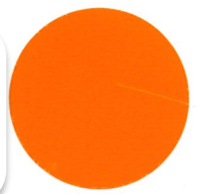


Mai Chen: The ca

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Mai Chen. Photo / Babiche Martens

NZ Herald

KiwiSaver provider Simplicity has recently attracted headlines with its "diversity activism" drive to increase diversity on New Zealand boards.

Simplicity has written to the chief executives of New Zealand's top 50 companies and demand that they develop and implement a diversity plan within the next five years.

Sam Stubbs, the managing director of Simplicity, said that "it will be obvious when you see photos of the board and management as to what has been achieved".

I agree that there is a burning platform for companies to increase diversity on boards and senior management to better reflect the changing client base and talent pool in NZ and the increasing focus of exports to Asia.

The research shows that clients and staff like to do business with (and be part of) organisations which reflect them.

But implicitly saying that all pale stale males are not diverse (thinkers) in leadership is simply wrong stereotyping.

The chief executive of nib (the major sponsor of Superdiverse Women) who visually does not look diverse has spent longer working in Asia than I have. So has Scott Pickering, the chief executive of ACC, who is also an Anglo-Saxon male. I find both of them open and

diverse in their thinking, and with high CQ (cultural capability).

In reverse, I have found some diverse looking people closed in their approach to other ethnicities, and not open to looking beyond their own cultural ways of thinking, instead doing things which they view as superior.

Diversity is not a gender or an ethnicity. We all have a gender, an ethnicity, a sexuality and an (dis)ability. Diversity is about difference and not assuming we are what we appear.

It is not just about more women on boards.

We need to be more ambitious about attracting people with all manner of different characteristics as long as they are the best candidate for the role.

The key is not to stereotype visually different people just as it is important not to stereotype Anglo-Saxon men.

The key is to get beyond stereotypes to assess people on the merit of what they bring to the board or senior management, for the sake of having the best team on board.

The key is defining merit in a way that does not exclude diverse people.

Success for Sam Stubbs is that his 4-year-old daughter can get senior management and governance roles if she is the best merit candidate for the job.

But having a diverse board simply for the sake of looking diverse will just queer the pitch for other diverse people who should be there on the basis of merit.

Who wants to be under a cloud of suspicion that they are just on the board because they are a woman or Maori, Pasifika or Asian or both?

Likewise, the YWCA Equal Pay Awards are there to celebrate employers who pay on merit, and not on stereotypes of women being worth less than men. Indeed, the statistics currently show that visually diverse ethnic women are the most underpaid of all, and that cannot be because they are less meritorious than other candidates.

In conclusion, if Simplicity's diversity activism results in changing the definition of merit so it is truly open to diverse candidates of merit, then I am for it.

I do not, however, support political correctness gone mad, quotas and stereotyping all Anglo-Saxon men on the basis of their appearance, regardless of their CQ and diverse thinking abilities.

- *Mai Chen is the managing partner of Chen Palmer Partners, chairwoman of the Superdiversity Centre and a BNZ Board Director.*