



Lift as you climb: how supportive leadership builds brands

BY VIRGINIA BRAILEY

As vice president, marketing and strategy for ADP Canada, Virginia spends a lot of time thinking about what goes into a brand promise—and the many ways in which brand value can be created.

Brand value can live and die with the leadership of a company. This value is built not only by your products, marketing initiatives, and financial performance, but also marketplace perception, company reputation, and organizational culture. It's these latter factors that are especially sensitive to the choices of an organization's executives and leaders.

Brands are built both by what leaders do, and don't do. Failing to act is as influential as action. One poignant example of this is the realm of gender diversity and inclusion.

It is tempting to think that public discourse and organizational focus have solved the gender problem; however the gap persists in both salary and the representation of women in leadership positions.

Women are too often left behind when it comes to high-visibility, high-impact projects that are considered critical to the development of future leaders. Research from Catalyst* confirms that women also receive less on-the-job training, which is more important to advancing careers than any formal training programs. Leaders should be ensuring equal opportunity for women in these and other advancement opportunities.

I think the solution is simple: leaders should never accept the status quo, and should look for opportunities to lift as they climb. This can be difficult, but I believe leaders have an obligation to help those who come behind, whether speaking broadly, of a gender or a generation, or specifically, about a mentee.

Today, I'm fortunate to work in a progressive company, where 45 per cent of the Canadian leadership team is female, and the corporate culture is supportive of gender, cultural, and personal diversity. But my earlier experiences weren't always as positive.

Early in my career, I realized the negative attitudes and behaviours towards women in the workplace were not something I could control, but my own attitude and behaviour was. I decided that I was not going to accept the status quo, and I turned my focus to how I could help others. I started lifting others as I climbed.

I decided to create and share meaningful opportunities for women, and other under-represented populations, so they could

move up the career ladder. We need to push past that notion of work as a zero-sum game, where if one person succeeds there is less opportunity for others. I strongly believe there is enough success and career fulfillment to go around.

There is an old saying: "Men are hired for potential and women for performance." I have been lucky to have been given career-changing opportunities by both women and men on the basis of both my performance and my potential. For this reason, I am inspired to find opportunities to do the same for others.

As I travel my own career path, I make an extra effort to recognize the work and potential of others, consider how my team could develop with stretch projects, and find opportunities for them to demonstrate their abilities. Opportunity is a key element of a great employer brand, which in turn increases employee loyalty and engagement.

There is abundant research that shows diverse and inclusive workplaces have better financial performance, better use of talent, increased innovation and stronger brands.

I believe that it's the challenges we face and how we react that truly shapes us. I encourage you to make the decision to not accept the status quo, and join the community of strong female—and male—leaders lifting others as we climb. We are not alone in our desire to develop and advance our career, and it's almost certain that we didn't get here without someone along the way opening the door to an opportunity to prove our potential. We must become a community of proactive leaders that can make the difference for more than just our own careers.

By making our individual approach to leadership a thoughtful and committed act, we can positively impact the brands we have been appointed to lead. We help ourselves and our organizations through helping each other, leading to more engaged talent, more realized potential, and better, more successful workplaces for all.

**The Promise of Future Leadership: Highly Talented Employees in the Pipeline, November 2012, Catalyst.org*