

‘Putting their hands up’: how to bring women into university management and support them there

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Background

The research project Senior Women Executives and the Cultures of Management on which we draw in this paper investigated the experience of women in senior managerial positions, what supported and sustained them and the impact their presence had had on the management cultures. The project capitalized on the opportunity that in some Australian organizations there were a significant number and proportion of women at senior levels of management and many had been in these positions for a significant period of time.

The project had three major objectives:

- (1) To provide an in-depth analysis of the lived experience of women at senior executive levels.
- (2) To identify, document and evaluate extrinsic (work/family policies) and intrinsic (cultural, relational and deep-structural) factors that support and sustain women in senior managerial roles.
- (3) To investigate the extent to which the presence of senior women in substantial numbers has transformed managerial cultures in selected organizations.

The project involved organisations that were acknowledged leaders in the promotion of women to senior positions, namely five universities; twelve public service departments in five states and two major financial institutions. Senior management was defined by the use of the Equal Opportunity for Women in the Workplace Agency (previously the Affirmative Action Agency, AAA) categories of Tier 1, Tier 2 and Tier 3 managers¹ (AAA, 1995). The organisations had around 30% of senior positions occupied by women.

¹ Tier 3 Management level includes those managers who are responsible for the formulation of programs and policies and assume accountability for financial, employment and human resource aspects of a specific work area.

255 interviews were completed, with 168 women and 87 men. The breakdown across the three sectors was as follows:

Private Sector		Public Sector		Higher Education	
72		102		81	
Men	Women	Men	Women	Men	Women
21	51	35	67	31	50

Tapes of semi-structured interviews averaging 55 minutes were transcribed and analysed. Ely's (1995) study of the effect of women's representation at senior levels in organisations on their gender and gender identity, which used direct quotes from interviews to illustrate participant's perceptions and experiences, provided a useful precedent in developing a strategy for representing the data. Following this approach, direct quotes are similarly used to emphasise, highlight or illustrate a particular finding.

One major focus of the research was to explore if organisations where women had achieved promotion to, and where they remained in, senior positions, had particular cultural characteristics that supported and sustained women. Universities around Australia have over the past 20 years been encouraged by government equity legislation to adopt a proactive stance towards the promotion of women into senior management. The 5 universities involved in this research have had success, not only in promoting women to senior positions, but also in keeping many women in senior positions over a period of time, and indeed seeing women promoted to more senior positions. The question was therefore: what were the organisational characteristics and/or the cultural aspects of these high-performing universities that supported women in maintaining these positions? Across all 5 universities there was unanimity about the factors that encouraged women to apply for senior positions and that sustained and supported them in those positions. These were clear support from organisational leaders, a critical mass of other women in senior positions, opportunities to network and strong statements on values. These were also named by interviewees from the two other sectors, but women from younger age groups than those in universities also identified flexible and family friendly policies as important for them.

The participants

In the 5 universities 81 interviews took place. 50 of these were with senior women, 31 were with senior men. The selection of those to be interviewed was negotiated between the research team and representatives from Human Resources and Equity Units. The final selection often depended on the availability of those approached at a time when members of the research team were in the relevant city. The interviews took place between November 2001 and October 2002. Interviews ranged from 45 to 60 minutes in length, with some lasting over an hour.

Tier 2 Management level is responsible for leadership and strategic direction and supervises Tier 3 Managers. Tier 1 Management is defined as having ultimate control of the organization and usually there would only be one person in that category in each organization.

Over the time period when interviews took place, universities restructured or senior staff retired. As a result 6 Vice-Chancellors were interviewed. Some interviews took place with people who then moved to more senior positions either within the university or in a couple of cases to other universities. In a limited number of cases those interviewed had just retired, either from the university or from the senior position that they held. Others retired during the course of the project.

The majority of those interviewed were in senior positions. This was defined as Deans or above in the academic stream, Directors and above in the administrative stream. In a couple of cases interviews were held with Heads of School or deputy administrators; this occurred in consultation with the contacts at each university who suggested that there were significant reasons for selecting that person – for example a woman Head of School in a male-dominated discipline.

