

LGMA Conference

Women in local government forum: Issues and challenges facing women in management, 3 September 2008

It's a question of where to start. So much change and yet progress into more senior ranks is faltering.

I've recently written a book about feminism and my experiences and it took me on a trip down memory lane: school, family expectations, uni, paid work, career issues and kids. It reminded me how much has changed and how much hasn't...

Most of the girls I went to school with didn't go on to higher ed.
Some fathers routinely told their daughters not to study or have a career because there was no point and they would end up married
It was important to be good and behave more than academic achievement
When I got to work it was still a novelty to have young women with graduate qualifications in the office.

Things have changed but not as much as I thought they would. My 15 year old daughter read it and was shocked by some of the content. And that concerns me. But she's still at school. What her comment also told me was that a female perspective is a potent tool for women facing a raft of challenges in their lives.

LGMA's national strategy to address and promote women in management positions in local government, which was adopted in May 2008. The main objectives of the forum are to establish a collaborate approach to promoting women in management positions in local government and develop and implement a Year of the Women in Local Government program.

Today, I want to pinpoint a few issues I think are hampering women and some suggestions for ways forward. I guess many of you are aware of the data available on women in management – much of it paints a sad picture. Women are entering the workforce in greater numbers but far fewer are reaching managerial roles than men, and at last count about 5 women were in CEO positions in the top 200. About 10% of senior managers and 5.1% of CEOs across Australian local government are women. Word around the traps is the next census figures will confirm we are going backwards. Pay equity is still not a reality. And the gap widens as you go up the ladder.

Local government is the smallest and most 'male' of the Government sectors in Australia.(LGMA NSW) The statistics that are available in Australia leave much to be desired in comparison with other countries that are more able to monitor changes. The 2001 National Framework for Women in Local Government identified the biggest issue for women council officers was workplace culture.

No coincidence these problems are either not improving or getting worse - we need more women throughout our businesses, government and the community to act as role models, normalise the presence of women and to change the very way we do business and what defines success. Stereotypes around gender have proved far more tenacious than many of us ever thought they would.

I have three areas I want to raise and then I hope we can have a lively question and answer session later on. I hope it illuminates. I've been getting pretty fed up with some of the discourse around this and I think its slowed more action to address it and

I'll talk about that shortly, I also want to a little later, reinforce the need for role models, and to urge a new way of thinking about these dilemmas that prevents falling into the trap of constant self-castigation and personalising the problems women face - and remind you that internationally these problems are very similar.

I should add a disclaimer - the answer to what can we do? is not about silver bullets nor neat prescriptions. I'm not qualified to do that but I can tell you what I'm hearing and what is preoccupying many women in businesses. But let's be clear if there were an easy answer it would have been corrected by now.

1 Why stereotypes rule and prop up a series of myths

Avoiding the deficit model - Gonski story

This is an update on the old women don't have the intelligence or strength to do men's work.

Women can negotiate and communicate - they have been doing so for centuries BUT many organisational cultures are inhibiting to many women - and that's partly because they were designed by and for men.

The only way it will change - being there, articulating your perspective and not mimicking male behaviours.

Confidence and risk taking in organisations are not a barrier women alone nor are they inherent weaknesses - you have earned a right to a seat at the table. You shouldn't have to defend your choices. Men don't.

This is not to say we can't learn and benefit from skills training - everyone can. Sociolinguists etc

A woman approached me recently after an event in Brisbane and she worked in the mining industry and told me how she thought women should never say "I feel" because it was too emotional.

There's also the polarised debate - which marginalises and trivialises women's concerns. Mummy wars, opting out generational change myths. Have you noticed how working mothers in particular - not to mention single mothers - are to blame for just about everything according to tabloid media - childhood obesity and bad diets, poorly behaved kids...

Blaming us for what is actually a structural failure seems to ignore the fact discrimination still occurs. Sometimes the fear of taking risks, the lack of speaking up in negotiations and so on is a direct result of something called indirect discrimination - it is much harder to call because it's harder to identify.

