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AUSTRALIA

PROFILE OF A SUCCESSFUL FEMALE LEADER

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DDI's global study *Holding Women Back*¹ revealed some interesting trends about what keeps women out of the corner office—including the fact that the deck is stacked against women from early in their careers when they aren't placed on the same development track as their male peers. This caught our attention. Specifically, *Holding Women Back* revealed that organisations were not even handed in their treatment of male and female leaders. The women—more than one-third of the global sample of over 12,800 leaders²—had not progressed nearly as far up the management ladder as the men. This discrepancy isn't a surprise; it did however prompt our special investigation. This global research delivered a series of best practices for organisations in *Helping Women Move Up*;

1. Formalise Succession Planning
2. Recognise Performance Equally
3. Democratise Development
4. Provide Women with Mentors

¹ Howard, A., & Wellins, R. S. (2009). *Holding Women Back: Troubling Discoveries, and Best Practices for Helping Female Leaders Succeed*. Pittsburgh: Development Dimensions International.

² Data for the Holding Women Back report was pulled from a larger study on male and female leaders. See Howard, A., & Wellins, R. S. (2009). *Global Leadership Forecast 2008|2009: Overcoming the Shortfalls in Developing Leaders*. Pittsburgh: Development Dimensions International.

5. Internationalise Women's Experiences
6. Equalise (and Enhance) Transition Support
7. Make HR Policies More Family Friendly

And in addition, guiding principles for *What Women Can Do*;

1. Make Intentions Known
2. Consider Multinational Assignments
3. Counteract Behaviour Stereotypes
4. Don't Wait for Opportunities
5. Stay Positive

Building on these global recommendations, we sought to understand, from an Australian perspective, what were the key enablers of success for senior female leaders. We know the statistics don't look good from an equity and diversity standpoint but we did not want to enter into the very complex terrain of the gender debate. So, this research has been specifically conducted to deliver the *Profile of a Successful Female Leader*.

And it started with a conversation—21 conversations to be precise—with some of the most exceptional women we have in Australia, across industries including mining, FMCG, government, engineering, insurance, postal services, banking and finance, communications, education, and property development.

The standout quality of these discussions was the openness and authenticity of the women we spoke to. Each was incredibly generous and candid in sharing their hard-learned lessons, failures, successes, philosophies and perspectives. To give you some insight into the calibre of women we were

speaking to, when we asked the question ‘Do you feel as if you’ve been held back in your career progression because of gender?’, 96% said that they hadn’t been held back at all. These women took full accountability for where they were and how they got there and many echoed Jo Mithen’s (CEO, Monash College) philosophy: “*You only get one shot - so have a shot today - what’s the worst that can happen?*” Often, when they didn’t get what they needed or wanted from a role, they had the courage and conviction to move on.

Throughout this paper we will share the personal attributes, capabilities, and importantly, organisational factors that contributed to their success and ensured sustainability of their ongoing career progression.

For the last 40 years, DDI has not only been defining success profiles, but selecting, developing and accelerating leaders against them. The *Profile of a Successful Female Leader* is a little different though.

Because we spoke with women across diverse industries with equally diverse and unique *knowledge* and *experiences*, we have not included these typical success profile elements in our research, as the profile would end up being broad and ill-defined. Instead, we are taking the position that what is necessary for women’s success at the most senior levels is a combination of *personal attributes, capabilities and organisational support*. After all, one can have all of the attributes and capabilities necessary for success but if the organisation doesn’t create or allow challenging development opportunities, or have leaders who place value on nurturing talent, rapid progression and acceleration is unlikely, regardless of gender.

This brings us to a controversial topic that is best addressed before we explore the success profile in more detail. ‘Isn’t this success profile going to look exactly the same regardless of whether you are male or female?’ The answer is not a simple one. DDI has found very little by way of significant gender differences in our assessment of male and female executives. This lack of substantial difference is supported by other findings.^{3,4} We are suggesting however, that there are certain differential focus areas for female leaders to succeed. This information was derived from those ahead of their game sharing the key enablers of their success. Defining these differential focus areas early will better enable aspiring female leaders to pinpoint development, and provide organisations with insight into the types of practices to institute in order to capitalise on a greater breadth of organisation talent than is currently being tapped (indeed it could be argued that aspiring male senior executives could equally benefit from a review of this profile, but that is another study altogether).

Figure 1. The *Profile of a Successful Female Leader* is comprised of the following enablers: personal attributes, capabilities and organisational support.



³Fox, C. (2007). When it comes to leadership, there is no gender. *Australian Financial Review*. 10 November 2007.

⁴Desvaux, G., & Devillard, S. (2008). *Women Matter 2: Female leadership, a competitive edge for the future*. France: McKinsey & Company.

