



**Take action where it counts most**

1. Look at your systems

Scrutinise each one, check for any bias that may have crept back in over time. Remove, minimise or interrupt any unintended consequences arising from your regular systems.

2. Look at your culture

Examine common activities, practices and behaviours. Ask who participates and who succeeds. Identify a targeted (but limited) sequence of small behaviours that people will commit to adopting.

3. Look at your programs

Ensure the principles and practices of inclusion are woven into every program, from induction to executive leadership. Review your programs for women and check they are evidence-based and designed to help them thrive at the top.

**WHAT DO WOMEN WANT?**

*Women's focus, women's aspirations*

The problem is well-known. Women continue to face significant challenges as they move up the ranks, whatever their organisation. Each step of the career ladder, it's the same: fewer and fewer women, despite their equal representation at entry level and their predominance in many university classes.

The barriers have also been investigated. It's a toxic mix of stereotypes, out-moded mindsets, narrow systems, opaque procedures and failed interventions. The business case is even simpler than it was years ago. As well as the equity argument and the 'use all your talent pool' advice, we now have data on the productivity challenges we face and the economic imperative to lift female workforce participation.

Despite all this, not much seems to be changing. While senior positions in top companies have grown by 20% in the past five years, less than one fifth of those roles have gone to women. What about all the effort and dollars spent? Helen Conway, Director of WGEA, described most of this as "no more than window dressing." The projects look good in the annual report but the results are dismal.

*Myths and legends*

Perhaps we shouldn't be surprised by the fact that conversations about this complex social and workforce issue are so often dominated by myths and legends about what women want and what needs to happen. The myths include: women lack competence; they lack ambition; they lack confidence; and they lead in a different, softer way, essentially unsuited to the cut and thrust of life at the top. Study after study has systematically debunked these claims. For example, thinking about the old chestnut of 'not enough competent women' turns the spotlight on how merit is determined and how large a pipeline needs to be before it is seen as such. Women are competent at school, at university and at entry level. Does their competence suddenly vanish? Research has also demonstrated that women are just as ambitious as men but, unlike their male colleagues, are far less confident that their organisation will support their ambitions. In a UGM filmed study, we showed that there is very little difference in the way men and women lead. Where we did find some small differences, these had a positive impact.

*What doesn't seem to help: unconscious bias training*

Many organisations find these approaches are overly simplistic. When the dust settles after the anti-bias training, there's no significant difference in the number of women moving up the ranks. In fact, as recent national data shows, things can get worse. A veil of political correctness sweeps the problem out of sight. Bias is normalised. A problem-focus

unwittingly encourages a backlash and a sense of exclusion. Diversity is seen as benefiting one group at the expense of another. Attempting to secure behaviour change by changing attitudes is risky.

*What helps: look at your systems*

Identify those pivotal points in your systems where decisions are made. They are often called the 'gatekeeper' moments and include hiring, evaluating performance, recognising, rewarding and promoting. Objective metrics, sound training and constant scrutiny are needed. Bring to bear on these people management systems the same level of sharpness that is automatically given to external business intelligence processes. Women want systems which are transparent, gender neutral and equitable.

*What helps: look at your culture*

The old definition of culture as 'how we do things round here' indicates where to start. Ask questions about what goes on and what goes wrong. What activities and settings help us do our work? Who participates in these? Who dominates? What kinds of work styles seem to get rewarded? How is competence assessed? Changing a culture is not usually about rolling out big, sweeping expensive transformational programs. Instead, a structured sequence of small actions and tiny behaviour changes delivers a sustainable, long term impact. Women want a culture that includes and encourages.

*What helps: look at your programs*

Is inclusion and inclusive leadership a part of every program? It needs to become the normal way things get done, not something special wheeled out when you want to talk about gender targets. Inclusion must be everybody's business since it benefits everyone. Take a sharp look at your programs for women. Review anything based on discredited research and false assumptions. This includes content based on ways of managing self-doubt, lack of confidence and lack of ambition. Talented women want to learn about the issues that matter to leaders and the skills that will help them thrive at the top. This includes, for example, thinking strategically and managing large scale change. Women want programs that help them contribute to business results.

*A portfolio approach tackles complexity*

Getting more women into leadership roles is a complex national (and international) challenge. In this necessarily short briefing, we haven't attempted to be comprehensive. But we've provided a straightforward, evidence-based blueprint to help you get real change. Tighten up your systems. Free up your culture. Smarten up your programs. No fads, fashions, myths or legends. Small practical changes, taken consistently, will deliver big dividends. That's what women want.