

Australian superwomen left holding the poison

MOIRA RAYNER NOVEMBER 03, 2008

When I was a younger woman I determined to be a lawyer — 'Not a very feminine career choice, dear,' as my careers mistress told me — at a time when female university graduates were so rare as to be celebrated in gold leaf on school honours boards.

It is no longer so. Women have, since the 1970s, been graduating with first class honours in what were once men-only disciplines (engineering, astrophysics, law, medicine, business administration) and starting out in a career which, we were told, would over time be rewarded through the 'pipeline' principle.

One of the hardest lessons for women to learn is that merit and hard work will not be rewarded like that.

The **latest report** from the EOWA, Equal Opportunity for Women in the Workplace Agency's 2008 Australian Census of Women in Leadership discloses a lamentable truth. Over the past two years the proportion of women in leadership roles has gone backwards faster than any 'shrinkage' of leadership opportunities.

Just 2 per cent are chairs of the boards of ASX 200 companies. There has been a drop from 3 per cent to 2 per cent of women CEOs, and a drop of 0.4 per cent in the numbers of women board members to 8.3 per cent.

Even the 'pipeline' has been scoured. Women executive managers (that is, managers who report directly to their CEO) make just 10.7 per cent — 182 women out of a total of 1700 — which is an inadequate representation of powerful, smart, savvy and committed women.

These companies make policy decisions that affect investors, business operators, employees, customers and consumers, without the input of women. They include our major financial institutions (and just look where they have taken us).

The facts speak. The proportion of companies with no female executive managers has risen over two years from 39.5 per cent to 45.5 per cent.

Anna McPhee, the chief executive of EOWA, attributed the flop in women's progress to outdated workplace practices, hostile environments and fewer opportunities for women. Other commentators have predicted, with the economic crisis, that women who have recently taken advantage of 'diversity' and leadership programs will be the first, and worst, affected by cutbacks and safe practices in firms and other institutions falling back on the tried-and-true experienced male managers among their colleagues.

Some women assert that they have never experienced discrimination, and that the poor representation of women in the heights is because they don't want the burdens that come with front-line leadership. But the diminution of women on Australian boards, at the pointy end of top ASX companies and in that pipeline is far greater than the shrinkage of executive teams. Something more is going on.



Part of it is that those with power don't want to share or relinquish it. Australian female political leaders, with the notable exception of former NT Chief Minister Clare Martin, have been handed their premiership roles when problems lie ahead. Men are then willing to relinquish the vessel with the pestle (apologies to Danny Kaye in *The Court Jester*) to women like Carmen Lawrence and Joan Kirner, and stand by as the potion proves untrue.

Another factor in Australia's slide may be, as McPhee suggests, that its leadership environment is primed with preoccupation with hierarchy and status, deal-doing, understandings, intrigue and backbiting. Women may feel it is hard to enjoy the amity of colleagues.

Yet another factor may be the ongoing failure to understand and overcome our unconscious rejection of difference. 'Team players' have to fit. But different 'team players' generate uncomfortable new views.

US linguistics Professor Deborah Tannen's research into how men and women communicate at work concluded that patterns of relationship-formation, communicating and coalescence began in pre-adolescent play, and in adulthood remain so fundamentally different that men and women might be speaking different languages. This, too, is why men on boards appoint women whom they know and with whose discourse they are comfortable.

Katie Lahey, chief executive of the **Business Council of Australia**, has responded to the census figures by calling for quotas for women in leadership.

That will help, but the solution also requires women who are prepared to be women, even in hand-to-hand combat. Women who seek to succeed as 'honorary men' will not last long. So long as women mould themselves on a block designed by those whose language, expectations and patterns of relationships were formed in the schoolyard, there will be no change. 'Merit' is in the eye of the beholder.

The women and men of Australia need proof that business can adapt. Those that cannot evolve to survive in a catastrophically changing climate will be little but carbon deposits in the tar-pools of future economic history.

LINKS:

[Equal Opportunity for Women in the Workplace Agency](#)



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