

BEWARE THE CULTURE TRAP

I recently attended an event where I was introduced to a woman entrepreneur who runs a consulting company.

Fewer than three minutes into the conversation, she told me that Ontario was a “much better” market than the East Coast because in Atlantic Canada, “no one will invest money in professional development unless they get a grant to do so”. Another woman who was chatting with us nodded her head in agreement. “So true,” she concurred. I told them I disagreed, but then the emcee started talking, and it was time to take our seats.

I’ve thought about this conversation multiple times since it took place. What struck me most was that, rather than a statement of fact, the entrepreneur’s assertion that “Atlantic Canadians won’t invest in themselves without a grant”, (seconded by another smart, professional woman) is culturally-accepted self-sabotage masquerading as “reality.” On top of the ongoing challenges women already face in the world of work, these culturally-accepted saboteurs can hit us especially hard.

Here’s what I think are the three most common (and debilitating) cultural “truths”:

Atlantic Canadians won’t invest in professional development without a government grant. Let’s start with the limiting belief that kicked off this entire column, shall we? I run a learning and development company. While the majority of our clients are based outside Atlantic Canada, we have served close to 70 regionally-based clients over the last three years. In that time, just two women said they would only invest if they got a grant. They are not clients. Which means that 70 Atlantic Canadian women invested in professional development without requiring government help. (Some secured grants, but were clear they were investing in learning programs with or without the help). The takeaway: Atlantic Canadians invest in themselves with their own money every day. Never allow limiting beliefs about our supposed dependence on government handouts mask what I see as deeper challenges related to effective product design, effective marketing and sales skills. No grant in the world will make up for a poorly positioned offering. Let’s all level up, shall we?



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Atlantic Canada = world. Another growth-killing stereotype is that your business will live and die by the regional sword. Having spent a lot of time in the U.S. over the last three years, I can safely say that Americans don’t have the same provincial mentality. If Beyoncé believed this, she’d still be performing small venues in Houston. Thankfully, she set larger goals for herself and now rules the world. Too few Atlantic Canadian companies export, period. And because women-owned businesses tend to be smaller anyway, and because companies that export tend to experience faster and more sustained growth, we as women entrepreneurs NEED to look beyond our sea-encrusted borders to bigger markets. Just imagine what would happen if, rather than one in 10 Nova Scotian firms were exporting outside the province, we were able to move it to three in 10. It would represent a significant jump in prosperity for the region.

Being from Atlantic Canada is a disadvantage. Back before Stephen Harper was Prime Minister, he described Atlantic Canada’s “culture of defeatism,” and was scourged by the press for doing so. And yet—particularly, it seems, for firms that do not export—there is an untrue belief that being headquartered in Atlantic Canada is a disadvantage (a defeatist attitude, no?). The truth is that it’s only a disadvantage if one allows it to be. An east coast HQ means that in order to play globally, you NEED to develop world-class marketing skills. Our relationship-driven culture positions us perfectly to build excellent professional relationships.

Attention women in business: being from Atlantic Canada is a business advantage...if you make it so.

Eleanor Beaton is a writer and consultant who has helped some of Canada’s most successful women entrepreneurs build influence and make an impact through courageous and unforgettable storytelling.

FEEDBACK

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