

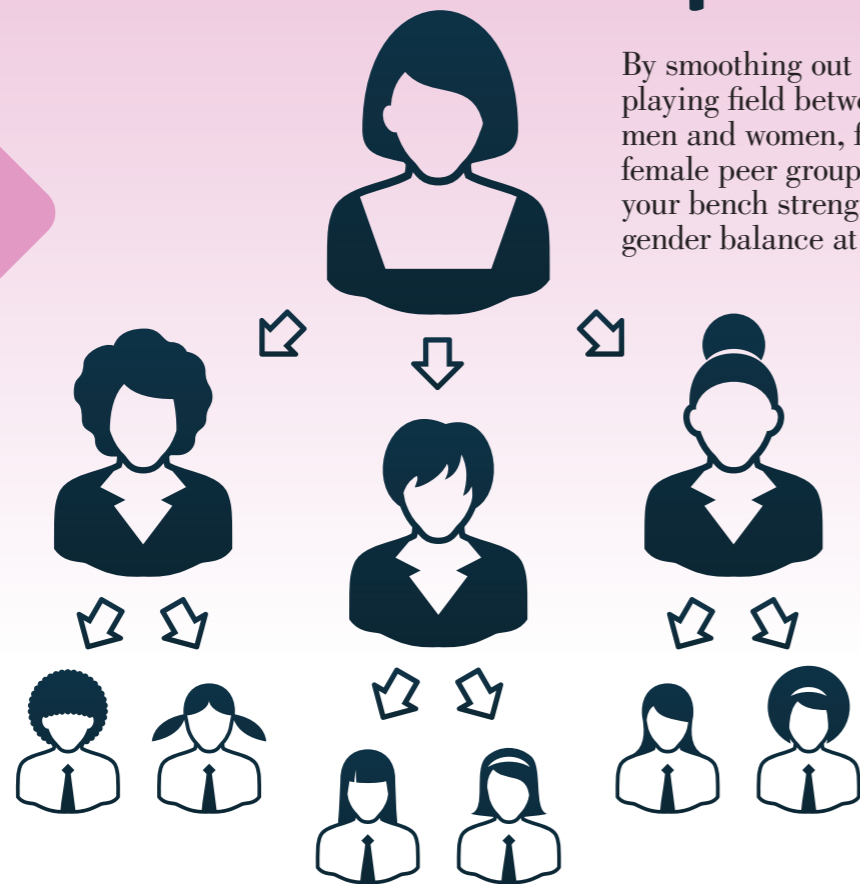


By Vanessa Gavan



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Extend Your Talent Pipeline



By smoothing out an uneven playing field between ambitious men and women, formalising female peer groups can increase your bench strength and improve gender balance at the top.

Having a higher than average percentage of women at the highest levels is demonstrably good for business by every measure. Meanwhile, nearly two-thirds of CEOs are concerned about the low levels of suitably skilled managers coming through their businesses, and the dearth of female directors is getting a lot of airtime.

So if gender balance at executive and board level is a competitive advantage and the pipeline of female talent for both is weak, why are so few organisations failing to provide high-potential women with the formal support and development they need to make it to the top?

You might argue that they are and that these measures are working because there are more senior businesswomen and directors now than 30 years ago when the term 'glass ceiling' was coined. It is true that there have been many initiatives at organisation, industry, and government level, with some success.

Yet women still lag well behind men at reaching the highest echelons of business. Any change has been glacial and disproportionate to the number of articles, research studies, and conference agendas devoted to the need for it.

The fact is, while women make up 48.5 per cent of the Australian

workforce, they account for just 26.1 per cent of key management positions, 17.3 per cent of CEOs, and 19.3 per cent of ASX directors.

The statistics show a disconnect between what is being said and what is being done. Either the actions being taken are not succeeding, their impact is overstated, or they are working very slowly.

