

Why Women's Networks and Dedicated Spaces are Essential to Achieving Board Parity

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For all the progress made in recent years, women remain significantly underrepresented in boardrooms and executive leadership. The numbers are shifting slowly but that is only because of deliberate intervention. That's why, this International Women's Day, it's worth spotlighting the power of women's networks and women-only development spaces. They're not a "nice to have," but as a strategic lever for achieving genuine board parity.

The Institute of Directors' decision to launch its first women-only cohort of the Accelerated Certificate in Company Direction is a timely example of this shift from rhetoric to action. This programme was created in direct response to feedback from our members and delegates, recognising that women benefit from environments where they can learn, challenge perspectives, share experiences and build powerful peer networks.

These spaces matter. They create room for candour, for shared understanding, and for leadership development that acknowledges the realities women face at senior levels - realities that mixed-gender environments can, unintentionally, gloss over. When women come together in a dedicated cohort, the conversation changes, the barriers that usually require explanation suddenly don't and the energy shifts from navigating context to accelerating capability.

Women's networks have long been a quiet engine of leadership progression. They provide peersupport

that counters the isolation many women experience at the top. For those with aspirations of a board position, role modelling makes senior leadership feel attainable rather than exceptional. That visibility and sponsorship has consistently shown to be critical to advancement.

But networks alone aren't enough. They need to be paired with high-quality, rigorous development opportunities, programmes that equip women with the governance, finance, strategy and leadership skills required for board effectiveness. We know that the Accelerated Certificate in Company Direction does exactly that, offering an intensive, globally recognised pathway toward Chartered Director status. The women-only cohort simply ensures that the learning environment is as inclusive and empowering as the content itself.

We've seen a shift from talking about "equality" to "equity" this is about recognising that identical treatment does not produce identical outcomes when the starting points are different. Dedicated spaces give women the psychological safety and peer community to stretch, question, and lead with confidence. And when women thrive in these environments, organisations benefit from stronger, more diverse, more resilient boards.

People no longer look at what businesses and organisations say in response to this imbalance, but instead at what they do. Creating intentional spaces for women's leadership development is one of the most meaningful things organisations can do.

On International Women's Day, the call to action is clear: Invest in women. Invest in their networks. Invest in the environments where they can grow without constraint.

Because when women rise, boards strengthen and businesses, economies and societies follow.