Of those interviewed, 46 were academics, 24 men and 22 women. 35 were in administrative, support or general staff positions. 28 of these were women and only 7 were men. The high proportion of women general staff interviewed reflected the high proportion of women in the senior administrative staff, particularly at one institution, at the time of the interviews.

There were some difficult questions of definition in job descriptions. In DEST data, senior academic administrators are defined as general staff. For this analysis, because of the different career paths that emerged between academic and general staff, it was decided to describe all those senior academic administrators (Vice-Chancellors, Deputy and Pro Vice Chancellors and Deans) as academics if they had come from an academic background. The descriptor administrative staff refers to those who had worked in 'non-academic' positions.

Strongly Expressed Senior-Level Support for Women

Women and men interviewed indicated that a critical factor in women applying for promotion was formal and explicit support of women and equity by senior executives in the institution. Executives had to go beyond rhetoric, and demonstrate their support through endorsement of women's performance, encouragement of women to apply for promotion, and commitment of resources to development, such as training courses. Women also emphasised the emotional support that a CEO and senior peers provided in assisting them through periods of potential difficulty and conflict. These findings echoed previous research on women's experience of management in Australian public and private sector organisations (Ross-Smith: 2000), which found that women clearly valued and benefited from supportive relationships with both males and females at senior levels.

The most significant support was that from the chief executive or the direct superior to the woman. These findings would seem therefore to support research which suggests that organisational leaders especially the CEO critically influence an organisation's direction, its performance and its organisational practices (Johnson, 2002). One Vice-Chancellor was described by his female Deputy as follows:

He's used to working with capable women. When you find men who aren't threatened by capable women then I think you're very lucky in life. He is not threatened by capable women; in fact he really understands the kind of contribution that capable women can make and values it.

Female DVC, 60-69

A male Deputy Vice-Chancellor at one institution described how two successive male Vice-Chancellors had established an environment where women were encouraged to apply for and maintain senior positions. He attributed a lack of support from a critical executive member as a factor in losing some senior female staff:

If you get even a slight change in a positive direction that attracts senior women to the place, if the culture changes, that will cause some of them if they get a better offer to go somewhere else. We lost two senior women last year because their immediate supervisor was changed and didn't give them the support they felt they needed and deserved.

Male DVC, 60-69

The issue of how support for women would be maintained with changes at senior level was a matter of concern for some. Women were very aware of how rapidly a climate could change to an unsympathetic one:

My feeling is that from time to time we go through sort of like peaks and troughs where there are times where we have to watch it, where the culture is really a little bit in danger and I think we're heading into one of those times now. But there was in my time as Dean, it's been there before, where it does get a bit blokey and I think some of the gains here could slip away really quite quickly with only a few key changes.

(Female Dean)

Women benefited from the support of their superiors not only in the area of promotion. Women also appreciated being backed in difficult staff negotiations. The possibility of being isolated, ostracised or criticised was of concern and some were sensitive about making mistakes in the work environment:

I now realise that in this management position people don't necessarily trust me. They have all sorts of ideas about managers. I may be caring and supportive but also being a manager who wants to get things done might put you at odds sometimes. So reconciling who I thought I was with how people saw me as a manager ... has been very challenging for me emotionally. My supervisor has been very supportive, and the three people in the executive group (*note: all men*) have been really supportive of me in working that through.

(Female Director of Academic Centre)

A Critical Mass of Senior Women

The notion of critical mass was a defining feature of this project. Critical mass theory is a concept derived from nuclear physics, describing a situation where a sufficient amount of an element such as uranium is collected to cause an 'unstoppable chain

reaction', a situation where change occurs dramatically beyond what could be predicted from the original quantity (Norris and Lovenduski, 2001). Kanter (1977) first argued that organizational change would occur only when women were present in sufficient numbers to assert themselves and influence cultures and values. She suggested that this involved organizations moving from 'skewed' or 'tilted' groups, where only a small proportion of women was present, to what she described as balanced, or 40-50%. Kanter contrasted this with organizations where a sole woman was on a management team, what she described as a 'token' in management. She argued that these women were both highly visible, particularly when they made mistakes, but were also able to be ignored. In organizations where women had not worked before, however, even tokens could give other women examples of how they could get ahead.

