



Bringing Women into the Picture: What Supports and Sustains Women Executives

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Research Intent

- We sought to delineate and understand
- Structural processes and policies supporting women, and
 - Organisational cultures which nurture and sustain women
- in order to generate guidelines and protocols to assist organisations to become “employers of choice” for women executives.



Significant Factors

- CEO support

The support of the CEO was critical to the development and maintenance of a culture which attracts, sustains and retains a critical mass of women senior executives.



CEO support

- Public and Higher Education participants generally perceived their CEOs to be committed to diversity at senior levels.
- There was more talk of executive management as “men’s clubs” in the public sector than in the higher education sector.



CEO support

- Participants from the **private sector** who had been in their organisations for a number of years frequently praised past CEOs for their efforts to appoint women to senior executive roles.
- The role of powerful women in influencing and “driving” CEOs was also highlighted.



Critical Mass of Senior Women

- Enough women to be influential.
- Critical 'acts' not just critical mass.
- Women in positions of significant power and influence.

Networks



- Both formal and informal networks were found to be a dimension of organisational culture that gained, sustained, and retained a critical mass of senior women.
- Sharing information, stories, experiences, encouragement, and support essential in not just individual career development but in addressing organisational issues of power distribution
- Women use networks to provide personal, social and organisational support.



Workplace Values and Policies

- Women in all sectors signified their need to be supported and sustained by a clear and explicit organisational value system
- A focus on people, respect, empathy, loyalty, balance, integrity, honesty, ethics, teamwork, performance, and transparency.



Values

- All sectors stressed the need to have a greater enactment of espoused values:

“We could be a lot better at aligning the day to day operation of how finance works with the values of the organisation in terms of teamwork, honesty, and integrity. There’s a lot of talk around those being the values and things we should adhere to. And we’re getting a little better, I’d say, at trying to recognise team values and set up team goals. But I think we still have a long way to go in people knowing those values and living and breathing them every day.”

Senior woman:Private sector



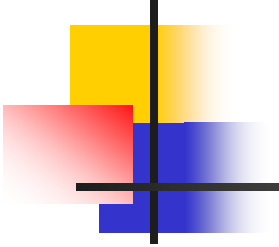
Family Friendly Policies and Practices

- It was acknowledged by all sectors that efforts were being made to implement family friendly policies across the board.
- These were seen as vital in ensuring that younger women had access to executive positions.



Clear Support Structures

Many interviewees, particularly young women, eschewed the notion of “special programs” for women but viewed networking, mentoring and coaching as critical supporting factors.



Mentoring: strong endorsement across sectors, regardless of gender

“I think mentoring is part of dealing with some of the stresses and other things, that you’re actually focussing on helping somebody else work their way through. Often it’s amazing how much the healer heal thyself comes into place when you’re helping someone through some challenges and issues in their career.”

Male Executive: Public Sector



Barriers to Support

- Flexible Work Practices

This was a significant issue for women senior executives in all sectors but particularly in the private sector. While there are increasing opportunities for permanent part-time work, issues around ***visibility, accountability, compatibility, “market hours” and balancing familial responsibilities*** were repeatedly raised.



Work/Life Balance

- Intensification of work pressures on senior executives.
- Significant lengthening of the working week.
- Domestic position, family structure, division of labour.



Life/Work balance

For many women the myriad demands of long work hours, travel, weekend work, fear of revealing their private lives to colleagues, the decision to have children or not, caring for elderly relatives, and care of self (or lack of it) are all outward manifestations of attempting to meet the implicit, unexamined, taken-for-granted masculine work culture.



Conclusions

Cultures that sustain and support women executives are those where:

- CEOs positively endorse the recruitment, support and retention of senior women
- There are significant numbers of women in positional power which in turn will affect decision making and attract other women to the organisation
- Women have clear support structures such as networking, mentoring and coaching



Conclusions

- Structural barriers directly affecting women's reticence to apply for senior positions are addressed
- A collaborative work place is encouraged
- An explicit values system is enacted
- Both men and women work to disrupt the normalisation and naturalisation of gender relations at work and at home.



Challenges still remain

- “The first compliment I got when I was in this job for a period of time was that I was OK because I had balls. And I’ve often wondered how the men in the organisation, when they show some compassion, would feel if I said, ‘Oh look, you’re terrific, you’ve got tits!’” So having balls is seen to be really important. This organisation has inherent gender biases that it still doesn’t recognise!”

Public sector: senior executive woman