



ORGANIZATION

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Seeing beyond the woman:

An interview with a pioneering academic and board member

Sandra Dawson addresses the changing role of women in business over the last 40 years.

Mary C. Meaney

**Article
at a
glance**

Sandra Dawson, a prominent expert on organizational change and leadership and a nonexecutive director, shares her views on how the role of women in business has changed over the past 40 years and what tactics companies can use to retain and promote women more effectively.

She also suggests some changes that society and governments should make to help bridge the gap between the large number of female university graduates and the small number of female senior executives and board members.

Dawson also offers insights on how the dynamics of boards shift as they become more diverse.

Sandra Dawson has often surprised even herself by the jobs she has taken on throughout her career. The result has been a rich mix of UK-based academic, government, and business roles where, as a woman, she has often been one of a small minority.

Dawson started in 1968 as a British civil servant in the Ministry of Labour, focusing on surveys of employment practices. Although she enjoyed the work, she says she found the lack of competition and determination dismaying and soon moved to Imperial College, attracted by a one-year position with someone whose research she greatly admired: Joan Woodward, an industrial sociologist. Dawson studied communications in the postal service and the organization of work in prisons.

Pursuing her interest in social research and a policy of not saying no when asked to take on something new, at Imperial she chaired a workplace nursery and was a director of an investment trust. She later became a professor of organization at the University of London; the director of Cambridge University's Judge Business School; the Master of Sidney Sussex College, Cambridge, and thus the first woman to head a Cambridge college founded originally for men; and a member of the boards of Barclays Bank and the antipoverty advocacy group Oxfam International. She has also served on government bodies, notably as chairman of one of the first National Health Service Trusts.

Her varied career and prominent positions make her well placed to describe how the role of women in business has changed over the past 40 years. She offers a range of practical insights and advice, as well as her hopes for the future of women in business, in this recent discussion in Cambridge with Mary Meaney, a McKinsey principal in London.

The Quarterly. We hear about how the presence of women on boards changes the dynamics of meetings. You've been the lone woman on boards and other senior-level committees, as well as one of several women in those settings. What difference does the number of women make?

Sandra Dawson: When you are the only woman in any situation, I think it is often quite difficult for men to get beyond the idea that "this is the woman speaking." In most boards, gender is the most obvious difference, since there is often little diversity in culture or education. So it can be a challenge to "see beyond the woman." Maybe when you get two or three, it encourages a different perspective, which prompts the thought, "Oh—women do not necessarily think alike." And that is the breakthrough in any prejudicial situation: to see the person and not the category or stereotype.



Sandra Dawson

Vital statistics

Born June 4, 1946, in Buckinghamshire, UK

Married, with 3 grown children

Education

Graduated with BA in sociology and history in 1968 from Keele University, UK

Career highlights

Master of Sidney Sussex College, University of Cambridge (1999–present)

Judge Business School, University of Cambridge

- Director (1995–2006)
- KPMG professor of management studies (1995–present)

Barclays (2003–present)

- Nonexecutive director

Imperial College, University of London

- Research assistant, lecturer, professor (1969–95)

I understand the point many advisers to women make when they recommend, “Say something, even if you fear that what you say will be discounted.” They may even advise, “Say something even if you fear you will be seen to have nothing to say.” I think this last point is a terrible rule, since no one should ever speak if they really have nothing to say, but it may not be bad advice, because it encourages women to be more confident about their contributions.

Fear of making a fool of oneself is a very strong driver of behavior, and it has occurred to me more than once that this is a rare fear among successful men and more common—usually without foundation—among successful women. Fearing that one will not be heard is not the same as fearing that you have nothing to say. It does not mean that you are stupid or you are not prepared. It normally says more about your audience than it does about you. It may mean that you fear that Fred will think that he has already made the point, and you do not want to be accused of repetition. I have learned that nobody need worry about repeating what Fred said, because Joe and Michael will soon be saying it in different ways, and Fredericka should not be shy to do the same.