Although some attempts have been made to give a numerical figure for critical mass, this overcomplicates the matter. Ely (1995) argued that although the presence of women was critical in attracting other women, the level at which they had been appointed and the power they exercised was more important than just having a balance of numbers between men and women. The critical factor was not that there was a 'magic' proportion but that there were sufficient women in senior management and in powerful positions to enable the 'sense' of a critical mass and to have an impact on the culture.

Dahlerup (1988 296-7) considered that the notion of a critical act was 'better suited to the study of human behaviour... (than critical mass since it) is one which will change the position of the minority considerably and lead to further changes.' Examples of critical acts included the recruitment of women by other women and the introduction of quotas, legislation and institutions, as well as female role models in high-profile positions. These, she suggested (ibid: 287) were more likely to lead to change rather than 'any fixed number of women.' (Honour, Barry and Palnitkar 2003)

For the purposes of the analysis presented in this paper we draw on what Martin, Knopoff and Beckman (1998: 433) refer to as a positional version of feminist theory. This perspective takes the position that "if an organization has an unusual prevalence of women, this may make visible some phenomena that would surface less frequently and less obviously in a more conventional, male dominated setting" (Martin et al 1998: 433). We wanted to find out if this applied to senior executive levels in the organizations that participated in this research and further to explore their suggestion that if an organization has at least 15-22% of women at the highest levels, "a different set of emotional norms might emerge".

The cultures which supported women were defined by most of those interviewed as ones with women present in significant numbers and in positions of significant power. A senior man described the changes at his university He went on to emphasise that the appointment of a number of senior women had 'made a demonstrable difference.' He supported the theory of a 'critical mass' and described senior women as having a 'magnetic attraction' in bringing others to the institution. :

In 1990 there were no women in the senior executive. Beginning of 1991 (a senior woman) arrived and that made a quantum difference. (Then another who) made a demonstrable difference in the way she interacted with the senior

management group. By 1996 ... about fifty percent of those senior positions were women and I put a lot of that down to three women ... who when it was really tough and you had to provide mentoring and develop the critical mass and so on, they were the women who made the difference in my view ... That was that magnetic attraction of senior women. ...

Women in these interviews supported Ely's view that the level at which women were appointed was more important than numerical equality. A female Dean explained:

Basically it was still very much a male dominated faculty and the culture of the place reflected that. That has changed, I think, with my appointment. If you're going to bring in one more woman, it's best to do it at the most senior roles. If you want to make a big change, that's the position that can make the most difference and I think my arrival here, even before I did a thing, communicated a message to other women in the Faculty. They also knew me from the late 80s and the early 90s. It was very widely known that I had been a really strong advocate for women's issues, gender equity and senior management in the University. So I really didn't need to do a thing when I came back. Just the fact of my coming communicated the message to women in the Faculty. Suddenly every leadership role would have a bunch of really excellent women expressing interest in it to the point where I started to become a bit concerned that I needed to appoint a few men because they're feeling a bit left out. And it's not out of the gender commitment; it's just that there were a stack of really talented women.

Q And they put their hands up?

And they put their hands up, yes they did.

Having women in senior and powerful positions meant that other women were more ready to apply. And women managers with an explicit feminist commitment could also ensure that women were interviewed for appointment and promotion:

A lot of people had no confidence in coming forward – female staff. You needed to specifically focus on them otherwise they got lost in the crowd. So I still think you need policies. And to just think about why you do it. I still have issues when I look at a selection panel and they've got one woman and four men and I'll send it back and say, 'Go back and do gender balance. Do you understand what we're talking about here? It's not a token female, it's balance.' So there still need to be messages. There still needs to be someone, when they are always talking about 'he, he, he,' to say 'and she.' Which makes you most unpopular in meetings but I will continue to do it.

(Female Deputy Vice-Chancellor).

The strong endorsement of the importance of having a critical mass of women in senior positions means that institutions should endeavour to promote and then support groups of women in these senior positions.

