

## Strategies to support women in leadership

### Introduction

There has been a significant body of research undertaken in both the private and public sectors to identify factors which act as barriers to the greater participation of women in senior management roles.

A number of studies have proposed strategies that may assist agencies to increase the representation of women at a senior level. WA public authorities may wish to consider using these strategies as part of their broader strategic and workforce planning. Initiatives should be targeted at the particular challenges faced by each individual organisation.

### Strategies to support women in senior leadership

#### 1. Managing organisational culture – the CEO and executive team should:

- champion gender diversity and inclusivity, and flexible working hours and arrangements for both men and women, to enable work and home life to be well balanced
- make senior management commitment to gender diversity more visible
- make a compelling business case for gender diversity that encourages and facilitates a gender inclusive culture
- engage senior leaders (male and female) directly in the drive towards greater gender balance
- take actions to increase men's awareness of gender diversity issues
- build a top team which includes a critical mass of talented women
- understand the numbers and levers, monitor the numbers, and set targets for the number of senior women in the organisation
- call out behaviours and decisions that are not consistent with an inclusive culture and hold themselves and their team to account
- play a strong role in key recruitment and promotion decisions
- get feedback on their own leadership.

**2. Development of women** – to equip women with the skills and networks they need to master executive roles, and to raise their ambition and profiles through:

- networking events and programs – observing and engaging with role models in the workplace
- leadership programs to increase the proportion of potential female leaders
- use of external coaches
- mentoring programs with internal mentors – building rapport with mentors to receive support and guidance, and be challenged
- undertaking personal and professional growth – can be achieved by taking risks, stretching skills and experience, and working across organisations where possible
- building self-confidence – such as through ‘speaking up’, participating in meetings and networking, both formally and informally.

**3. Evaluation systems** – consider collecting data on the following indicators to identify inequalities and track improvements:

- gender representation overall and at certain job levels
- internal targets for women in managerial positions
- gender representation in promotion rounds
- promotion rates by gender at different levels of seniority
- work satisfaction levels by gender
- participation rates in training programs by gender
- participation rates in mobility programs by gender
- attrition rates by gender.

**4. Human resources systems, policies and processes** –consider initiatives and programs such as:

- processes that overcome gender biases in appraisals and career management systems
- building culture that supports and appreciates those who work flexible hours (both males and females)
- a culture that recognises different leadership styles
- processes that overcome gender biases in recruiting
- processes to retain top performers who may want to leave
- logistical flexibility (e.g. remote working)

- career flexibility (e.g. leave of absence, option to alternate periods of part time and full time work)
- policy to schedule meetings only during business hours or school hours
- program to smooth transition before, during and after maternity leave
- guarantee to keep similar or better position when returning from leave of absence
- regular, individual contact with human resources team or management to define career path – including updates from HR while people are on leave (such as maternity or parental leave).

## **‘Not Yet 50/50’ – Barriers to the Progress of Senior Women in the Australian Public Service**

Research sponsored by the ANZSOG Institute for Governance, at the University of Canberra and six Australian Commonwealth departments sought to identify which barriers appear to impede women’s progress through to the senior ranks of the Australian Public Service. This research led to a report by Evans et al (2014) *‘Not Yet 50/50’ – Barriers to the Progress of Senior Women in the Australian Public Service.*<sup>1</sup> The research found that leadership commitment is necessary to implement a culture of inclusive practices, going beyond individual measures to the introduction of systemic organizational changes that change behaviour.

The report recommended a range of strategies<sup>2</sup> to support greater representation of women in senior leadership roles in the Australian Public Service:

### **Committed leadership:**

- Make an explicit statement to staff reinforcing the value of diversity in management and leadership styles and aligned to values
- Set targets and be held to account in performance agreements
- Develop a culture of inclusive collaborative leadership practices and educate on unconscious bias
- Showcase successful leaders and include senior women in key decision-making bodies.