Sandra Dawson Fast Facts

- Nonexecutive director and trustee of Oxfam
- Chairman of the executive steering committee of the Advanced Institute of Management
- Member of The UK–India Round Table and the external advisory committee of the Ruskin School of Fine Art, University of Oxford
- Was awarded a DBE (Dame Commander of the Order of the British Empire) in 2004 for her contribution to higher education and management research
- Former chairman of Riverside Mental Health National Health Service Trust, and nonexecutive director of JPMorgan Fleming Claverhouse Investment Trust, RAND Europe (UK), and the Public Health Laboratory Service
- Served on the UK’s Review Body on Senior Salaries, the Economic and Social Research Council Research Priorities Board, and the Department of Trade and Industry Task Force “Accounting for People”
- Was inducted into the International Women’s Forum (IWF) Hall of Fame in 2006

Board dynamics work through conversation, body language, and argument, and all participants need to learn the spoken and unspoken rules of the game. The way that Fred makes a point and the way Fredericka speaks will not always be heard in the same way, but both should find their voice in a way that suits them and will have impact in the board.

The Quarterly: What about the idea that women tend to be less assertive because of cultural norms?

Sandra Dawson: Yes, it’s the old story: what is clear thinking in a man is shrill and dogmatic in a woman, when in fact they’re behaving and speaking in the same way. These impulses take us to notions of identity and, in a way, to identity in the relations between the sexes. How do I want to be portrayed; what would be my stock, as a woman, among my male peers if I started taking a very, very strong view or, worse still, if I started winning the game? In my generation, there was quite explicit discussion about “Do I want to be seen to be too good, too successful compared with men? What will this mean for me as a person in my relationships with men?”

Today, thank goodness, that is certainly not discussed so much—it’s more a question of being heard, of persisting with an idea, of feeling that “if they have not heard what I said, should I come at it again? Should I reframe it? Should I just be

quiet?” Probably, more women than men are likely to think, “Oh well, I will not carry on.” But these are really impossible generalizations, as context and personality can make so much difference. I know I have been excessively fortunate in that the idea that one should downplay the success of women has never featured in my close family relationships or good friendships, either as a child or as an adult.

The Quarterly: One female executive at a financial-services company recently said that its problems in retaining women come not from overt discrimination but from “a thousand micro-inequalities.” What is your perspective on how companies treat female employees and what can help to retain them?

Sandra Dawson: There is still some institutionalized prejudice, which is extremely difficult for women—or men—to tackle, as it can be deeply ingrained. However, it is no longer dominant in many organizations. Most people at the top of companies really want to enable more of their very able young women to succeed and get to the top. So it is not that they do not want to encourage women; it is not even that they do not want to encourage them at a subconscious level. It is that they do not recognize the micro-inequalities of which you speak, so all of us, men and women, need to be alert to these subtle forces and work to eradicate them.

In a more extreme form, prejudice and discrimination can be embedded in language or images, which many now recognize as completely improper. Here, I have seen many organizations take an increasingly strong line over the last 40 years. It is now normal for the clear rule to be, “We will not allow any conversation or images where women are shown as sexual objects.” And so I am very surprised that it can still be commonplace in some workplaces for women to be confronted at work by pictures of Page 3 girls. But by far, the majority of companies are striving to create an environment for women to feel that they can be individuals, team players, and leaders and that they will not be immediately stereotyped as sex objects, good assistants, noncareer-minded working mothers, or bossy, nagging demagogues.

We talk a lot today about the importance of mentoring and coaching, and they can be vital in helping novices learn the rules of the game. But it is very important that men should not always be mentored by men and women by women. Mentoring based on interests, not gender, can help to change the culture because it can lead to greater understanding of the perspective of the “Other.” It can make a big difference when very able men mentor and guide young women, routinely and systematically, and vice versa. That said, it can sometimes be very helpful to have a mentor of the same gender; the important thing is to find the right fit rather than be doctrinaire about it.

