



25 March 2011

## TACKLING AUSTRALIA'S GENDER GAP

### Building a culture where diverse groups can thrive & contribute

#### 1. Remove bias in the system

Ensure that all your capability, talent or leadership frameworks are developed on the basis of a representative sample of men and women.

Check that all criteria and any behavioural indicators apply equally to men and women, and are free of stereotypical language and assumptions.

#### 2. Manage unconscious bias

Train managers, in particular, to interpret criteria in agreed ways and become alert to the potential for unconscious bias to creep into the ways things are done.

#### 3. Reduce the 'demand' for assimilation

Actively publicise the research on cognitive diversity and how it benefits thinking and innovation. Show just why assimilation makes no sense from a business perspective.

#### 4. Build a questioning mindset

Encourage people to notice and question what they observe. Make reflection and critique part of your commitment to continuous improvement.

#### 5. Develop better problem solving talk

Arguably, professionals are hired and deliver value on the basis of their ability to solve problems and make decisions. Build this capability further through targeted development programs. Focus on cognitive ability and cognitive style benefits – not gender, culture, personality or generation!

#### *Women and men side by side*

How different are women and men and do these differences help us explain why it's proved so hard to get more women into the senior ranks of Australian organisations? Some years ago I took cameras into thirty Australian organisations to examine these two questions, through filming women and men engaged in everyday problem-solving talk. Since then, I've continued the research by exploring what we can do to change things: both what organisations and individuals can do.

What did I find? Women and men's communication styles are, in fact, largely the same. The whole *Mars* and *Venus* story is no more than a convenient myth that functions to mask bias, conscious and – more typically – unconscious. Nevertheless, I did find some differences and they were significant. For instance, when women meet without men present, they adopt a highly interactive, dynamic form of brainstorming where everyone collaborates to develop an idea from a tiny concept to a fully-fledged plan.

But when they interact with men, successful women have learned not to do this. They tend to conform to the male style as the 'gold standard'. In my footage, you see the precise ways that narrow, traditionally masculine ideas about leadership potential are reproduced.

#### *The importance of 'cognitive diversity'*

Ironically, women's communication preferences, with their emphasis on collegiality and collaboration, emerge as particularly suited to the complex problem solving and discontinuous change of the twenty-first century. In addition, research shows that 'cognitive diversity' (a team's ability to think differently about a problem) leads to breakthroughs beyond the reach of talented individuals working alone.

It's about the differences inside people's heads that produce essentially different cognitive toolkits or methods of thinking. These enable a diverse team, organisation or society to perform better than groups comprised of people who all think the same way. So if cognitive diversity is a good thing, where can we find it? One of the most straightforward ways is by hiring for differences in social identity – a balance of different cultures and genders.

Despite the proven advantages of diverse thinking styles, I found there was still a bias towards male norms and the traditional masculine view of leadership. This has the effect of excluding other versions of reality. Women's differential treatment is sanitised as simply a misunderstanding between *Mars* and *Venus*. Then the solution to increasing the percentage of women in top jobs becomes simply about finding more women who can 'manage like

men' and co-opting them, as a reward for the adjustments they've made!

This has a damaging effect on women's chances and women's choices. But it also excludes potential leaders from other cultural backgrounds *and* those men less comfortable with the prevailing tough, competitive leadership ethos. In this sense, current approaches to identifying talent are out of step with the reality of the Australian workplace, where diversity is now woven into the fabric in such a way that the old 'business case' arguments sound antiquated and beside the point. We can no longer *choose* whether or not we want to be diverse, or even whether we think being diverse is good or bad: we simply are and we can't go back.

#### *Difference or conformity*

If real change is our objective, we can't limit ourselves to those interventions designed, from the best of intentions, to encourage women to further accommodate to men. This is both unjust and ineffective. It implies deficiency and paves the way for assimilationist approaches. If innovation is what we want, then the last thing we should be doing is trying to iron out the differences between people!

At the time of writing this article, a well-known company has asked us to coach a talented woman about to apply for a critical senior role. They'd like to see more women in senior positions and they're also feeling pressure from the new ASX guidelines. To help this female candidate maximise her chances, they'd like her to adjust the way she presents herself. They want her to come across as tough enough and ambitious enough to be evaluated as suitable. There was no suggestion that those assessing the candidates might examine their assumptions. Maybe their narrow constructs of leadership block their ability to see the leaders in front of them, with their diversity of abilities and thinking styles?

#### *Merit – not an objective measure*

'Merit' is, unfortunately, not an objective measure but is frequently distorted to help mobilise bias, both conscious and unconscious. Ideas about merit so often mirror our prevailing norms about what a leader should look like and how a leader should behave, including the right amount of toughness, ambition and commitment to a culture of long hours. The result is that instead of identifying talent we perpetuate the status quo.

Leadership models designed for the last century are unlikely to equip us to meet the complex adaptive challenges of this one. Yet we cling to them and bias lingers, like a bad smell, preventing us from doing things differently. If we're going to succeed in tackling the tough problems of this century, we can't afford to measure potential in ways that deprive us of half our talent.