

# **Unconscious Bias in the Workplace and the Need for Strong Leadership**

Catherine Branson  
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Let me give you an interesting statistic - less than 15% of men in the USA are over 6 feet tall but 60% of corporate CEOs there are over 6 feet tall. Less than 4% of American men are over 6 feet 2 inches tall but 36% of corporate CEOs in the USA are over that height.<sup>1</sup> There is a similar pattern for Generals and Admirals and for Presidents. It seems unlikely that anyone in the USA is consciously recruiting or voting by reference to height. Almost certainly there is an unconscious bias in favour of tall men when looking for powerful leaders.

Unconscious bias affects all aspects of our lives. We tend to like people who look like us, who think like us and come from backgrounds similar to our own. Beliefs and values developed over a lifetime of experience significantly influence how we view and evaluate others and, indeed, ourselves.

Today I am going to concentrate on unconscious bias against women in the workplace.

It is an important issue because bias against women in the workplace is costly.<sup>2</sup> The debate about whether diversity is a good thing is now 'old hat'. Research by McKinsey and many others has

shown that companies with three or more women in senior management score more highly, on average, on organizational criteria than companies with no women at the top.<sup>3</sup> By organizational criteria I mean things like leadership, direction, accountability, innovation. A link between diversity on boards (meaning gender and ethnic diversity) and financial performance has also been clearly demonstrated.

This suggests that Australian businesses have work to do. The representation of women on boards and in senior management in Australia is low. While 45.9% of the full-time labour force in Australia is female, a mere 3.5% of CEOs of the ASX500 companies are women.<sup>4</sup> Just under 23% of directorships of the ASX100 companies are women while progress is even worse in the ASX 101-200 companies with women holding only 14% of board positions.<sup>5</sup>

While unconscious bias against women does not provide the whole explanation for these figures, it undoubtedly provides a good part of it.

We know that unconscious bias causes us to find certain characteristics that we regard as positive in men as negative in women. We know, for example, that the descriptors 'assertive' and 'ambitious' correlate with positive reviews for men but when used to describe women they correlate with negative reviews of their performance. We know that the pejorative term 'bossy' is almost exclusively

reserved for women; men presumably are simply 'authoritative' or even 'masterful' – a term for which there is no female equivalent.

There is also what Dr. Karen Ashcraft has described as the 'glass slipper'.<sup>6</sup> This is the phenomenon of women trying to fit into roles that have been defined against women before they even try them on – roles that she describes as 'male congenial roles'; roles that because of assumptions that probably don't stand analysis are assumed to be natural fits for men but not for women.

The other side of the coin is that women tend not to put themselves forward for promotion, or apply for new positions, unless they feel that they already have the qualifications and experience said to be required. It is often said that men will apply for a position for which they feel they are 60% qualified while women won't apply unless they feel that they are 120% qualified. We know that phrases like 'a proven track record' in job advertisements will attract more male than female applicants – whereas 'a passion for learning' will attract more women.

So how are we to ensure greater gender balance in business?

The first thing is to acknowledge that unconscious bias, including against women, affects us all. I could not help but identify with a story that I read recently in which a woman, a woman who regarded herself as a feminist, wrote of her reaction to finding that

the pilot of her plane was a woman. When the voice of the female pilot came over the loudspeaker she basked in a glow of pleasure. However, when the plane flew into turbulence she found herself thinking, 'I really hope that she can fly'! Of course, she then identified the bias involved (she would have simply assumed that a male pilot could fly safely through turbulence) and felt guilty. Prejudices run deep.

So all decision-makers are likely to benefit from learning more about their own implicit biases. There are tools around, including on-line tools, to help us do this. One is the Harvard University Implicit Association Test (IAT test).

A useful model for approaching change is the joint publication of Chief Executive Women and the Male Champions of Change entitled 'It starts with us: The Leadership Shadow'. This model urges leaders to reflect on the things which create their 'shadow' so far as the achievement of gender balance is concerned – what they say, how they act, what they prioritise, how and what they measure. It is an important publication and I urge you all to read it. It is easily found online on the website of the Male Champions of Change.

As that publication recognizes, workplace culture<sup>7</sup> is an important factor if the number of women holding senior positions is to increase. Successful business leaders are conscious of the culture of their

organization and recognize that cultural change comes from the top.

I was recently privileged to hear Carolyn Hewson AO<sup>8</sup> and Raymond Spencer<sup>9</sup> speak at one of CEDA's Women and Leadership Series in Adelaide. They both stressed that if you are a leader in your organization and you espouse equal opportunity for women, it is important that your conduct is consistent with that position 24/7 - and that you call out bad behavior in others. As they said, sexist comments and harassment of female employees, of course, can't be tolerated under any circumstances and no matter how senior the transgressor might be.

Raymond Spencer additionally spoke about the need for leaders to ensure that the practice of men routinely talking over women is not tolerated. He suggested that at meetings each person present should be invited in turn to express his or her view to avoid men dominating the discussion - whether or not their views are the most informed or well thought out. He additionally spoke of the need in smaller businesses to challenge any practice of letting a woman get the tea, cleanup after the meeting and additionally take the notes. Tasks like this, he suggested, should be rotated so that everyone takes a turn.

These two senior business leaders also spoke of the important role of mentors. They pointed out that a successful leader will thoughtfully mentor those

who report to him or her, scheduling meetings at lunchtime if necessary rather than after hours, helping them to succeed, talking to them about their potential for advancement and helping them think outside the box.