Ellen Bravo

"Four decades in the women's movement has taught me that the Big Boys rely on a series of myths to prop up the reality that benefits them. Women are making great strides, they say, and where that's not the case women have only themselves to blame. When feminists challenge those myths and propose concrete policy changes, the Big Boys hustle to defend their positions I came up with this shorthand to describe how the Big Boys operate. They:

Minimize - what problem?

Trivialize - that's a problem?

Patronize - You don't understand the needs of business.

Demonize - You're the problem.

Catastrophize - Your solution will cause greater problems for the very ones you want to help.

Compartmentalize - If you get what you want it will hurt some other group (by the way, don't you love how half the human race is still routinely described as though it were some sort of minority or special interest group?)

Unfortunately there's a belief that because discrimination on the basis of gender is illegal it no longer occurs. This has allowed the idea that it's something about women themselves that hampers their progress to become much more widespread.

Importantly, this feeds back into the problem. If you tell someone repeatedly that they are – almost by default - inadequate then it becomes a self-fulfilling prophecy. I'm all for skills training by the way, and for women. But I think it's time to see that because women may often communicate or negotiate differently is not a weakness – but addressing this is about upsetting established norms. It's not about personal failings. The other factor that concerns me about the deficit model is it moves attention away from restructuring and changing these norms and cherry picks a few skills deficiencies.

2 Critical mass and role models

The catch 22 of role models.

Fear of being branded token or not serious means some women don't want to speak up about the particular concerns they have. Many women don't want to talk to the media any more etc

Yet this means a lack of role models and change at the top and a scarcity of mentors to champion women.

Positive reinforcement is enormously important and that's why no doubt the LGMA is looking at a program, to legitimise the concerns.

Two young women in my organisation told some awful stories about the law firms how they were made to feel aliens.

Positive examples of how to make it work - change (men and babies), why it is important to encourage women (Hannah and the lift story)

According to Catalyst's Advancing Women Leaders: The Connection Between Women Board Directors and Women Corporate Officers, which found that the number of women on a company's board is directly connected to the future number of women in its senior management ranks. This compelling predictor shows a way to increase the number of women in leadership, and further supports the findings of Catalyst's research on the financial implications of gender diversity at the top. That analysis revealed that Fortune 500 companies with the largest representation of women board directors and corporate officers achieve, on average, higher financial performance.

Women in corporate leadership can also send a critical message to people entering the workforce. Women leaders are role models to early- and mid-career women and, simply by being there at the top, encourage pipeline women to aspire to senior positions.

Catalyst's latest research shows a clear and positive link between the percentage of women board directors in the past and the percentage of women corporate officers in the future:

Companies with 30 percent women board directors in 2001 had, on average, 45 percent more women corporate officers by 2006, compared to companies with no women board members.

Yet if we don't discuss this problem it will continue to seep further underground and the platitudes will continue to be used to appease the media.

I wonder if family friendly awards and the trumpeting of work life balance policies are contributing to the problem? Elizabeth Proust - former CEO of Esanda and a board director - believes this is the case. Cancel the family friendly awards and have an honest conversation instead she recommends.

Another senior woman I spoke to recently said senior teams are very slick about saying the right thing and ticking the 'diversity' box.

Speaking of rhetoric, I don't think it's been helpful to continue chanting the women and men are very different mantra either, or continue to promote the idea that women have some sort of monopoly on the so called soft skills. That kind of pigeon holing has been counter-productive I fear.

3 It's time to get organisations to put some targets in place

These issues are global and The Guardian ran a story....the political is seen as personal. But it's not and it helps to understand that. Divide and conquer. Saying a workplace is merit based begs the question of how to define merit? As Jane says could merit be somehow connected to testicles? And it's insulting.

It's clear structures and attitudes are very slow to change so I'd suggest some framework would help. research backs this up - in the US a major study found organisations with specific equity managers and structured programs with clear goals had far more success in retaining and promoting women than those without.

