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Design Flaws in Programs Targeting Women

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A self-described entrepreneurship "heretic," Astia CEO Sharon Vosmek explains what she sees as some of the design flaws in many programs targeted at increasing female participation in entrepreneurial activity.



Transcript

So the question is what I think of programs that specifically target ... Women in tech. ... women in tech. I hate women's leaderships programs. I'm so done being mentored; I'm so done having women be mentored. So that's one. It's just - I don't need another mentor, I've got plenty of advisors, thank you very much, and our women are exceptional, they don't need mentoring, they need advisors just like anyone else does. But I think often mentoring or targeted programs are used as a way to fix women as it were rather than address what is the issue that why aren't women there? And I will give an example; an unnamed partner of ours was really struggling to get women in to their program for entrepreneurs. So they wanted to start a separate one for women.

And they came to me and said we're going to do this separate one for women, it's going to be awesome, because the women won't come to our current one. And I said well, have you explored why they won't come to your current one? Well, no, no we're going to do this one for women, it's going to be great. Women are going to show up and so they did that and they got a few women, but not the hundreds that they usually get for men. Two years into this interesting dialogue with them, they've finally taken a look at what was happening in their organization to prevent women from participating. One was that they had an on-location requirement. Okay, the vast majority of women have responsibilities in addition to their work. And it is very difficult to go on location anywhere to - even if it's a weekend boot camp. And they redesigned their program and moved away from their three month on location requirement and boom! Their female applicants doubled, just by changing how they were doing their program. So things that try and fix women rather than fix the paradigm, I am very challenged by. Having said that, I do love my female book club because we get together, we have a lovely glass of wine and we mentor each other through whatever hurdles we're having.

But I think there are very few scenarios where a uniquely focused woman's effort will get us to where we need to get, because I actually think it's a real - this is a real problem for us as a society and furthering it with more and more women's only programs, I don't think gets us any closer to an ultimate solution. It's less comfortable. I think it's far more comfortable for women to get together and feel all womanly and we live each other and that's good, but that's the same problem that boys have when they all get together and they feel good. I just think that it's time for us to get uncomfortable.