Opportunities to Network and Share Experiences

Networking is generally seen in the literature as a means of enhancing one's opportunity for career advancement through the development and use of contacts for information, advice and moral support (McKenzie, 1995). Women's exclusion from informal communication channels with colleagues has been defined as a critical barrier to their advancement into leadership positions. The concept of networks has been strongly identified with the notion of the 'old boy' network and with the view that males effectively use such networks to foster relationships that enable them to enhance and build their careers. When viewed from such a perspective, women have traditionally been seen to be less effective than men at networking (Still and Guerin, 1986; Still, 1995). Networks have been traditionally related to identification of shared values; male awkwardness with women in the workplace has therefore been identified as a major factor in the exclusion of women. Women have been prevented from gaining the knowledge needed for them to accumulate experience critical for leadership positions in their organisations, the information necessary to identify and access important 'gateways' and the visibility for their contribution and achievements to be recognised.

Until relatively recently women in senior management roles often eschewed networks for fear that they were merely reproducing masculine modes of behaviour. Ross-Smith (2000) found senior women in the banking sector did not have the patience for and found little time for networking in the traditional sense of the 'old boy' network. These women were simply too busy and had too many other commitments. But other women in leadership positions have found it important to build links with other women to break down their isolation, to find mentors and role models and to gain support.

Research has suggested that as women rise in the university hierarchy, their peer support falls away and they become isolated from other women. It is also suggested that although women are good at networking, the networks they establish are not as powerful as those of their male colleagues (Rothstein and Davey (1995). Yet the 1997 evaluation of ATN WEXDEV, an executive development program for women in senior positions in the five ATN universities showed that networking through the program was highly valued. Many of the women felt quite isolated in their own university setting and praised the opportunities 'to network with colleagues in other states and in other areas of university activity' and 'to have access to information, support and advice.' ATN WEXDEV was praised in that it brought together women academics and administrators. It was suggested that there was less difference between academics and administrators at more senior levels when responsibilities converged.

The research project reported here suggested that the presence of a critical mass of women made it easier for women in senior positions to form links with others and to seek support from women who would understand the issues they faced. A female administrator described the way she used her network of women both academics and administrators to draw support:

(T)here's a really deep understanding I think amongst a lot of the senior women here of that we need to really vent and to let off some steam and to understand that in each other. I know that there's a number of women around (*names senior women from various areas*) that I've really connected and bonded with over that time and it's understanding the stresses and demons that we all face in terms of staff issues.

(We) might just get on the phone, might just send a memo it all depends. (*One woman*), we probably ring each other any day that one of us leaves the car park before the other which could be every day of the week. We say 'You can go home now!' Because we both tend to work half the night if we don't remember to go home. There's just things like that, kind of keep each other in check, and I have found that very valuable here because it's very easy for me to do nothing but work. I'm a very obsessive compulsive worker. (Female Director)

This demonstrated other findings, that women in particular were more likely to use networks to foster relationships, support one another and share concerns about women's disadvantage, rather than to further their careers (Clark, Chandler and Barry, 1996). In informal networks women could acknowledge other competing demands and speak about external commitments such as family. A female Dean indicated that women were prepared to be honest about insecurities with other women, and to seek advice about decisions, suggesting they felt less scrutinised and judged by female colleagues than by males:

I find I can speak to other women much more frankly about my experience and to many more women. It takes me quite a bit more time to know a male manager well enough and develop a sense of trust where I could say 'Look I feel really distraught about this issue,' where I find with women I can say that fairly readily. You don't have to pretend to have everything together.

To some extent, these findings support those of Mavin and Bryans (2002) who analysed the experiences of women academics in management in the UK. They focused on the way such women used informal and collective strategies to challenge and overcome inequities and boundaries in management and organisation. They found that by using their own experiences the "informal network of women performed the joint role of supporting its individual members and their career development *as well as* addressing organisational issues of the distribution of power". Working on four key issues – survival, support, career and change – the network helped women to reflect critically on their situation as well as changing their organisations by developing strategies for action and their own political agenda.

