

“Gender is not an issue”: the invisibility of women executives in local government.

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Women Executives in Local government

In Australia men dominate senior positions in local government, with only 5.1% of CEO positions across Australian local government filled by women and women occupying 10% of senior executive positions across the sector (Paddon 2005). Victoria stands ahead of other states, with 10% of CEO roles occupied by women (Paddon 2005).

The authors of this article are currently both engaged in (separate) research here in Australia regarding leadership and gender in local government. Both Kate’s and Andi’s interviews confirm the situation.

"It looks very strange...well certainly here, and I expect most Councils, the very large majority of employees are female and probably the majority of clients in many of the services are women and yet the higher you go the more likely it is to be male."

When the figures for female participation in local government are considered, it seems women still have a long way to go to climb to the 'top of the tree' in relation to their level of overall participation. Local governments across Australia employ over 125,000 staff, with women making up 40% of the local government workforce (Paddon 2005). Table 1 below highlights that this has been the case for over a decade. Yet at the senior level in local government, our respondents suggest:

"When you look around the room [at the senior level] there are always overweight middle aged blokes in suits"

"There is basically no diversity of any kind. Not just gender, but anything else you care to name. Its not representative."

Table1. Comparisons of Australian Local Government employment rates for men and women

| Year | 1996 | | | | 2001 | | | |
|--------------------|--------------|-----------|--------------|-----------|--------------|-----------|--------------|-----------|
| | Female | | Male | | Female | | Male | |
| | No. | % | No. | % | No. | % | No. | % |
| Victoria | 17431 | 57 | 13093 | 43 | 17050 | 58 | 12297 | 42 |
| New South Wales | 14609 | 34 | 28005 | 66 | 14587 | 35 | 26608 | 65 |
| Queensland | 8225 | 28 | 21292 | 72 | 9072 | 30 | 21010 | 70 |
| South Australia | 3031 | 38 | 5023 | 62 | 2941 | 38 | 4810 | 62 |
| Western Australia | 4471 | 39 | 6955 | 61 | 4623 | 39 | 7236 | 61 |
| Tasmania | 1352 | 33 | 2702 | 67 | 1036 | 31 | 2253 | 69 |
| Northern Territory | 811 | 43 | 1070 | 57 | 532 | 43 | 709 | 57 |
| Total | 49930 | 39 | 78145 | 61 | 49841 | 40 | 74923 | 60 |

Source ABS 1997, based on the Paddon Report (2005)

What makes a good leader? Are the skills and attributes gender-less?

There are numerous reasons cited to account for the lack of women in the top echelons of local government. Some academic research has focussed on the differences in the genders to account for it (Riger and Galligan 1980). Other researchers have looked at structural, cultural and organisation barriers to women's participation (Kanter 1977; Fawcett and Pringle 2000). Sinclair (2005) argues that because women's leadership looks different to men's it is not always seen as a valid form of leadership. Powell (1988) suggests that many theories of effective management have been based on observations of male managers. In this context, masculine behaviours and values are seen as the behavioural norm. So we read that a good leader is decisive, task focussed, rational, cool-headed, strong, stoic and self-reliant.

A good leader is really an idealised male figure. This situation makes it hard for a woman to be a good leader and it means that gender can be characterised as a non-issue: these are the traits of a good leader of either gender – so goes the mainstream view. How then does a woman assume the mantle of leadership under these criteria? She can be both strong and stoic like the men, yet this strength can be perceived as ‘distance’ and ‘coldness’ or she can try to bring awareness of the feminine into her style and may be considered weak. Wilson (2003) gives a summary of research that shows that leadership is a matter of perception, that is, men and women both perceive female leaders are not as good as men and characterise women as ruthless when they are authoritative.

Women managers have a difficult balancing act and the characterisation of ruthlessness is always possible, as one interviewed CEO has been described by a male manager in her organisation:

“...can't see any difference between her and a man doing the job, she's a bit more ruthless than some of the guys [ruthless?] Yeah.”

Wilson (2003) suggests that mainstream management theory is ‘blind’ to the notion of gender in leadership. Idealised masculinity is the measure of behaviour and it sets the standard against which women’s performance is measured. Women report that when they adopt more feminine behaviours at work, they are viewed as less effective yet when they adopt the more masculine behaviours they are criticised for not being more feminine (Ragins et al. 1998). More lately Sinclair (2005) has investigated the importance of bodies in leadership. She argues that we have considered leaders as ‘brains without bodies’ in the past and that stature, gesture, look and voice are important elements of leadership.

