

Jen Dalitz



# Raising poppies

Seven success strategies for advancing and retaining women.

According to the most recent ABS figures, 50.3 per cent of Australians are women. Australia has a female Governor-General and Deputy Prime Minister. The Premiers of Queensland and New South Wales are female, as is the CEO of our largest banking group. Yet 98 per cent of our CEOs are men, 90 per cent of company executives are men and 92 per cent of all board members on our top companies are men.

So where are the women? This question is being asked not only by women who want the top jobs, but also management teams eager to realise the full potential of their human capital. And

## Reality checklist

**1 Women constitute a tiny percentage of company executives and board members.**

**2 Specific actions are possible to help firms attract and promote women in the workforce.**

**3 Cross-industry and cross-organisation programs can help women fast-track their career.**

shareholders are also getting on board, with the knowledge that women control 77 per cent of household expenditure decisions and organisations with more women in their leadership ranks produce financial results up to 35 per cent stronger.

Here are some success strategies from organisations across a range of industries and sectors that attract, retain and develop women into future leaders.

### Success strategies

#### 1. Role models matter

Establishing mentoring programs and encouraging women to find a champion can assist women in scaling the heights. This is particularly successful in male-dominated industries. Qantas offers its senior women a menu of mentoring offerings, giving them insights on how to plan career moves and deal with obstacles.

#### 2. Be flexible

Under the National Employment Standards, workers now have the right to request flexibility and you need to consider how to respond to this. Open your mind to the possibilities – and benefits – of flexible work arrangements to help women maintain a career after family. KPMG successfully divided the role of national manager, people and culture, between

two women who worked in two different offices – one in Melbourne and one in Canberra. The benefit? Coverage of the role in two locations that delivers synergy beyond what one person in one location could achieve.

#### 3. Share the success stories

Engineers Australia ran a Year of Women in Engineering initiative that led to its female full membership growing by 15 per cent in 12 months, and it's still reaping the rewards. Much of the program's success was attributed to sharing success stories of female engineers that until now had been largely unheard. This included publishing an article on the "25 most influential female engineers" in their industry magazine and producing a book on the journey of successful female engineers. Suddenly other female engineers had role models they could relate to, in a profession highly dominated by men.

#### 4. Set targets

What gets measured gets attention and this is the rationale behind the new ASX guidelines for diversity on boards. GM Holden introduced a 30 per cent female new-hire target and – with no other procedural changes – recorded an increase in female new hires from 25 per cent in 2004 to 31 per cent in 2006. Simply introducing the KPI gave visibility to an issue that had previously been overlooked, and the results followed.

#### 5. Use external forces where you can to bring about change

Several professional services firms have been influenced by clients who requested diversity disclosure in the tender process. Where tenders ask for information to be provided on diversity initiatives and female representation, sharing this information with your

## What could you do differently to attract, retain and develop women into future leaders?

executive team to help create a groundswell for change.

#### 6. Beware the unconscious bias.

It's often the unintended actions that cause the most damage. ANZ Bank implemented several organisation-wide initiatives aimed at uncovering the assumptions and unconscious bias women face in advancing their careers and is encouraging leaders to break down the invisible barriers that are holding women back within the bank. Addressing these assumptions is a key focus for their diversity council, chaired by CEO Mike Smith.

#### 7. Create a forum for women

When 90 per cent of executives are men, it can be difficult for women to retain their own sense of identity and confidence. Giving women a forum to come together, learn from each other and realise they are not alone in the challenges they face can mean the difference between a woman handling the roadbumps or simply handing in her notice. Woolworths has been running an internal women's program with success for some years now. You can also tap into cross-industry and cross-organisation programs and get your women on the fast track to career success. ▀

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