### **Talent management and succession planning**

- Provide structured career development for women with suitable sponsorship or coaching, job rotation and selection for high profile and challenging roles
- Over-represent women in existing development programs
- Target recruitment and identify and develop women for leadership roles
- Ensure effective performance management systems with regular feedback.

### **Workplace flexibility as enhancing productivity**

- Develop a ‘better practice guide’ for employees and managers
- Create a central webpage to promote success stories and provide practical information
- Peer review better practices with other agencies
- Provide job design expertise.

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<sup>1</sup> Published in the Australian Journal of Public Administration, Vol 73, Issue 4, December 2014 and also on the [website](#) of the Workplace Gender Equality Agency

<sup>2</sup> Wording has been slightly amended from the original.

### **Attraction, recruitment and selection**

- Explicitly promote senior women as role models
- Include in performance agreements efforts made by senior staff to encourage women to apply for positions and promotions
- Implement an SES refresher programme including appointing external representatives on selection panels
- Develop a plain English recruitment guide on merit promotion that includes gender balance on panels
- Review job descriptions to eliminate gender bias and ensure that it is written in inclusive language.
- Report on the proportion of women applying for and achieving promotion.

### **Support and Development**

- Seek out leadership programs which focus on gender and diversity training
- Use unconscious bias experiential training programs especially for senior executive staff and confidence building programs including at the middle to senior management level
- Establish sector wide mentoring programs for women
- Establish women's networks across each department with senior women in sponsorship roles and include success story telling as a regular activity.

### **Governance**

- Collect and disseminate annual data on diversity achievements (including women)
- Establish departmental committees or 'diversity councils' with external membership to oversee departmental progress
- Measure and report success in achieving gender diversity across the sector.

## Resources

- Catalyst 2007, The Bottom Line: Corporate performance and women's representation on boards - <http://www.catalyst.org/knowledge/bottom-line-corporate-performance-and-womens-representation-boards>
- Chief Executive Women (CEW) 2013, Gender Diversity Kit - <http://www.cew.org.au/resources/toolkits>
- CEW & Male Champions for Change 2014, The Leadership Shadow: It starts with us - <http://www.cew.org.au/resources/toolkits>
- Committee for Economic Development of Australia (CEDA) 2011, Women in Leadership: Looking below the surface - <https://www.ceda.com.au/media/143387/wilsept21.pdf>
- Credit Suisse 2014, The CS Gender 3000: Women in senior management - <https://www.credit-suisse.com/au/en/news-and-expertise/research/credit-suisse-research-institute/publications.html>
- Evans, M; Edwards, M; Burmester, B; and May, D, 'Not yet 50/50' – Barriers to the progress of senior women in the Australian Public Service, Australian Journal of Public Administration Vol 73 Issue 4 pp 501 -510.
- Gender Worx 2010, Gender agenda: Unlocking the power of diversity in the boardroom - <http://www.genderworx.com.au/resources/>
- McKinsey & Company 2007, Women Matter: Gender diversity, a corporate performance driver - [http://www.mckinsey.com/features/women\\_matter](http://www.mckinsey.com/features/women_matter)
- McKinsey & Company 2008, Women Matter: Female leadership, a competitive edge for the future - [http://www.mckinsey.com/features/women\\_matter](http://www.mckinsey.com/features/women_matter)
- McKinsey & Company 2010, Women Matter: Women at the top of corporations: making it happen - [http://www.mckinsey.com/features/women\\_matter](http://www.mckinsey.com/features/women_matter)
- McKinsey & Company 2012, Women Matter: Making the breakthrough - [http://www.mckinsey.com/features/women\\_matter](http://www.mckinsey.com/features/women_matter)
- Public Sector Commission 2014, State of the sector in summary 2014 - <http://www.publicsector.wa.gov.au/publications-resources/psc-publications/state-sector-report>
- Workplace Gender Equality Agency - <https://www.wgea.gov.au/>