PERSONAL ATTRIBUTES

The women we spoke with consistently demonstrated personal attributes that have clearly enabled their success, provided them with the emotional resources to overcome obstacles, and allowed them to address the complex challenges that often came their way. Interestingly though, 33% did say that they felt they had held themselves back, and this brings us to the first attribute.

- > **Courage:** Primarily this emerged in terms of women taking calculated risks on themselves. The adage we heard repeatedly was: *‘a man will look at a role, decide that he can deliver on 50% of it and go for it anyway; a woman on the other hand will look at the same role and although she may be able to deliver on 80% of the requirements, will focus on the 20% gap and decide she’s not ready for it.’* Wearing a mantle of fearlessness, backing yourself and having the tenacity to get back on the horse when you fall off were all presented as critical characteristics in the move up the ladder. Sylvie Vanasse (Director of People, Parsons Brinckerhoff) offered the following advice when women do hold themselves back from that next opportunity: *“when you feel envy, question why you haven’t gone for it yourself.”*
- > **Passion:** *“When I’m happy at work, it makes everything else in life hum”* (Jo Mithen). We also heard of the importance of “having a connection to an underlying purpose” (Christine McLoughlin, Company Director and Head, McLoughlin Advisory), *“needing value alignment”* (Jo Mithen) and ultimately choosing a job and career that you actually want to devote your energies to - *“I’m a true believer that if you enjoy what you do . .*

. your performance will be higher and you will be more successful.” (Colleen Harris, Executive General Manager - Human Capital Strategy, NAB).

- > **Authenticity:** Be true to yourself in the pursuit of your goals, and understanding and accepting of who you are. The women interviewed did not act differently because they were in a leadership position. Importantly, they were clear about when their work or personal life should take precedence at different stages in their lives.
- > **Ambition:** Put simply, women should *“be ambitious”* and *“aim high”* (The Hon. Patricia Forsythe, Executive Director, Sydney Business Chamber). Interestingly though, very few of the women we spoke to were chasing a quick ascent to a CEO role. Rather, they demonstrated a commitment to delivering business results, to finding the next challenge and to building a portfolio of skills, experiences and knowledge by consistently putting their hand up for new opportunities. Remember that *“there’s no obstacle that can’t end up being a stepping stone to something greater if you can work out how to get over it.”* (Trish Unwin, Manager HR Strategy & Organisation Development, Australia Post)
- > **Conscientiousness:** Talent alone is absolutely not sufficient and there are no short cuts. These women all worked very, very hard to get to senior levels in their career. *“Be prepared to work hard. don’t think you are somehow going to get there by good luck and good judgment and being nice to people at all times, because you won’t.”* (Trisha McEwan, GM - Human Resources & Communications, Orica).

- > **Self Insight:** This emerged as a key personal attribute in terms of the importance of playing to your strengths and understanding your development areas. Knowing what you're good at and where your gaps are helps you to *"understand yourself and what is right for you, not what the organisation thinks is right for you."* (Louise Doyle, formerly Group Executive HR, National Foods).

An astute reader may notice the absence of a key attribute here - *Confidence* - and its absence requires explanation. Self-belief and confidence were presented as important enablers of senior leadership success but less frequently called out than the characteristics we cite above. That's because rather than being discussed in depth, it was much more *observed* by the interviewing panel. These women presented as poised and self-assured. We saw neither overt aggression nor outright arrogance, but a poised, credible and confident approach.

Personal attributes such as courage, passion, authenticity, ambition, conscientiousness and self-insight are innate and by their nature challenging to develop. Our point of view is that these attributes become the baseline elements required in the pursuit of senior leadership roles. Achieving success without them becomes incredibly difficult - imagine the personal strain of ascending without confidence, or inspiring your team without them being able to see your passion, ambition and drive.

At the same time though, the *Profile of a Successful Female Leader* extends beyond just personal attributes to the capabilities required to support effective performance at the senior level. In contrast to personal attributes, capabilities can be developed over time, through both formal development and exposure to key challenges and career experiences.

CAPABILITIES

Whilst we could list all of the competencies that we frequently see in executive profiles, regardless of gender, what we have called out here are the must-have capabilities and differential focus areas in the context of female leadership success.

