An evening with Gillian Tett: How to lead an organization like an anthropologist

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At BLG, we strive to think outside the box when it comes to client events. That's why we decided to kick off this year's Energy Disruptors UNITE 2022 conference in Calgary by inviting a group of diverse leaders to an intimate dinner with Gillian Tett, chair of the editorial board and editor-at-large of the Financial Times.

Gillian's book, *Anthro-Vision: A New Way to See in Business and Life*, explores how anthropologists get inside the minds of people to understand cultures and how this practice can be applied to any organizational environment. Gillian encourages business leaders to think like anthropologists so they can better understand consumer behavior, markets and workplaces. By thinking like anthropologists, she says, we can address some of society's most urgent challenges.

The guests were connected by a common goal — the desire to challenge the way they think about leading their organizations — and Gillian led the group in a vibrant, multidimensional discussion.

Here are my takeaways.

The big question: What is "anthro-vision"?

As an anthropologist, Gillian coined the term "anthro-vison", which builds on the anthropological way of looking at the world. Gillian defines anthro-vision as a framework that allows you to see every side of a problem, understand what the people around you value and find frustrating, and take a step away to look at situations with a fresh perspective. It is making sure we are using lateral vision and looking at a business as a whole rather than fixating on its specific functions. As Gillian says, "fish don't see water." It's difficult for us to see the whole of an organization's needs unless we step out of ourselves and look back afresh.

Hot topics of conversation

- **Find out what you're not hearing.** This is important to understand change and what is valuable to your employees, clients, customers and other stakeholders.

Listen to people from all departments and backgrounds. Talk to them about what they value. This is what Gillian calls an **anthropological lens**; looking at a business from a broad point of view and understanding the needs and wants of others from their perspective.

- **Make the unfamiliar familiar, and the familiar unfamiliar.** As leaders, it's easy to get focused on financials and quarterly board reports — the things we know well. We need to practice seeking out areas and people we don't know well and get to know them better. We also need to look at what we know well from a different angle. That includes disciplines. Even Gillian doesn't view anthropology as the sole source of truth — social science needs to be combined with medical science, computer science and economic science to create a more effective way of looking at the world.
- **Gillian Tett's thoughts on Zoom meetings**. The hybrid environment may be here to stay. One question raised was whether the hybrid-working platform is good for employees in the long haul. Does it democratize the workplace? It's been helpful, Gillian said. After all, everybody is the same size on a video call. Whether someone has a corner office or a cubicle matters less. However, there is a digital divide and some people can feel left behind. Which brings me back to my first takeaway: listen for the unheard voices to discover the diversity of opinion on, say, a technological transformation.

What's next for business leaders?

As leaders, we should ask ourselves;

- What are we not seeing and hearing?
- What's coming around the corner during a highly volatile time of change?
- How can we look beyond the balance sheet to consider the wider environment?

When I think back to our evening with Gillian at the end of September, what I remember most is the transformative energy in the room — and it wasn't simply because Energy Disruptors UNITE was starting the next day. The food, music and conversation created a magical opportunity to make the unfamiliar familiar and the familiar unfamiliar, right here in downtown Calgary.

Want to get on next year's invite list? Reach out to me.

By

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