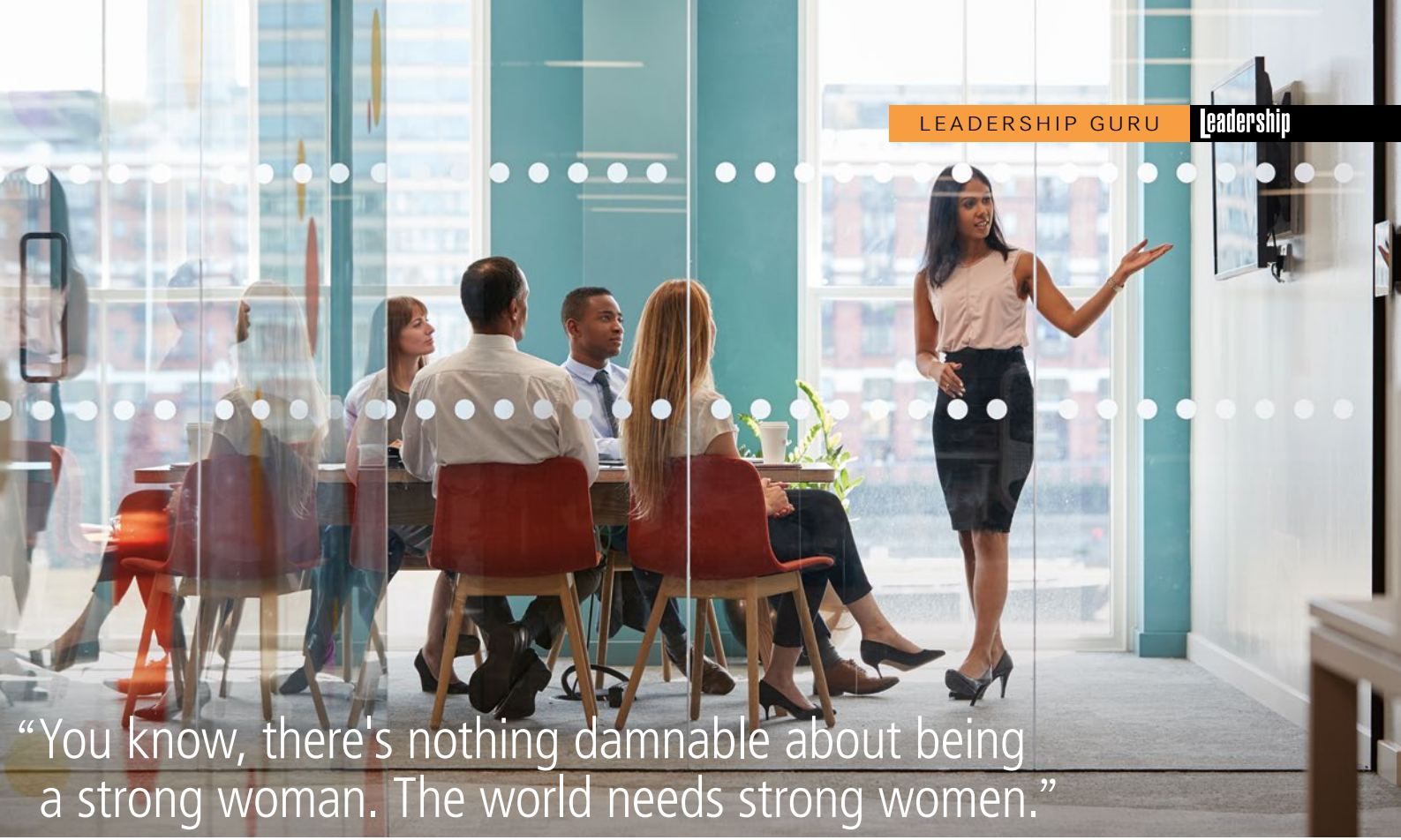
One of the most striking findings was that “men often have different ideas about where things go wrong. They tend to identify recruitment as the biggest challenge in gender diversity. Women, by contrast, think that advancement and retention are the biggest challenges.”

### Proven measures

On a more optimistic level, the research also looked at what was actually working well today:

- Offering flexible work models
- Committing publicly to gender diversity
- Tracking performance through meaningful Key Performance Indicators (KPIs)
- Sponsoring women through a scalable programme
- Crafting anti-discrimination policies

These are all tried and tested, and they deliver. They are relatively straightforward to implement but must have the full and visible backing of the



“You know, there's nothing damnable about being a strong woman. The world needs strong women.”

### The world has changed

There is not a business that we are working with that is not going through significant change, if not forced transformation. These turbulent times demand a different approach to leadership than in the more certain times. It is imperative to enlarge the available talent pool for the types of leaders who are at their best in transformational times.

What we experienced with Louise and at Vodafone gave us a positive glimpse of just how vital it is to get as many able women as possible into the leadership pool and fast. Nearly all the organisations we have encountered in recent years have an active ‘gender’ agenda, but they are achieving very mixed results.

We are now clear that ‘one size fits no one’ when it comes to the challenge of diversity. By better understanding what the actual gender issues are in your organisation, then investing in initiatives that are designed and crafted to deal with these specific diversity challenges, it is much more likely to make a telling difference to the outcomes.

### Moving from best practice to next practice:

- Setting clear, transparent targets work
- The CEO must be the ultimate sponsor
- All managers are held accountable for establishing inclusive environments

- Target those on their way up for leadership development
- Reverse mentoring enables the leaders to better experience the subtler challenges
- Move beyond HR having to drive diversity and inclusion
- Invest in analytics to bring data alive to identify revealing trends and attitudes
- Flexible working is integral to all solutions
- Like everything else, the shift in the understanding of diversity is moving fast
- There are no ‘one-off’ diversity initiatives that work well

### At the end of the day

Louise had been an active participant throughout the day. She had some big ideas and had some shot down, she was not afraid to challenge and support.

Some initiatives raised within her team went against decisions that she had made in the past. No one from the outside would have guessed or noticed.

In fact, it was plain that she was proud that they felt they could challenge without having to be sycophantic or shy about it.

As we drew to the end of a long but excellent day, Louise came to the front and concluded the day with no notes but a head full of exciting new ideas and initiatives. She clearly had her heart

full of gratitude and pride, which she shared openly and humorously with all the team.

She was never the boss, and never needed to take control but she was always in charge, and certainly an inspired leader throughout. Nothing worthwhile is ever achieved without sincere passion and humility.

### Diversity is being invited to the dance— inclusion is being asked to dance

Fred Astaire had the most remarkable presence as the star of dance of his era, and when one mentions Fred Astaire, we immediately think of his timeless partner, Ginger Rogers, as well. They were the dream dance team of the 1930s. She not only matched him step for step but as many have pointed out, she matched him whilst having to move backwards all the time—and whilst wearing heels.

“You know, there’s nothing damnable about being a strong woman. The world needs strong women. There are a lot of strong women you do not see who are guiding, helping, mothering strong men. They want to remain unseen. It’s kind of nice to be able to play a strong woman who is seen.” Ginger Rogers Today, authority is the least successful way to transform cultures—influence and persuasion work so much better. ▲

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