Setting sex quota for board seats won’t fly

Quotas make people just go through the motion of meeting pre-set numbers, says ex-US ambassador Linda Tsao Yang

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THE subject of how to get more women represented on corporate boards and in management came up at a lunch talk about Asian corporate governance practices.

Former US Ambassador Linda Tsao Yang, who has broken the glass ceiling and landed on the boards of the US government and non-profit agencies herself, said yesterday that she is not in favour of instituting a “quota system” to ensure that both sexes are balanced in boards and in management.

Saying that quotas make people just go through the motion of meeting the pre-set numbers, she said: “What I would prefer is to have each organisation say what kind of effort they will make to ensure that more women will be represented on their boards, what kind of timetables they have in mind, what is the outward target and what methods they will use,” she said.

Ms Yang, who also used to be the executive director of the Asian Development Bank (ADB), was responding to Laura Hwang, who was in the audience at the talk organised by BoardAgender in partnership with the National University of Singapore’s Business School.

Ms Hwang, the president of the Singapore Council of Women’s Organisations, had asked about the possibility of a quota system being implemented here to redress the gender imbalance in top positions.

Ms Yang, now the chair of the Asian Corporate Governance Association (ACGA), a non-profit organisation dedicated to improving corporate governance in the region, was the first Asian woman executive director appointed by the US government to the ADB board; this post also made her the first executive director appointed by President Bill Clinton and confirmed by the US Senate.

Since the 80s, she has served on numerous boards, including the California Public Employees’ Retirement System, the Committee of 100, a national Chinese American organisation, and The Center on Asia Pacific Policy of the RAND Corporation.

Speaking from experience, she said women can play crucial roles in organisations by bringing their gender’s perspectives to the table. She said that at the ADB, for example, she had pushed for more women to be hired because half the organisation’s target audience are women.

But she draws the line at championing for more women in influential positions simply for the sake of equality.

“I want more women not because I am a woman, but because it will be beneficial to the organisation,” she said.

Speaking as someone who has fought in boardroom trenches alongside her middle-aged, white American counterparts, she listed for her audience the tenets she personally lives by, among them, the ability to build trust and share credit and to own up to mistakes.

These pave the way to good work relationships, she said.

She added that she made it clear from the onset at every organisation she has joined that she was there to be a problem solver, not a finger pointer. This went a long way to calming the nerves of those who were intimidated by her or who were not keen having her there.

Of casting herself as a problem solver to build good relationships quickly, she said: “It’s important to know the challenges other people in the organisation are facing because if I can help solve their problems, it will help me when I have issues to raise.”