- > **Cultivating Relationships:** *Initiating and maintaining strategic relationships with stakeholders inside and outside the organisation.* 89% of respondents cited that an enabler to success as a female leader was having mentors, champions and internal sponsors to act as sounding boards, to challenge thinking around key business initiatives and approaches, and to support professional development and growth. It is these sponsors and champions, particularly internal, who help to open doors when the opportunity arises. For example, a key enabler for Sylvie Vanasse was being *"blessed with a wonderful mentor - someone who believes in you more than you believe in yourself."*
- > **Drive for Results:** *"You are only as good as the things you deliver; you can't just have one win and then cruise through"* (Maria Tassone, GM Academy Operations, NAB). This is all about tangibly demonstrating business results and doing so consistently, *"because nothing speaks more loudly than the role you are doing and the results you produce"* (Kirstin Schneider, Manager, Talent - Corporate Human Resources, Australia Post). But it doesn't stop at the result, leaders need to own their successes and be able to confidently communicate business impact from their efforts. An example of this drive comes from one leader who, in her first strategic leadership role took the company from insolvency to profit generating in the first 12 months, with 25% net returns year on year after that point.

- > **Building Organisational Talent:** *Establishing systems and processes to attract, develop, engage and retain talented individuals; creating a work environment where people can realise their full potential.* What we did not see were women who were only interested in their own growth agenda. Rather, there was a focus on building the talent around them, taking risks on others and building natural successors that “enable you to move on with your career” (Anne O’Keefe, Head of Human Resources, Zurich), whilst ensuring that your efforts and impact in previous roles remain sustainable.
- > **Personal Growth Orientation:** *Actively pursuing development experiences to improve interpersonal and business impact.* Active pursuit of ongoing learning, training and education to ensure currency of skills whilst being able to demonstrate the value in deploying them was deemed critical. The leaders we interviewed were also very well aware of the steps they needed to take to gain critical new experiences, often had firm views of what they needed and wanted to do, and had the networks and options available to be able to pursue them. The development experiences discussed were also incredibly varied, from international experience, to residential Executive MBAs and challenging in-company projects.
- > **Business Savvy:** *Demonstrates a keen understanding of basic business operations and the organisational levers (systems, processes, departments, functions) that drive profitable growth.* “You can’t advise people on leadership if you don’t understand the business” (Jude Hollings, GM - People & Organisational Development, Kangan Batman TAFE). This keen understanding is pivotal in building

a respected leadership brand and goes hand-in-hand with being able to demonstrate tangible business results. As such, we strongly recommend that this capability is nurtured early in leaders so they are better equipped to define and pull the levers required to drive and enhance organisational performance. Developing this capability also provides additional benefits as Alex Badenoch (Executive Director - Talent and Organisation Development, Telstra) sees it: “I found that no matter what, male or female, the greatest thing I can do about breaking into networks is about understanding the business.”

An important point that came up was how successful women who focused on the capabilities described above were able to make use of their self-insight to make the right decisions at critical points in their careers, such as leaving a job when it was not suitable. To sum it up, “ultimately having the right people around you, and being in cultures that are supportive of that and are willing to back you sometimes, even when you don’t necessarily have the on-packet credentials. that really helps you to accelerate and drive and build your confidence” (Alex Badenoch).

Interestingly, another important capability that came up during group discussions but was not touched on during the interviews was the need to be visionary as a leader. Being visionary has been defined as “the ability to sense opportunities and threats, to set strategic direction, and to inspire constituents”.⁵

⁵ Ibarra, H., & Obodaru, O. (2009). Women and the vision thing. *Harvard Business Review*, 87, p. 62.

That study found female leaders were perceived as less visionary compared to male leaders, and this capability became more important for leaders moving from mid-level management to more senior leadership roles. When questioned, the women in our study were unequivocal in the view that being visionary was a crucial capability in leadership roles. Although we didn't include this in our original list, we felt that this would make an interesting extension to the discussion.

Having defined the differential personal attributes and capabilities of effective senior female leaders, it is crucial to note that these leaders did not operate in a vacuum. What comes next is the importance of a supportive organisational culture in accelerating the growth and realising the potential of successful female leaders.

ORGANISATIONAL SUPPORT

Our global research provided a series of best practices for organisations in *Helping Women Move Up*. Our findings in this study echo many of these practices and in particular, our research indicated that **having mentors at work, supportive leaders, and flexible work practices** were essential. These in-company resources are so critical because they enable senior female leaders to structure their time, approach and focus appropriately depending on the work and non-work priorities at play at the time. For many of them, real success is defined by the achievement of a work-life balance.

However, such a balance cannot be attained without a supportive organisation and flexibility of the work culture.

The women we interviewed came from diverse backgrounds with an equally diverse set of personal circumstances and family responsibilities. Regardless of the specific personal situations female leaders are in, organisations must have both a board and CEO who are committed to encouraging a culture that supports diversity of approach, thought, and practices. This is a critical starting point in terms of driving the right attitude, but organisational leaders across the leadership pipeline also need to be equipped with the skills to deal with such diversity - to harness the value of diverse talent whilst still driving clear performance outcomes *“you need more than lip service but evidence from the organisation - granular information about what's happening - both data and stories.”* (Christine McLoughlin).

