

# 2020 vision with a diversity lens

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The first months of 2020 have been very exhausting, to say the least. We experienced a volcanic eruption, and are still not out of the woods with the threat of COVID-19. While our vision for the future remains hazy, I remain optimistic that for the rest of the year, we will hear many stories anchored on the tagline “20-20 vision.” For me, this is more than just a catchy phrase, but a call to sharpen our focus on the persistent gaps and glaring problems in society.

Coincidentally, March is also Women’s Month, which is why I think it is only appropriate to discuss issues that I have observed affect women the most. As business leaders, we have the responsibility to understand, come up and implement the best solutions to address these gaps to empower our women and the workplace of the future.

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## **Persistent gender gap**

Year after year, the Philippines ranks high (always in the top 10) in the World Economic Forum Global Gender Gap Report. The latest report puts us in 16th place, a big slip from last year’s 8th spot. I had to step back and reflect on it: Are we moving backwards or is it

because we have become complacent?

Truth be told, when speaking to executives about pursuing gender equality in business, more often than not, the response is a defense: “We have so many women executives! We are doing well in terms of gender equality.” Time and time again, we ask, “How much of that was by design and how much was a coincidence?”

Perhaps some companies believe that this is not something to invest in, or that there is a, forgive me for the term, “sexier” advocacy to pursue. But this I tell you: Investing in gender-friendly policies and projects and ultimately pursuing gender equality in the workplace is not just a good thing to have. It’s not just the right thing to do, but it’s the smart thing to do for business in the long run. You will eventually realize that your short-term costs will be outweighed by the long-term benefits.

## **Generational gap**

Next up: “Okay, boomer.”

Ever heard of this? It is apparently a catch-all dismissal phrase directed toward older people by the younger generation, and it has become synonymous with an “intergenerational warfare.”

If you observe social media closely, there is a recurring generational conflict between the Baby Boomers—that’s mostly us, and millennials and Generation Z. “Boomers” are often accused of lecturing to the younger ones about work ethic and about working harder and complaining less. On the other hand, millennials often accuse Boomers of being self-absorbed and out of touch. Anecdotally and statistically speaking, the younger generations are not as bad as we paint them to be. In fact, they are more socially aware and technologically savvy than we are.

This is quite a bitter pill for us to swallow: we need to accept that society is changing, culture is changing, and the world itself is almost unrecognizable compared to when we were younger. Rather than create a new conflict, let’s leverage on this age diversity and other forms of diversity in the workplace.

Instead of taking the easy route by creating homogeneous groups, say of the same age, gender, etc., let’s aim for diversity and inclusion so that we do not lose the opportunity to learn from the different experiences and backgrounds of others. Such differences stimulate productive discussions, which could result in new and creative solutions. I believe this is something we all aspire to achieve.

Let's choose to keep an open mind and to listen rather than judge each other because of preexisting beliefs and practices we have grown accustomed to.

### **Confidence gap**

More often than not, when a woman is asked or tasked with something outside of her comfort zone, the automatic response is “Why me?”—a question full of self-doubt and insecurity. I often wonder why because existing local data show that girls actually do better in school.

Despite higher academic marks, it seems that women are less confident in the work setting. In fact, according to the joint study conducted by the Philippine Business Coalition for Women Empowerment (PBCWE) and the Makati Business Club (MBC), some 95.1 percent of 103 female respondents expressed confidence in their skills, education and leadership potential, but they rated their suitability for leadership roles lower when asked to consider a “career upgrade” (88.4 percent) or immediate elevation to a top role (70.4 percent).

Here in the Philippines, “self-promotion” seems to be a pervasive part of a person's career path. It also seems that those who “promote themselves” often have better chances of being hired, being promoted, getting a raise, and thriving in their careers. Thus talented women who second-guess themselves are deprived of a successful career, while also depriving the company of the opportunity of benefiting from the full potential of their female employees.

What can we do as business leaders? We can remedy this situation by adopting policies and practices at work that can encourage both women to transition to higher roles, while allowing both to balance family and work, providing mentors and role models, offering opportunities for women to network, and customizing career development plans of high-potential employees.

### **A 2020 challenge**

I see this year's Management Association of the Philippines theme as a challenge to our leadership to create a competitive workforce. Leadership—with not just a gender lens, but a diversity and inclusion lens, will definitely give you a clearer view of what needs to be done. This will eventually attract the best talent, and in turn, give your business

the competitive edge. We can still do a lot for the rest of 2020, and there is no better time to start but now. INQ

This article reflects the personal opinion of the author and does not reflect the official stand of the Management Association of the Philippines, or MAP. The author is chair of the Philippine Women's Economic Network, cochair of the Philippine Business Coalition for Women Empowerment and member of the MAP diversity and inclusion committee. Feedback at [map@map.org.ph](mailto:map@map.org.ph). For previous articles, please visit [map.org.ph](http://map.org.ph).

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