They also drew attention to the need for leaders to be aware that well qualified women may not be putting their hands up for appointment or promotion; if a short list is not gender balanced, he or she should push those responsible for identifying candidates to go out and actively search for qualified women.

In my experience it is also important to watch that interviews are truly fair? Have you ever witnessed something like this? Interviews are conducted of two candidates for a position – one called Peter and the other Sally. When Peter comes in the Chair of the interview panel immediately feels that he likes him, he may even have gone to his old school. He asks the first question and Peter doesn't handle it very well - he is obviously nervous. So the Chair seeks to put him at his ease. He says a few reassuring words and then tell him that he will ask the question again. This time Peter gives a good response and then handles the rest of the interview with confidence. When Sally comes in she too is nervous but no one does anything about it. Her interview goes well but not quite as well as Peter's. The next day when the recommendation for employment is being drafted, the intervention to put Peter at ease is forgotten – what the panel

remembers is that he seems a great guy, open and easy to talk to, someone likely to get on well with staff. Sally is remembered as OK but nothing special. If asked the Chair would swear that both interviews were conducted in the same way – his role in influencing the outcome will have been invisible to him.

We also need more women to be courageous about their career choices. Not foolhardy but courageous. Willing to see how skills developed in one area might translate to another; willing to take the chance that those making the recruitment decisions might see in them the very qualities that they are looking for; understanding that the person or board to whom they report will want them to succeed and will be willing to provide them with support should they be selected. And, of course, willing to accept that not being selected is not the same as failure – that taking part in a selection process can itself be a valuable experience and one that might even bring your skills to the attention of someone you might not otherwise meet.

There is other advice that I commonly offer younger women as they embark on their careers. I always encourage them to seek a career where their interests lie – if you don't enjoy what you are doing and believe in its value, you will find it hard to devote the time and emotional energy to it that is necessary for success. After that you need the discipline to ensure that you are truly good at what you do. These two things really go hand in hand.

I believe that it is also important to be open to new ways of pursuing your interests – that is, not to dismiss too quickly an unexpected opportunity to take a career path that you had not previously contemplated.

Try also to develop the skills to bring people with you in your professional life – to treat people respectfully, to challenge constructively, to avoid diminishing others. It will not be helpful in the long run to try to be someone who you are not, but you can learn a lot from carefully observing those who you admire the most. You will probably be able to identify skills and techniques that they employ that you could also use to your advantage. And do not hesitate to seek advice – nearly everyone is flattered to have his or her advice sought. But don't seek advice without doing your homework first. You will not gain respect by seeking advice from someone senior to yourself just to save yourself time and effort.

It can also be valuable to find opportunities to challenge stereotypical views about what you can do. One way can be by volunteering to undertake a task of a different kind from that which you would ordinarily be expected to do.

Confidence in your self, or at least the ability to project self-confidence, is at the heart of nearly all of the above advice. While some insightful leaders will be able to see the potential behind a timid



exterior, many will find it difficult to believe in you if you don't demonstrate a belief in yourself.

Twice in my life, I have had to ask myself difficult questions about the extent of my belief in myself. Twice a courageous man has broken with tradition and offered to appoint me to a senior position; in one case to a position never before held by a woman and in the other to a position that only few women had held. Each of them must have stared down either their own unconscious bias or that of others around them before offering to make the appointments. In each case I had to work out whether it would be merely courageous or rather foolhardy for me to accept their offers. The decisions that we together made transformed my life – and the sky did not fall in. Indeed, the organisations affected prospered.

If we all seek to identify and then challenging our unconscious biases maybe we can together help Australia reap the benefits of greater diversity in all areas of leadership.

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<sup>1</sup> Excerpt from *Blink* by Malcolm Gladwell: Why Do We Love Tall Men? See [gladwell.com](http://gladwell.com)

<sup>2</sup> See, for example, Goldman Sachs JB Were Investment Research, Australia's Hidden Resource: *The Economic Case for Increasing Female Participation*, (2009). See also Australian Government, Workplace Gender Equality Agency, *The business case for gender equality*, March 2013 ([wgea.gov.au](http://wgea.gov.au))

<sup>3</sup> *Women Matter: Gender Diversity, a Corporate Performance Driver*, McKinsey & Company, 2007. See also *Women Matter 2: Female Leadership, a competitive edge for the future*, 2008 and Reibey Institute, *ASX500 Women leaders* – 2011 edition.

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<sup>4</sup> Workplace Gender Equality Agency: Gender workplace statistics at a glance, [www.wgea.gov.au](http://www.wgea.gov.au)

<sup>5</sup> Boardroom Diversity Index 2015, Women On Boards ([womenonboards.org.au](http://womenonboards.org.au))

<sup>6</sup> Karen Ashcroft, *The Glass Slipper: 'Incorporating' Occupational Identity in Management Studies*, *Academy of Management Review* July 31, 2012.

<sup>7</sup> See also McKinsey Quarterly: *Why gender diversity at the top remains a challenge*, April 2014 by Sandrine Devillard & Ors

<sup>8</sup> Carolyn Hewson AO has 30 years' experience in the financial sector and is a non-executive director of BHP Billiton, Westpac Banking Corporation, Stocklands Corporation and BT Investment Management.

<sup>9</sup> Raymond Spence is Chair of the SA Economic Development Board and of SAMHRI. He returned to SA following 35 years of living and working in the USA, India and Europe.