The warmth and acceptance between women in higher education was compared by some to their experiences in the private sector, where difficulties could not be acknowledged. A senior woman academic described her attempts to speak with a recently arrived administrative colleague, whose previous experience had been in the highly competitive corporate world:

I went out of my way to try and help her and to be supportive and so on, but she was initially quite resistant. I'd say 'How are things going' and she'd say 'Fine. Why do you ask?' And it wasn't until a little while later that she said she actually

realised what a different culture it is here at this university, that in private enterprise you never admit weakness. It was my strategy with her when she wouldn't talk and she was clearly stressed and under a lot of pressure, a lot of staff resigned and all that kind of thing, I know what it is like to be alone and so I was just trying to be supportive. So I started telling her some of the stuff-ups that I'd made and all the things that hadn't gone well and she always looked really shocked. Then one day she phoned and said 'In private enterprise you never admit you're weak, you never admit anything and I couldn't understand what was going on' and I said 'No. People are willing you to do well and want to support you'.

The importance of networks among women, both informal or formal such as WEXDEV, was emphasised by many women. Informal networks would seem to be more important to them than to men. Women used networks for companionship and for 'comfort', rather than as means of connecting with more powerful colleagues.

We've got a Senior Women's Group and then a range of other, of WEXDEV related activities associated with women. And I think that's very nice, so we do meet and we'll have particular luncheons for example which will be organised with a guest speaker or whatever the case might be and it's for senior women only. And senior women is fairly broadly construed and so that's very nice as well. ... At one stage for a while there I was the only woman on the Vice-Chancellor's advisory group and now there are four, one, two, three, yea, four. Which is really nice. I'm enjoying that as well. We don't meet collectively together or anything like that either but certainly there's a sense in which the women are fostered. I think, it's a lovely thing and the Vice Chancellor's been very supportive of that which has been great.

(Female Dean).

Workplaces that are Friendly and Collegial

There was also a strong emphasis on the establishment of friendly and collegial workplace, ones where friendship was valued. Indeed a male Vice-Chancellor characterised the friendly atmosphere in the institution as relating to the high proportion of women in senior positions.

One institution in particular was much praised as having a friendly culture. Here it was described by a male Pro-Vice-Chancellor recently appointed from a more 'traditional' institution:

Anyone you speak to in this University who is a relatively recent arrival will almost certainly comment on that positive aspect of the place, that it is a pleasant place to work, that people do observe the basic levels of courtesy and friendliness.

A Director of an academic centre described the direct approach two women colleagues, herself and a Deputy Vice Chancellor, had taken to encourage a woman from the private sector to take up an administrative position:

(We) took her out to breakfast on Saturday or something like that, and (she) said later that it was breakfast that made up her mind to come. ...She said she saw the good relationship between (us) and thought this would be a good place to work.

A female Dean also mentioned this appointment and the number of senior women who kept in touch casually with the new appointee to support her in the non-traditional area, which she now headed.

The woman who was appointed also commented on this, comparing it favourably with previous experience in the private sector:

The other thing that struck me was the immediate sense of acceptance of the individual, very strong here obviously, and you would expect it to be so in a university environment. But I had no idea what they might feel like to work in and it's wonderful, I found that really very supportive.

She described approvingly the way she was welcomed to her university:

The day I started, the second day, I met one woman for coffee. And I got some flowers. They have welcome cards here from various women. The DVC organised dinner for me in the second week to meet a whole bunch of people. You know there were a lot of things to give me that opportunity (*to meet other women on the staff*).

A senior administrative woman in another university specifically described a different experience, which she saw as being unwelcoming and unfriendly:

I'll give you a very simple example. I've been here (*5 weeks*) and I've sat on these committees... there are a couple of Deans who have not made the effort to introduce themselves and to say 'Hi. Welcome. I'm John. Welcome.' Now I can go up and say hi to them... I haven't because I think the courteous thing is - I'm the new person. I believe they should put out their hands.

There was clear evidence that women placed great emphasis on these personal relationships and wanted these to be recognised within the workplace culture. One female Dean expressed great concern about receiving a form letter from the Vice-Chancellor offering her the position:

And you know this is a form letter from a man I've known for 20 years. I came half way across the world to try and help him make a go of something that was just about falling in the gutter, so if I'm reappointed I want someone to say more than a form letter says. And in fact at the bottom of it, it said some extraordinary wording like: I feel sure you will continue to do a satisfactory job at the University. I mean something just dreadful, no one should have got it.

