

Shelley Zalis

CEO, The Female Quotient

Shelley Zalis is the CEO of The Female Quotient and an internationally recognized thought leader for advancing equality in the workplace. Through her organization, Zalis is advancing gender equality across industries and career levels. A firm believer in giving back with generosity, her legacy is to tap into the power of collaboration to transform workplace culture so that all people feel like they belong.

Zalis authors a Forbes column that provides advice for women in the “messy middle” of middle management, who are looking to rise into leadership positions. She is co-founder of #SeeHer, a movement led by the Association of National Advertisers (ANA) to increase the accurate portrayal of women and girls in advertising and media. She is on the board of directors for MAKERS.

As an entrepreneur and thought leader whose focus has been on elevating more competent female leaders to the C-suite, Shelley looks at equity through a gender lens across all intersections of race, religion, and age. Here, she shares her thoughts on closing gaps across the spectrum and how we can use this moment to, in her words, “pivot with positivity and proactivity.”

Mind the gaps

We’re about closing the wage gap, the gender and racial gaps, and pipeline gaps. Women enter the workforce at 50/50, yet represent just 21 percent of the C-suite.

No turning back

We can’t look at where we’ve been. We need to live in this moment and create for this moment. Our commitment to equality never stops. Pre-COVID-19, The Female Quotient was doing 70 Equality Lounge® pop-ups a year at different conferences, including the World Economic Forum in Davos, Switzerland.

Since COVID-19 began, we’ve hosted over 450 conversations with 1,500+ speakers—because the conversation needs to keep going and the actions need to be taken. When you look at pre-COVID-19, there was a disproportionate lack of women, especially women of color, in the C-suite. Since COVID-19, the gaps have widened, and we’ve added a new variable. If you’re working from home and you have kids, you’re taking on the additional responsibility of educating them. We are seeing increased challenges around mental health, stress, and anxiety, as a result. For women living alone, there’s also increased loneliness. Yet we all have the ability to reset and ignite in a whole new way. We can create a more equitable future. Shame on us if we don’t take advantage of it.

The buck stops with leaders

With all the conversations we’re having about closing the wage gap and having more women in the C-suite, we’re going backward. We’ve got to go to the edge and push the boundaries if we truly want to see change. We have to get comfortable being uncomfortable. We’ve also got to work together. We’ve been working on the same things separately as opposed to advancing women across age, race, etc. We need to share the good, the bad, and the ugly to push forward. Then, we have to look in the mirror and take responsibility. We have to create the measurement for accountability, so we hold ourselves responsible and don’t point fingers at other people to fix the problem. We all have the power to become impactful, conscious leaders. We can all activate change.

Own your power

There are two taboo words for women: money and power. Often, we feel because we have to be nice, we can’t use the word power. There’s hierarchical power and there’s soft power. The greatest powers that leaders possess are soft powers: resilience, passion, compassion, visualization, storytelling, and contextualization. Aggression, assertiveness,

and linear and analytic thinking are masculine powers. In my opinion, the greatest leadership qualities today are the feminine powers. When you look at COVID-19 and which countries responded first, they're all run by women. We are natural protectors. We want to protect our family, and we speak truth. We don't have time to bullshit. Leaders with caregiving qualities are the best leaders. The contradiction is we're losing our best leaders to caregiving.

Systemic change in the workplace

True equality won't be achieved through a knee-jerk reaction of filling quotas. Each workplace has to become a culture of belonging. When you have representation and then you have reflection—in other words, when you see yourselves there—people feel comfortable. We know there's a 30 percent threshold before we see cultural transformation. If a board of directors is 30 percent female, women become engaged. I think it's not that the C-suite is not aware of racial inequities—they've been aware. They just haven't been held accountable. With George Floyd, we all experienced it. You can't ignore what happened. It's front and center, and now leadership is being held accountable by their boards. Every CEO has a boss. There's no turning back. People are becoming more comfortable sharing their vulnerabilities. We need to start listening, learning, and activating. It's about having conversations, knowing you're safe and secure and encouraged and rewarded for having them. That's how change will happen.