In addition to organisational resources, highly effective senior female leaders also had critical environmental resources available to them, enabling commitment and focus to their careers. Many talked about the importance of personal relationships with friends and family - *“an unspoken support that is without much acknowledgement”* (Helen Newall, HR Director Australia, AXA), but one that is of great value in buffering both stress and pressure at work. For many of them, success is defined by balancing work-life priorities, as this allows you to *“give yourself some purpose in life other than work”* (Hilary Crowe, GM - People & Culture Business Banking, NAB).

TOP TIPS FOR THE ASCENT

Having spoken to some of our most exceptional leadership talent in Australia, we wanted to share their consolidated list of the top tips for women starting out in their careers:

1. **Fail often, fail well.** Know and understand what is important to you, and be very clear on the goals you want to achieve. However, don't be afraid to fail along the way. *"Success is about working out what you want to do, not necessarily driving for the name or title, but more about the richness of what you are doing."* (Kate Eastoe, Group Corporate Counsel, Asia Pacific, George Weston Foods).
2. **Find someone who believes in you even more than you believe in yourself.** These mentors and sponsors will be able to provide you with insight, guidance and advice, even with challenges you haven't yet encountered. *"Make yourself meet these people, and continue to meet them within the organisation"* (Rilla Moore, Executive GM - Human Resources, Stockland), because if you choose the right ones, they will back you when you need it most.
3. **Show your value, stand out.** Demonstrate results and make them visible. However, take note that doing a good job is not defined by long hours, but rather, by the outcomes you deliver. *"Earning respect and doing a good job of what you do gets you a long way."* (Joy Linton, Finance Director, National Foods).

4. **Hunt the next opportunity down, don't wait for the tap.** *"Be prepared to learn at every single opportunity, even if it won't be relevant straight away"* (Fiona Fleming, Group Corporate Affairs Manager, George Weston Foods). Consider job rotations, international job placements, and put your hand up for any other opportunities that come your way. And remember, *"women can be their own obstacles."* (Cathy Manolios, General Counsel, Zurich).
5. **Take a portfolio approach to life.** Build and strengthen your relationships through all aspects of life. When you build those networks at work, it's not only about *"knowing people, but knowing when to work with them."* (Anne O'Keefe). At the same time, don't forget the importance of getting support from your family and friends.

COMPARISONS WITH THE GLOBAL RESEARCH

On the whole, the Australian women interviewed did not feel that they had been held back in any way by their gender. In contrast, the global research showed that in general the women did not get the same development opportunities as men, and felt that being a female had hindered their career advancements. Both the Australian and global research highlighted the importance of organisational support during the transition into new roles, and for moving through the ranks. Thus, a huge aspect of female leadership success hinges on the degree to which organisations help enable talent to reach their full potential.

THE REASONS WOMEN ARE NOT MAKING IT TO BOARD LEVEL

Having taken the opportunity to explore this issue, we found that many women motivationally just did not wish to be represented on board directorships. We heard on one hand of a preference for involvement in business versus governance. But on the other hand, we also heard of the challenges of breaking into a very tight network. Board membership is generally gained through invitations and referrals, rather than through advertisement. As such, if board involvement is a long-term goal, increasing your public profile and developing networking skills should become a priority early on in your career. Voice your desire to join boards and ask for referrals from your sponsors so they are aware of your interest and can provide appropriate direction.

Perhaps one of the most interesting perspectives that emerged was that women might actually start applying for directorships too soon, typically in the not-for-profit sector, without first focusing on building a strong repertoire of senior leadership roles. As such, they lack the level of exposure required to be successful in their applications. Thus, similar to the tips offered for the ascent, the main pieces of advice offered to women who wish to enter board directorship are: concentrating on building public visibility, broadening work experiences, and strengthening both internal and external networks.

CONCLUSION

Having defined the critical personal attributes and capabilities required for the success of senior female leaders, the next natural question is, 'What can we do with this information?' Given that each of the participants in our research was so keen to share their perspective to support other ambitious and driven women, the answer takes two forms.

1. Attention goes to aspiring women who can use this profile to understand the key enablers of success as a senior female leader. And rather than being disempowered by concepts such as the glass ceiling or glass cliff, we hope this research has the opposite effect, and conveys a sense of just how much mastery they can have over their careers should they choose. This report provides clarity to what women can do to strengthen their leadership profile for high impact.
2. Attention turns to organisations. With much debate currently circulating regarding quotas and the view that Australia is lagging behind the rest of the world when it comes to driving diversity, this paper provides succinct guidance as to the initiatives, culture and approach required to enable organisations to leverage a truly broad talent pool. And it's not just about having special interests groups in place, but ensuring that leaders shape organisations that promote women to the top.

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