A female Dean from one institution suggested that the friendly environment among management was based on the warm relationship between the mixed-gender triumvirate in the most senior management positions. She emphasised the fact that 'They're really good mates.' She attributed this to the character of some men in senior

positions. She described them as behaving in a 'female way,' in other words she drew on stereotypes of female management as non-competitive, cooperative and warm:

Our Vice-Chancellor, our previous Deputy Vice-Chancellor, certainly at least one of our Pro-Vice-Chancellors, are men who in many of their dealings would be seen as operating in a very female way and I think that's one of the reasons that women feel quite safe in this institution.

The importance of organisations having open, cooperative and friendly relationships between staff was emphasised and praised also by men. Both women and men on senior-level committees talked about the importance of relaxed meetings, with jokes and some personal interaction. People also appreciated opportunities for informal contact.

Although women are stereotypically associated with more consultative and 'collegiate' management styles, Hearn (1999) noted that collegiality in the university system was often a white middle class male version of collegiality. This did not emerge in these interviews in these universities. It might be that 'new' universities with less traditional networks of mentoring and patronage might not have such rigidities.

The emphasis placed by both women and men on the importance of a welcoming environment and friendly relations with colleagues indicates that management has an important role in encouraging the development of such an atmosphere, clearly a critical factor in making a university one that attracts and maintains staff.

Value Systems

Both men and women expressed their commitment to their organisation's values, but a commitment to values were expressed most strongly by women interviewees.

Women particularly emphasised the importance of having clearly expressed values. Indeed higher education was defined by some as a value in itself and a reason for working in it:

I don't think I ever switch off from the values, goals about decent education, good communication, good society. I don't think I ever switch off from that and I think education is that, you know. (Female Dean)

Women who had worked previously in the private sector made clear distinctions between the importance to society of education and the lesser importance in societal terms of other areas of work:

Educational organisations are very, very real in terms of adding value to the world in my mind and I thought that was a very important part of me coming here.
(Female Administrator)

Other women went further in specifying the values that they wanted the organisation to display:

Education is a wonderful attribute that has the power to change people's lives forever. So it is very exciting to be working in an organisation which has that potential and to see people coming in, you know, whose lives are transformed by the service the University offers. I think that's very exciting. And I guess I loved my own time at University and, you know, it is wonderful to be involved in the education field.

Q So ... what I am hearing is values...

Very important, very important. Trust is very important. Transparency is very important. And I mean we do find that people say they'll stay because of that. We want people to stay here... (Female general staff)

Transparency and Integrity

Transparency and honesty were emphasised by women who approved of colleagues behaving with integrity, not having hidden agendas.

A senior female administrator described her institution:

There's a high degree of integrity. Most of the people who exercise a reasonable level of influence encourage all sorts of things. It is an openness, it's a transparency, it's a fairness and respect. They are what you see, largely. It is not a manipulative or game playing culture. A lot of the senior people - and a good cross-section of the executive - are fairly instinctively collaborative and I think that rubs off in the processes that they support and generate.

Another general staff member approved of a shared sense of purpose among the senior executives, an awareness of the strategic goals of working together:

And anecdotally this university's culture is much more supportive, much more... I guess less, to use a horrible expression, silo-based than many other institutions. I find talking to my peers, there is much more (collaboration) ... As the VC says, we move as a pack ...

Another woman, a Dean, was passionate about the honesty and integrity of her university:

I think that there is an absolute commitment in this institution to integrity and that for me is a hallmark of why I find this a very good place to be and a privilege to be here. There's an integrity about process, and an integrity about interpersonal interaction. There does not seem to be in any way an acceptance of being mean to people. In fact I've seen very little of people being mean to people. And I just think there's an ethos about the place that's not how you behave. Isn't that funny, funnily enough we've had a new member of staff who was a bit mean and I actually found myself saying to him we don't behave like that here. This is how we behave here.

She demonstrated that she was prepared to confront people who did not follow the University's accepted cultural principles. She described a man from another area whom she believed did not follow accepted standards:

The person who behaved that way has gone and it was interesting because it was about group norms I think that made him stop that behaviour. He was fairly senior but as it turned out I was asked to be chairperson of the Committee to which he reported and on a number of occasions I simply would remind him that his behaviour wasn't acceptable. Funnily enough several people said to me that I contributed to his leaving. I said fine I have no problem with that -- he's a bully.

