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A few years ago, I had a corporate feminist dream job. Launching a company's national initiative to recruit more female employees. In the finance sector.

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But first, I had to get the signed-off support of all department heads. So I spent months perfecting the proposal, presented it and won the support of almost everyone.

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But in this team, there were two men we'll call Howard and Tom. Howard just would not get back to me. I emailed him about the proposal, I left him voice mails, I'd roll my chair back and forth during meetings, trying to make eye contact with Howard.

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(Laughter)

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He'd just take out his phone and start scrolling. And then I started to question myself. Had I been diplomatic enough in that email? Too demanding in that voice mail? Does Howard hate this proposal or am I just overreacting? It's probably just me, I thought.

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And then one day, I'm walking down the hall and here comes Howard. He's holding a packet of papers, sees me and lights up. He says, "Sara, Tom just emailed this to me, you should take a look. It's a proposal for us to recruit more women."

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(Laughter)

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"I think Tom has a really great idea here, and we should all get behind it." Howard proceeds to hand my own proposal back to me. And explains to me the many merits of what I wrote.

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(Laughter)

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Howard was never against recruiting more women. But he needed to hear from a man why it was important to hire more women. And as this scene played out, I said nothing. Because I knew somehow that I was a guest in a place that wasn't meant for me. And so instead of questioning my environment, I questioned myself.

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I wanted to know how so many talented women who worked long hours and started their careers with confidence all became trained in this kind of self-doubt that makes them say, "It's probably just me." How was that still possible? Aren't things getting better?

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Opportunities for women have increased over the last 50 years. But over the last decade, progress has stalled. Experts have previously identified 2059 as the year the wage gap would close. But in September of this year, these same experts announced that according to the most current data, we'll have to adjust our expectations to the year 2119.

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(Audience murmurs)

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One hundred one years from now.

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Looking beyond the wage gap, women are still underrepresented in leadership, receive less access to senior leaders and are leaving the fastest-growing sectors, such as tech, at 45 percent higher rates than men, citing culture as the primary reason. So what have we been doing to address gender inequality? Why isn't it working?

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Many businesses think they're addressing the problem, because they provide training. Eight billion dollars worth of training a year, according to studies from the "Harvard Business Review." These same studies also conclude that these trainings don't work and often backfire. Research tracking the hiring and promotion practices of 830 companies over the course of 30 years found that white men who are asked to go to diversity trainings tend to rebel by hiring and promoting fewer women and fewer minorities. The other solution has been to ask women to change their own behavior. To lean in. To sit at the table. Negotiate as often as men. Oh, and get more training.

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Women currently earn the majority of college degrees, outperform their peers in key leadership skills and are running businesses that outperform the competition. It doesn't look like education or skills or business acumen are the problem. We're already empowered. Enough to make an impact on the businesses that are ready. These approaches fail to address the key systemic problem: Unconscious bias.

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(Applause)

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We all have bias, it's OK. It's lodged in our amygdala, it keeps ticking away when we go to work. Bias affects how much I like you, what I believe you're capable of and even how much space I think you take up. Thanks in part to the Me Too movement, awareness of gender bias has spread.

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But the harassment stories that made headlines are just one piece. You don't have to harass a woman to limit her career. The messages women send me aren't about being harassed. They're being tolerated in the workplace. But they're not being valued. I don't know anyone who has ever said, "You know what I love about my employer? They just tolerate me so well, I feel so tolerated."

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(Laughter)

06:01

To break the inertia, we need to take a step beyond Me Too. Beyond just being tolerated as women. Our organization decided to tackle the problem in two ways. First, if we're all biased, our workplaces need to be actively antibiased by design, not by trying to change mindsets one training at a time. So our team began by identifying over 100 cultural levers that can be adjusted to counter the impact of bias. We found that small tweaks can lead to big changes. And they cost a lot less than eight billion dollars.

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So what do these small tweaks look like? If a woman is asked to state her gender before filling out a job application, or performing a skills-related test, she performs worse than if she were not asked first. So how can businesses avoid activating this self-stereotyping bias? Move the gender check box to the end of the application.

07:04

Example two. In a national survey that we conducted, men were 50 percent more likely to state they had received multiple, frequent evaluations over the course of the last year. As opposed to one single yearly review. Here's why this matters. "Fortune" magazine reviewed performance evals across industries. And found that criticism like this related to personality, ["Watch your tone!"] but not job-related skills, appeared in 71 of the 94 yearly reviews received by women. Of the 83 reviews received by men, personality criticism showed up twice. But in businesses that conduct much shorter, highly frequent reviews, say, five-minute weekly evaluations focused on specific projects, the personality criticism vanishes. And the perceived performance gap between men and women is nearly nonexistent. While yearly reviews rely on overall impressions, which are like petri dishes for bias, short, objectively focused evaluations eliminate this feelings-based gray area.

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Now, some businesses are consciously taking these steps to counter the impact of bias, while others just do a good job of advertising. We wanted to find out who is actually getting it right. So we put a poll on Facebook, we asked women in workshops how they were choosing employers where they would be valued. The most common response that we heard? "I Google it." So we googled it.

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(Laughter)

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Specifically, we googled "best employers for women in tech." Our results showed three completely different lists. One business shows up as the top employer on one list, doesn't show up at all on another, some lists offer no criteria and some are purchased ads. They're paid for.

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Employees and employers both want clear benchmarks that go beyond good intentions. The LEED certification gave businesses this clarity around environmental stewardship by outlining the exact steps they need to take for certification. We wanted businesses to have this kind of playbook for gender equity.

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So for our second act, we took what we had learned from testing these cultural levers, we partnered with the University of Washington and created the first standardized certification for gender equity in US businesses.

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(Applause)

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Thank you.

10:02

(Applause)

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To create this standard, we had to learn what matters and what doesn't. We found out that what matters is not the total percentage of female employees. Or the number of board members that are female. Those are what we call vanity metrics. They can be bought, while the culture inside can still be out of balance. The factors that matter and that should be measured are under the surface.

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For example, even in organizations where equal percentages of women and men state that they have had access to a mentor, men's mentors are more likely to be in senior positions. Reviewing our survey results, men were twice as likely to state they had been offered an opportunity to shadow someone in a senior role.

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We're all used to hearing about the wage gap. Hidden opportunity gaps like these are just as influential. So when assessing a company's culture, we measure these gaps between men's and women's experiences. And the smaller the gap, the more equity is center of the culture.

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We also searched our findings for the tenets of workplace culture that are most important to men and most important to women. We learned that only three factors consistently matter to men, while a dozen matter to women. And they only share one in common. Topping the list for women: Paid family leave, health care for dependents and feeling that their ideas are heard and they're properly credited for them. These are a few of the 188 indicators that determine whether or not an organization meets our quantitative standard for workplace equality. Based on the data that matter. These are the factors to create a culture of equity that lasts. Not just for a month or for a quarter but for years.

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So where does this leave us? Women in the workforce today are constantly told, "You can be anything you want now. It's up to you." Women of color, for whom the wage gap is even larger, have heard it. The two-thirds of minimum-wage workers who are women have heard it. Workers who don't identify as male or female and hide their identity at work have heard it. If they can hear, "You can be anything you want now, it's up to you," I believe it's time for our businesses to hear it, too. Eliminating workplace bias is a tall order. But we can't afford to let half our people go on being ignored. We've given businesses a framework for real change. Businesses can be anything they want now. It is up to them.

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Thank you.

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(Applause)