

Forbes

OCT 12, 2012 @ 07:58 AM

3,504 👁

The Little Black Book of Billionaire Secrets

# When Gender Diversity Doesn't Work (and How to Do It Right)

**Elise Knutsen**, CONTRIBUTOR*I cover international movers and shakers.* [FULL BIO](#) ✓

Opinions expressed by Forbes Contributors are their own.

**Beth Brooke**, the Global Vice Chair of Public Policy at **Ernst & Young**, has a unique approach to promoting gender diversity in the corporate world: let men complain more, and allow their grievances be aired openly.

Ms. Brooke explained her strategy in Deauville, France where she is attending the Women's Forum as part of the CEO Champions initiative.

The towering executive (and former Purdue basketball star) is committed to making Ernst & Young's 167,000 strong workforce as diverse as possible and has worked to integrate women at every level. While she firmly believes that gender diverse teams produce better results, she conceded that



*Beth Brooke, Global Vice Chair of Public Policy, Ernst & Young*

effective leadership is crucial for successful male-female collaboration.

“We spend a lot of time internally on what we call inclusive leadership. How do you get diverse teams to actually perform as they should, which is better than a homogenous team. But as you know the research shows that when they’re not well led, diverse teams actually suck,’ she said with a laugh.

“When I look back on our journey, we’ve been at gender equality in our organization for twenty plus years,” she continued. “When I look back at what we overlooked on our journey, we focused on the business case around women and all those perspectives but what we overlooked was this leadership issue.”

Lacking proactive management, people, particularly men, often struggled on gender diverse teams. “Some of their experiences have been miserable,” she admitted

But these criticisms are rarely voiced. “It's politically correct to talk about gender equality,” Ms. Brooke explained, and men don’t want to be accused of sexism. “We had men very scared to talk about it, because every time they opened their mouths they got, ‘You said that wrong!’ or 'That was offensive’ and so, what to say?”

But stifling the conversation only makes it worse. “We have forced it under ground... We need to bring that back to the surface and make it safe, not hammer people.” Let the men complain! Let the bellyaching begin!

In all seriousness, Ms. Brooke raises an essential and often overlooked point. For genuine gender equality to exist in the

workplace, dialogue must exist. Men should not be branded as sexists for broaching the subject of women in the workplace; doing so only breeds resentment and allows deeper bitterness to brew. Women should not assume that criticism from male colleagues is rooted in sexism; doing so cheapens the devastating experience of true sexual discrimination.

**Beth Brooke's** strategy represents the new, enlightened approach to establishing a diverse workforce. Ramming gender equality down throats with doctrinaire leadership is simply ineffective, and ultimately undermines very effort it attempts to promote. Repeating the mantra of sexual parity was useful for previous generations marked by deeply chauvinistic standards. Today, dialogue is the key.