Something needs to be done, and I believe targeted development is at least part of the answer. I realise that men can feel excluded and women want to be seen to succeed on their own merit. I understand the view that this approach is trying to fix women when we

should be focused on changing men's attitudes.

However, what I am proposing is not blanket female-only development programs, but an adjunct to the management development both genders receive: highly targeted, internally run programs for women in their twenties and thirties. These women are in the crucial early stages of their careers when their trajectory is most likely to be interrupted or slowed by having children, yet their success is essential to maintaining a healthy pipeline of diverse talent.

The advancement challenge

Even when an organisation's intake is equally divided between genders, women's advancement rates fall significantly relative to men's as their careers progress, even though they are just as ambitious.

In their first two years at work, 40 per cent of women see themselves as rising through the ranks, the same ambition level as men. However, by mid career, women experience a 60-per-cent drop in ambition. This applies whether or not they are married or have children. Their male peers' confidence falls by just 10 per cent.

Women's confidence plummets because the realities of the working environment become clearer as the years progress. In financial services, for example, women represent 60 per cent of all employees, but only 44 per cent of middle managers and 26 per cent of executives. Their success rates go down as the organisation's responsibility levels rise.

If more companies introduced female-only, high-potential development programs, they would be providing the early development, support, and training young women need to help them navigate tricky waters and fulfil their ambitions. They would also be creating the formal female cohorts that are missing from the business environment and that are so vital to closing the gender gap.

Why are so few organisations failing to provide high-potential women with the formal support and development they need to make it to the top?

Why cohorts matter

Cohorts provide individuals with essential contacts, career advice, and exclusive information. Many senior executives owe their success to the support of a cohort whose power and influence have grown over the years. These executives are nearly always men.

Cohorts often develop naturally among female peers with similar goals and challenges. There are also several women-only associations that help with business connections. These are both excellent ways to build professional relationships.

However, the most powerful cohort is one that is formally supported by your own organisation and established in the early career years. This can be achieved through the collective development of groups of high-potential women who rise together through an organisation.

There are several reasons CEOs should support formal female cohorts.

Countering unconscious bias: Eight out of ten male and female senior leaders maintain there is gender discrimination in their organisations when it comes to selection for responsibility, development, and promotion. Cohorts provide access to practical advice and support from other women about how to overcome bias.

Boosting confidence: Being part of a cross-functional peer group can be a powerful way for young women in a male-dominated workplace to gain a new perspective on their challenges, making them feel less isolated and improving their performance.

Providing encouragement: With women continuing to take on more family responsibilities than

men, they are vulnerable to the time pressures of line jobs and more likely than men to avoid or refuse them. Yet these roles are essential for a high flyer to reach their potential. Advice from female peers who are overcoming the same experience can encourage other women to see it is possible.

Sending a message: The CEO is demonstrating a genuine commitment to helping women get the support they need to advance. This will resonate with all female employees and attract more high-potential women.

Gaining sponsors: Without cohorts, women miss out on forming relationships with other women who may one day be able to sponsor them inside the company or when they move elsewhere.

Attracting millennials: Women born between 1980 and 1995 are more educated than previous generations and have high career expectations. More than half of them prioritise support for their career development and progression when seeking out and staying with an employer.

The wider impact

Female workers earn an average of 18.8 per cent less than men across the whole workforce. Having lower senior representation and lower pay are inextricably intertwined; if we don't change one, we won't change the other.

Actively creating female-only development cohorts is an effective way to help aspirational young women build the leadership skills and peer networks they need to change statistics like these.

That alone should be reason for every CEO to seriously consider the idea. •

About Vanessa Gavan
For over 15 years, Vanessa has consulted to a range of leading Australian and international organisations to enhance business strategies, improve executive leadership capability, redesign organisational structures, and deliver operational performance solutions. As an entrepreneur and business leader, Vanessa has lived through every business life cycle and has refined her abilities to inspire, deploy, and motivate people to achieve great things.