Flexibility and Family Friendly Policies

In the financial institutions and public sector departments involved in this research project, women, and indeed some men, emphasised the importance of having policies and practices that made it possible to both work and have a family. Support and importantly resources for what have been traditionally regarded as women's family commitments was strongly emphasised by most respondents as essential in the drive to promote and support women executives, even though many had no immediate personal need for them as they were in more senior positions and did not need provisions such as maternity/ paternity leave.

This was particularly so in the university sector, where of the 81 respondents, 60 were over 50 years of age (74%). There were only two interviewees aged between 30 and 39, both women administrators. One was on maternity leave with her first child when interviewed. She was concerned about how she would manage the return to her full-time position:

One of the issues that I have been thinking a lot about is the extent to which the culture is going to be flexible because obviously I am about to return from maternity leave and I have, quite honestly, been worrying about the extent to which... you know, suddenly going... you know, myself being able to work in a much more of the traditional career pattern previously and you know being able to put in the long hours and deliver the goods... and, you know, it hasn't been an issue because my partner and I have both been in senior positions and that's been our life, very professional focus. And to suddenly realise that there's this new person in my life that I need to accommodate. I have been wondering about the extent to which the University will be able to accommodate my new needs, I suppose, and I don't feel particularly positive. I would be happy to be proven pleasantly wrong but from my observation I don't think the University has always been very good at being flexible. I mean it is... I know all the stats because I work in this area and, you know out of 60 people in management positions at this university only one works part-time and I think that's quite a telling statistic.

This woman's uncertainty about how she would manage was shown by her hesitancy, the constant repetition of 'you know'. She clearly was not sure whether she would be able to return on the same basis as before the birth of her child. She went on to indicate that she knew other Directors who would also welcome more flexible work opportunities:

I've spoken to other people, both men and women in the administrative Director group, who have indicated to me that they would all feel that they're working very hard and a number of them would be interested in maybe doing four days, maybe working in a different format but just feeling it is just not possible to even ask for it. And I guess that's interesting, the extent to which we self-censor from asking for these things because we feel that that's part of the culture that would be. You know it may be that the University would be perfectly amenable to it but people feel 'Oh, they really can't do without me doing all these hours because I am very important to the culture of the organisation'. I've experienced that trap myself, that you really feel that you're very indispensable until the moment that you walk out the door and you realise the place doesn't fall down when you walk out. It's a very good experience to have.

Conclusion

A critical dimension of this research project was to study organisations where women had moved beyond the 'glass ceiling' and had maintained, and indeed enhanced, their position in senior management over a sustained period of time. We wanted to identify what aspects of the organisation's culture had contributed to this. In the five universities where interviews took place, both intrinsic and extrinsic factors were found to have contributed to sustaining and supporting the careers of senior women. These included: strongly expressed senior level support for the promotion of women into senior management, a critical mass of women in senior positions, opportunities to network and share experiences, the establishment of trusting and friendly relationships between colleagues and the organization's value system.

Whilst men still well and truly outnumber women at senior levels of management in the Australian universities, it is clear that the women who participated in this research are by and large sustained in their careers. What is suggested here, therefore, is that in evaluating what it is that sustains women in senior management cultures, the intrinsic worth (not just financial) of the actual job itself would seem to be a factor. As it is only relatively recently that women have had the opportunity to experience the obvious satisfaction that comes with holding powerful and influential positions in universities, it would be of interest to investigate further the particular characteristics or dimensions of these senior level appointments that contribute to this intrinsic worth. A series of interviews with the 50 most powerful women in the US (Sellers, 2000) found that the power to affect significant change was one element of a senior management role that women saw as particularly rewarding. The power to influence decision making and the capacity to realise their full selves were also factors that attracted these women to senior roles but particularly important was the nature of the job itself, not necessarily the financial rewards or the seniority of the position. The women interviewed indicated that they appreciated and valued their work in the universities and were well aware that they contributed significantly to the operation of the institutions.

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