Sometimes, when I am asked to mentor people—usually women—I say, “Let us have a talk about whether I am the right person, and let us especially talk about whether it

is appropriate, given where you are in your career, for you to have a woman or a man as your mentor. We could, of course, have a chat about some of the things that are specific to women, but a mentor who is on the executive committee at your company would be much more effective for you than I would be.” I think that in this respect, women have not necessarily done a service to themselves, because we have tended to think that we ought to mentor each other.

The Quarterly: Sometimes, with all the best intentions, you can end up pigeonholing people.

Sandra Dawson: That is right, and pigeonholing is a form of discrimination. It is vital that we look beyond the label of gender and think about what would be most effective for a given person’s career. With top-talent programs, for example, the important thing is making sure that every stone is turned to get a reasonable proportion of women into that top 250 and then making sure that each of the top 250 is as hand picked, hand crafted, and hand supported as the others.

It may be counterintuitive, but women don’t always need particular sorts of help and guidance from other women. The question should always be, “If that is to be your next job, what do you need?” That calls for a process which does not see a man or a woman but sees individual talent, whether in the skin of Sandra Dawson or Samuel Dawson.

I get really optimistic looking at the programs many companies now have for talent management and succession planning, because I think the “war for talent” means that people are really eager for the best talent. If only we can get a sufficient number of women to be considered, there will not be anything to hold them back.

The Quarterly: What would it take to shift the dynamic in a meaningful way?

Sandra Dawson: It surprises me that it still is possible for most men to go into many situations where there are only men in the room. I did not think, 40 years ago, that my career would develop as it has, but since that did happen, I would have expected there to be many, many more women in top positions in all walks of life. So why aren’t there?

One reason is the inadvertent matter of whom you choose to be your life partner and the father of your children. Children are the big thing that makes many women think, “I cannot carry on.” And at that point, your partner is vital: will he really support you and the family in enabling your career? I know many men who would say they are very supportive of their partners, but I do not see that support, fundamentally, at all.

So your choice of partner is really important, and of course these sorts of criteria are not uppermost in one's mind when falling in love. One needs some luck, for which I will be forever grateful.

The arrangements we make as a society for enabling people to work when they have school-age or infant children have fundamental financial as well as emotional implications. There are specific government actions that can help—for instance, it seemed to me terrible that women had to pay out of taxed income for their child care, and I campaigned to change that in Britain.


We also need to tackle issues in the workplace. Is it permissible to say, “I have to take my child to the doctor”? I do think there is a lot that companies and organizations can do—mentoring, good career planning, flexible employment practices, innovative schemes for taking time out and yet keeping in touch. But much as I like to see companies assuming responsibility, I do not think that this matter can be solved by individual women, their families, and individual corporations. The important thing is the social, community, and family context, and that comes down to the question of what value we place upon having women in the workforce.

When I am in the United States—certainly in the academic world—I see, in the numbers and proportions of senior women, that they are about 20 years ahead. We in Britain have done a lot in the academic world, but the US is still much stronger there. And when I go to India and China, there are exceptionally able young women who often come from families where there has traditionally been a lot of support for enabling children to be cared for “beyond the mum.” It may be that colleagues in China and India benefit from a social structure which enables women, and they may be more successful than we have been in the West.

It is quite interesting to think in a historical context. There have been leading women throughout history—in literature, in entrepreneurship, in policy—but they were always seen as exceptions. The coming of separate property rights, of the ability to get an education, and of the possibility of determining whether or not, and when, you would have children created a context in which it looked as if the constraints were gone. However, whether it's 1,001 minor inequalities or the social context in which we all work, some constraints are still there. But that is not because some mean group of men are saying, “Let's keep these women down or out.” I am sure that is absolutely not the case, and if you cast the problem as if it were, then you will never really find a solution.

The Quarterly: If the social issues are dealt with, is there a single strategy to ensure that women get to the top?

