



Reflecting on women's progress where you work: simple actions at three levels

1. What can organisations do?

Check that your systems and processes are aligned with the principles of equity and inclusion. Has any bias crept into how recruitment is pitched? What about how you identify potential leaders? Check your reward and recognition systems. Are managers trained in how to manage merit?

2. What can teams do?

Who contributes and who gets heard at regular team meetings? Does everyone get a fair go or do certain types of people tend to dominate? Can you change everyday team processes to ensure an inclusive, side-by-side approach?

3. What can individuals do?

Both women and men can actively support a side-by-side workplace culture by engaging in inclusive behaviours every day. Do you try to connect with everyone in your area? Do you deliberately seek to include people in those all-important social exchanges, networking and small talk? Such talk is known to have a significant effect on building good relations and an inclusive culture.

SIDE BY SIDE: WOMEN, MEN AND INCLUSIVE LEADERSHIP

How far have we come?

One evening some 16 years ago, I (Margaret from the UGM team) was asked to speak to the top 60 leaders in a financial institution about women's progression into senior roles. The audience was almost entirely male (and Anglo-Celt). I outlined the case for broadening the leadership talent pool. People nodded, a little bored. But then, as I went on, you could have heard the proverbial pin drop. I pointed out that, if the talent pool was larger and the organisation didn't grow by a similar amount, there was a simple implication. With greater competition for every role, the standard would go up. The mediocre among them would no longer make the grade. No-one spoke for a while. Many shifted uneasily. In the Q&A that followed, the group stressed that, while they were committed to change in theory, it would need to be incremental, over time and reflect prevailing (masculine) social norms.

Could that scenario be repeated today?

Probably not. It would be unacceptable to be so lukewarm about gender equality. These days most organisations state publicly that they are taking action to increase the number of women leaders. In the last twelve years, there has been progress. Many organisational practices have begun to change. Discrimination has been publicly challenged, including in the courts. Organisations have become more inclined to reward talent over gender. There's more evidence of family-friendly policies and flexible work practices. There are mentoring and networking initiatives to promote women's visibility.

The culture, both in society generally and in the workplace, has shifted. These days, the appointment of a woman to a senior role signals innovation and progressive thinking. It's often publicly applauded. Women themselves have changed. Qualified and talented women are more comfortable in declaring their ambitions. Embarrassing and outdated stereotypes are dismissed, as more roles open up to the right person not the 'right gender'. Practices that blocked women's progress are being eroded. It's now much harder to declare 'think manager-think male'.

So why do we still have so far to go?

In Australia, as in most OECD countries, despite this progress, deep change has been piecemeal and dismally slow. When I addressed that group years ago, most people believed that by 2018 things would be significantly different. While things are different, I'm afraid they're not significantly different. Where leadership in Australia is concerned, men are generally still in charge. And, as many researchers point out, in those (rarer) circumstances where women do reach the top, the costs they incur are often high. For example, the swift counter to Cheryl

Sandberg's exhortation to 'Lean in' was the reminder that 'Women can't have it all'. As Harvard Professor Barbara Kellerman has pointed out, 50 years after we started the conversation about women and leadership, it's still a hot topic. Reviewing the statistics, she concludes that, for all the progress made, women continue to lag badly behind.

Is there still a glass ceiling?

This has been the traditional explanation. The view was that women and men operated on a level playing field until it came to securing an executive role. Then the invisible barrier of a glass ceiling prevented further progress. But more recent, large scale studies have shown things are more complicated. We now know the barriers are many, complex, varied and occur at all levels. Talented women disappear in various numbers and at various points. The old metaphor of the glass ceiling appears to be inaccurate. It suggested a specific barrier at a particular level. Some now argue that a better metaphor is a labyrinth. This describes a complex journey towards a goal, with twists and turns, false leads and tricky puzzles to be solved along the way.

The new leadership irony

Considerable research has focused on the question: do women and men lead differently? UGM has contributed to this inquiry through our filmed data of men and women working side by side in regular teams and meetings. We've found men are more likely to be directive, assertive and confident. Women are more often collaborative, encouraging and supportive. These two styles track through to different linguistic strategies. But women report a double bind. When they behave more assertively, they risk being seen as unfeminine and thus disliked.

The irony is that up-to-date leadership constructs stress the need to be inclusive and collaborative. This style is seen as having distinct business advantages in the knowledge economy. Male leaders are frequently asked to adopt a more encouraging style, one that includes followers and adapts to context.

Side by side – inclusive leadership

UGM has long argued that, in modern organisations focused on innovation and growth, we want leaders who are gender neutral. They succeed by exercising influence rather than control; by including their followers, rather than dominating them. Male leaders need to show empathy and relationship skills – attributes not traditionally associated with men. Female leaders need to show strength, ambition and confidence – attributes not traditionally associated with women. In other words, new models of what a leader looks like and how a leader behaves should be inclusive, not gendered. The goal is for women and men to work side by side, sharing leadership and rendering obsolete both glass ceiling and labyrinth.