Maybe we need to spell out the aims and set some time-frames for change. This is not about quotas - although they may have their place Norway etc - but organisational goals that incorporate increased representation of women in senior jobs, mechanisms to check pay levels, assess career progression of women and help to provide support by such measures as mentors.

Norwegian example.

What doesn't help, the study found, is plucking a group of managers and putting them into a seminar every so often – remedial attitude workshops.

Lost sight of some sensible steps. Re-organisation of work - effects everyone, flexibility etc. Some definitions of what flexible work is and is not. Understanding that part-time jobs are not a full time role compressed into 4 days a week. Seriously considering the groundwork to facilitate a job share. Educating clients as well as colleagues.

Choose your employer carefully and think about the future

I often tell women to stick with a medium or large corporate rather than opt out. Many have better policies and even if there is still a rhetoric/reality gap I reckon they can be better long term bets. And I urge women having kids to think about sticking with the job. It can be hard, I know, but so is trying to re-enter the job market after a break. Part-time and job sharing can work - it's been getting a bad press but I am a good example. Etc

Redefining success

You can have it all but just not all at once

Often asked why there's so much resistance. Go back to first principles. Workplace is where power, identity, status and money is negotiated. It is a place where there is much at stake and so rife with fear and the bad behaviour that comes from it. We have a strong foundation - look at the push for paid maternity leave; and the way men now step up to care for their kids; it's often not about real choice; political is personal, a cultural shift to deconstruct what social and commercial structures are reinforcing; remove stereotypes, concentrate on the benefits that difference can bring.

Feminism is a really proud human rights belief system. It puts people first before gender. I want to issue a rallying call to you all: we have been told for years that change is simply a matter of time and if it hasn't happened or has slowed then that's our fault - we are not smart enough, loud enough, or aggressive enough, we have babies and make our employers lives difficult. Well, I've had enough of that kind of platitude. We are smart, well educated people with plenty to offer and the wherewithal to make it work. It's time to ensure we see real change, more women recruited and promoted and paid fairly. This is not just for us, but for those who come after us, our daughters and friends and relations. We can show that the way we communicate, negotiate, run our lives and careers is just as legitimate as the male model that has dominated. We can change the way the system operates but we need to do it together and to be clear about that goal.

A good article. Our experience: My wife Sue is living the gender disparity at the moment. Having worked in sales for a large manufacturer for over 12 years, Sue is the most experienced manager in her division and was appointed a National Manager at the end of last year. At the same time a new manager took over their sales division and Sue has now been demoted while only being in her new role 3 months. Sue grew sales over this period by 12% and built a new team from scratch. The new guy just preferred one of his mates in the role. Sue is still being paid the same amount. Now another manager with no experience has been placed into her old role. Sue is now expected to train him.

Another woman (same company as Sue) Mary who works in another similar division with 5 years more experience was earmarked for "promotable" for 3 years. In that time she was encouraged to take on special projects to give her wider experience. Last month (after being overlooked several times before) another male with very little experience was appointed in a role that she should have been considered for. I know Mary and she can run rings around these guys. When Mary raised her concerns her personnel file was re-assessed as "valued professional".

Both women now have their salaries fixed as they cannot receive a pay increase due to a ceiling on their pay gradings.

Both women have raised their concerns with their HR departments but only been given lip service. The girls can read between the lines: they are to be "managed out of the business".

This company espouses diversity but now mid and senior management is white anglo saxon boys club. There are no females above low level management.

So what can they do? Neither of them want to be trouble-makers so they will leave at the first available opportunity. Unfortunately they also have contracts preventing them

from working for competitors for 6-12mths. This is a very difficult period for both of them.

On the company's website the NSW Government has given them an award for giving support to women in the workplace. What a croc!

Is this the best we can do?

``I've found generally at the law firm or in politics to have a sense of yourself and don't let that be buffeted around by what other people say about you. You do have to be very firm. We are taught to be polite and I don't think we can be in a modern age. And working with your female colleagues helps too and we have a reasonable number of women in federal SLP and we support each other as we move up." Julia Gillard