Sandra Dawson: There is never, in my experience, one single strategy that will secure a magical solution to any highly complex issue. Indeed, if people think that there is only one way to get more women at the top of organizations, I would be sad—it would be as though by enabling more women to get to a single goal by a single path, we were narrowing their opportunities. It’s important to think about the balance between a directive plan and an unexpected opportunity. In some ways, if women could feel a bit freer, they could perhaps be in a position to take the unexpected opportunities which might provide the next big opening.

I prefer a sense of openness about these issues rather than “We have got to do X and Y and that will be enough.” It is useful to have the checklist for women—speak up, be assertive, speak in short sentences, think carefully about your career moves and how you present yourself, et cetera—and checklists for companies to ensure equal opportunity. But let us have those as an enabling framework, not a rigid straitjacket. It would be such a pity if in tackling these issues to achieve diversity, we ended up with less diversity. 

Teaching collaboration

The Quarterly: You’ve also done much work on collaboration and how to teach it. Tell us about that.

Sandra Dawson: I am a very strong advocate for collaboration. When I welcomed MBA students to Judge,¹ I always said, “You need no lessons in competition. You will be as competitive as anyone, because you are here and because you are determined about where you want to go. But I am not sure how you will collaborate, though that may well differentiate you in tomorrow’s global business world.”

I found women likelier to agree initially that collaboration is important. I found men much more difficult to get to the door of collaboration. Men maybe have a tougher time looking beyond themselves and those like them. They have got to believe that there is value in the “Other,” who will by definition have different interests and ways to see the world.

If we didn’t have different interests, we would not need to collaborate; we would be a homogeneous team and all march together in step. This is suitable for simple tasks where one needs a lot of human force in one direction, though there are few situations today where that is true. But this idea of bringing success out of difference—bringing synergy out of diversity—can be thought and done by men as well as women.

The Quarterly: How do you get men to approach the idea? How do you teach collaboration?

Sandra Dawson: You can talk and talk, but it is difficult, on a tight deadline, to think as much about others as about yourself. So we teach collaboration by demonstrating its success in action. We divide the students into groups constructed so that, with luck, you will be the only person of your nationality and from your discipline or sector in the group. We set each group to the task of working with a local company to take a new product to

market. The groups have to deliver on very tight deadlines they can meet only if they take the best from each member and do not allow one member to dominate in all respects.

We begin by getting the teams to determine basic rules and structures. Who takes notes? What is punctuality? If we decide to start the workday at 8:00 a.m., will there be a range from a quarter till eight to five till nine? People have to ask themselves, “What do I offer the group? What do I value about each of the others, and how will we work together to get the best result? Unless we find a way of working together, I cannot achieve my near-term goal—which at a minimum is to do very well in this part of the MBA program.”

The Quarterly: Have you found by experience that you can see a link between diversity, encouraging diverse people to collaborate, and success?

Sandra Dawson: In some situations, you need diversity. When you enter new markets, you must have diversity to gain insights into the construction of success. In emergency relief work, you must have diversity to appreciate the needs, constraints, and customs which help or block humanitarian aid. In general, with complex tasks and nets of stakeholders, having many different voices at the table is fundamental to success. For example, in developing new products, you can have all the analytics, the research—even a model of your consumer. But unless you have your consumer at the table, with the analysts and researchers, you cannot understand what is going on. I do not think collaboration is an ideology; it is a requirement for sustained success in business, public policy, and the voluntary sector.

Equally important from a leadership standpoint is understanding when to draw everyone together to move on. “We have listened to each other, we have different perspectives, we have explored the options, but now we must get the product out.” The group must become one team with a clear focus on the task. To be an authentic leader, you must help your colleagues understand that you are not a hypocrite if you tell Mary that you want to understand everything she has to say but will not necessarily act on it. Managing the timing and pace of collaboration to achieve successful outcomes is something you can teach, unlike the experience of collaboration. That must be felt—most importantly, by achieving through synergy things which could only be glimpsed if one tried to achieve them through competition.

Notes

¹Cambridge University’s Judge Business School.

About the Author

Mary Meaney is a principal in McKinsey’s London office.

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