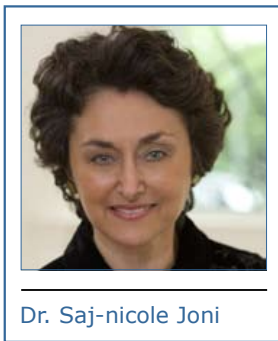


The Third Opinion

The Sotomayor Debate: What Every Business Leader Needs To Discern

Saj-nicole Joni, 07.13.09, 05:05 PM EDT

It's wrong to object to her "wise Latina woman" remark. Here's why.



The political and media frenzy that erupted with President Obama's nomination of Sonia Sotomayor for the Supreme Court was predictable. Full and even raucous debate about critical appointments is a necessary part of democracy. But no one should have rushed to condemn Judge Sotomayor's remark, in a 2001 speech, that "I would hope that a wise Latina woman with the richness of her experiences would more often than not reach a better conclusion than a white male who hasn't lived that life." Calling that inherently racist reveals a kind of thinking that no longer resonates with, and indeed is no longer tolerated by, the leadership of global corporations today.

Given the daunting array of demands we place on business leaders today, we know we need the best possible talent, and we know that talent comes in all sizes and shapes. To face the enormous challenges and opportunities of disruptive innovation, global economic upheaval and pressing environmental issues, boards, CEOs and top executives know they need a varied pool of leaders who can debate vigorously, challenge existing pieties and develop sophisticated perspectives that lead organizations to new and sustainable growth and prosperity.

The Sotomayor debate gives us a chance to end our narrow thinking about categories by thinking more broadly and deeply about the need for diversity and about what constitutes wisdom.

Every person who sits at a boardroom table and makes decisions draws on an array of personal and professional experiences. We don't ask a former National Football League coach to leave at the door everything he knows about motivating teams when he shifts to a career as a scientist. We don't ask a former top equities trader to leave behind everything she knows about hedging risk when she moves up to lead a global information technology organization.

Success in business demands the right balance of alignment and disagreement, harmony and tension, sameness and difference. That's a simple—but essential—condition for success. The world is changing too fast, and the complexities it throws at business are too multifarious, for us to get by with the narrowness of vision that may have been common at organizations a generation ago.

Whether someone's life experiences make him biased is the wrong question to ask. It's a waste of time, a holdover from the past. Everyone has a unique life experience that shapes how they view the world.

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The right framing of the question is this: How will a person's background and life perspective mesh with their competencies and expertise as they take on increasing power and responsibility? Will they grow in wisdom and judgment, making sound decisions that integrate increasingly diverse perspectives, or will they succumb to the siren call of power and allow a personal agenda to cloud their view, limiting their ability to serve all of their constituencies?

That is one of a few key questions that boards need to consider when they appoint and review their chief executive officers. How committed is the CEO to expanding and evolving her thinking and perspectives? What kind of counsel does he seek to augment and challenge his own thinking? Similarly, this is a critical question for CEOs and top executives to ponder as they seek to develop their leadership teams throughout their organizations.

Given the enormous importance, power and lifetime independence of the position of Supreme Court justice, this question deserves the utmost attention. It requires a much higher bar of scrutiny for Sonia Sotomayor than for a CEO. After all, CEOs are still accountable to their boards and stakeholders.

In the debate about appointing a "wise Latina woman" to the Supreme Court, the political world appears to be forgetting the past. Supreme Court seats have always been parsed out according to criteria beyond simply having well-qualified judges. At first, the (unspoken) agreement was geographical. There were New England judges, Southern judges and so on. Soon that became unexceptional. The demand for diversity moved on to religion. There was the Catholic seat, the Jewish seat and on down the line. Finally, that issue was put behind the country, and it moved on to gender and race.

Now it's time to move past this kind of narrow scorekeeping to a focus on achieving diversity that encompasses expertise, multiple perspectives, difference, wisdom and ultimately, highly refined judgment in our leaders.

Both the political world and the business world are better at talking about diversity than at actually achieving it. In that sense, the debate is far from over. While the business world has not yet achieved the full diversity it knows it needs, it at least widely acknowledges the need.

This is a time to be welcoming diversity, not throwing charges of racism at it.

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