



### Your own organisation in the spotlight

1. In your organisation, what's the percentage of women in senior roles? The definition of 'senior' varies depending on sector. So just use the method typical where you work. An important point is the trend. Over the last three years, has the number increased?
2. Looking at your organisation's strategy for increasing the number of women at the top, what is being done? Is the strategy regularly reviewed and tested against research findings on what helps and hinders women's career progression?
3. Is there a leadership program for women? What is explored in it? How was this determined? Has it been successful in supporting talented women?
4. Taking a common definition of organisational culture ('how we do things round here'), how inclusive is yours? Think about small talk, social interactions, meetings, development opportunities and promotions.
5. Is there any evidence where you work of what Michael Harmer called a discriminatory 'boys' club'?

## THE GENDER GAP AT THE TOP

### *Numbers even worse than many realised*

The headline proclaimed what we'd all suspected: 'Women stall on climb to highest rungs of corporate Australia'. The Sydney Morning Herald's Business Day survey of gender diversity in ASX 100 companies (published early November 2014) found that there has been virtually no progress when it comes to senior executive women. This poor result is despite the fact that the number of female board directors has increased. Even worse, a scan of annual reports showed that in 2011, on average, women held 24% of senior roles but this year, when the exercise was repeated, the figure had dropped to 23%. It seems we're going backwards. But that's not all. August ABS data reveals that the gender pay gap in Australia has now widened to 18.2%: the biggest gap since 1994, when records began.

The spotlight is now well and truly on the disturbingly slow progress of women into senior roles. As Jennifer Westacott of the Business Council of Australia has acknowledged, it is a very complex problem. In any domain, complex problems tend to have multiple factors that contribute to the high level of difficulty in resolving them. Indeed, problems of this type never have a single, magic key unlocking a perfect solution. As with any complex social issue, where women's progress into senior ranks is concerned, it's more likely that a portfolio of interrelated actions and interventions will prove the best way forward. In addition, different organisations will require a slightly different blend of remedies to suit their sector and circumstances. There is unlikely to be 'one size fits all'.

### *Particular Australian obstacles*

There are reasons why a somewhat masculine organisational culture developed in Australia. Historians point out that, for more than half a century after settlement, Australia was almost entirely a masculine society, where Europeans were concerned. As late as 1840, the proportion of European males to females was two to one. The masculine bias of the traditional Australian ethos (captured in the culturally unique term 'mateship') is seen as a function of such conditions and of the fact that many men depended on other men for companionship.

Sociologists make similar comments. For example, in an international study of 53 countries, Australia is described as a 'masculine society'. Men in societies such as Australia are expected to be tough, assertive, decisive and ambitious, while women are viewed as more caring and relationship-centred. This binary opposition of social roles contrasts with relatively 'feminine' countries (such as those in Scandinavia), where it is more acceptable for both women and men to be caring, concerned with relationships and, as

managers, to value emotion and consensus. Masculine cultures privilege traditional masculine values of competition and toughness in organisational life. A US study compared leadership styles in several countries, including Australia. A finding was that cultural values of individualism and masculinity are more deeply ingrained here than in the US, resulting in a masculine bias in organisational life.

Of course, these narrow and outdated definitions of both masculinity and leadership don't disadvantage only women. They also have a negative impact on many men who, because of their personality, cultural background or sexual orientation, may not be seen as 'fitting in'. Both men and women can feel pressured to manage according to old stereotypes in order to be accepted and get ahead.

All this is at odds with what is taught in MBA programs or executive training about leadership, and how best to lead and motivate others. But there is often a mismatch between theory and reality. For example, in July 2014, in a two part ABC interview, the prominent employment lawyer Michael Harmer, described what he termed a 'boysisie, boozy culture' at the top of many Australian organisations, where women are expected to go along to get along. His firm has experienced a steep rise in cases involving the poor treatment of talented women. "We still have a patriarchy and we are monumentally failing to increase the numbers of women at the top", Harmer concluded.

### *A fresh approach urgently needed*

At UGM, we are actively engaged in identifying exactly what should be in a broad-based portfolio of measures, as we support our clients to tackle this frustrating and long-standing problem. One element of the portfolio is a new leadership program for women: 'Women in the C-Suite'. In designing it, we've drawn on what we found when we took cameras into Australian organisations to look at the everyday skills involved in typical executive roles. We then tested this against international studies on what it takes to thrive at the top, as well as checking with executive recruiters who explained exactly what they look for. In the light of this thorough investigation, the program has modules on, for example, how to think and operate strategically and how to manage transformational change projects.

Our consulting experience, coupled with research from around the world, has convinced us that, when women feel well-qualified and well-prepared, they are much more willing to take a risk and compete for a top job. They are also more successful both in securing such roles and thriving in them once there. Current approaches are not delivering results. We can't go on doing more of the same, if we're genuine about wanting to see more women in senior roles.