Fox and Broussine (2000) undertook a survey of local authorities in England and Wales and found that while the more traditional views of leadership still exist among elected representatives, there was consensus among male and female CEOs on the strengths that women leaders can bring to local government. These included candidness and a desire to confront situations, collaboration, consensus building, empathy, flexibility, willingness to learn, determination, home/work balance, egalitarianism, openness, and community orientation. These are characteristics in any CEO that could prove useful, but

allowing the combination of toughness and femininity in one personality are 'difficult qualities for our culture to reconcile and digest' (Oakley 2000: 325).

Yet Fox and Broussine also found that men in positions of authority do not want to see that there is still a problem. They found that male CEOs overstate the progress being made to appoint female CEOs. Why would male CEOs overstate the progress? Perhaps more complex and non-rational dynamics are at play here.

Unconscious factors in Leadership

What makes a good leader and how individuals make it to the top of their profession is a complex matter. Leadership is not simply a binary system (leader and followers); it is a more complex dynamic between the two (Collinson 2005) with powerful and often unconscious attitudes, values and beliefs shaping the leadership dynamic. It can be threatening to open up the field to those who may be different – whether by gender, ethnicity or other minority. Ashcraft (2005) found that airline pilots engaged in subversive tactics to undermine a program of encouraging crew empowerment, while at the same time apparently accepting change. She notes the importance of the sense of loss of power (the fear of it, the talk of it) as influencing resistance to change. Resistance to change may be disguised and those in power may not always be consciously aware of their resistance.

One female CEO in Kate's study said that although gender is not an issue for her, men tend to under-estimate her capacity to make hard decisions and are shocked when she does. When asked if people's attitude sometimes forced her to make a tough decision to show she was capable of it, she said, not at all.

"I don't believe it [being a woman in the role] influences me, in the way I respond. I don't try to meet people's expectations of me as a woman. We are an unusual commodity in local government (women CEOs) and many people have not worked with a woman. My value set, my upbringing – there was never a label connected to being a girl, so that's what I relate to. I don't put labels on other people too."

This female CEO's view was that she was raised to believe there is no difference between men and women, in terms of professional abilities, so gender is not relevant and her staff concluded when interviewed that while the CEO was 'controlling, cold and aloof', this is her personality and not related to gender.

“Yes, but it’s just her personality. She can’t change it “

“Gender has not entered into it...gender has never arisen.”

People around this CEO (and indeed herself) denied she was treated differently due to her gender. Clearly, perceptions matter, whether they are accurate or not, as does organisational history and the impact of previous leaders. In fact the discussion of gender seems to make some local government staff uncomfortable. One staff member felt it was impertinent when Kate raised the issue. She put it to the senior staff member that if his (female) CEO is controlling, as he suggested, it might be because she feels as a woman in charge of men, she must exert more control to be considered credible. He responded:

“Rubbish. I can’t know what is in her mind. I resent the question. What has that got to do with it? It’s irrelevant. It’s insulting to raise it. Gender is not an issue.”

Why is it that gender is not relevant and indeed not a fit topic for discussion? It is hard to understand the vehemence with which gender can be rejected as an issue and the apparent rule that gender must not be named. Perhaps staff deny its relevance to avoid any acknowledgement of the projections they place upon a woman in a position of authority. If a female CEO is controlling and aloof and it is simply part of her personality that cannot be changed, then we can deny that we do have expectations of her as a woman in the position. But clearly, staff do have expectations. Would a male CEO with a similar style be described as aloof, controlling and distant? More likely such a leader would be described as coolheaded, decisive, even handed.

The way women (and other minorities) are treated in climbing the corporate ladder is not always a simple or even conscious thing. Bozionelas (2005) found that sometimes the best person for the job is not selected, but rather, unconsciously, panel members choose the person most like themselves; the one they feel comfortable with, so that they can build networks with the new person and thereby strengthen their own power base.

Leadership studies have tended in the past to see leading as a dualism (leader/follower), with the leader as the subject – the voice, the power – and followers as object. This thinking leads to an over-simplification of the true dynamic of leadership (Collinson 2005) where, although power may not be equal between leaders and follows, it is not true to say followers have no power at all to influence issues. Dualisms tend to simplify and thereby exclude (rational/emotional, male/female, public/private, home/work and so on as Collinson suggests). It is certainly not a simple ‘men vs. women’ situation either as many senior women attest that support from other women is often missing. As two different

senior females in local government say:

"Women are much more controlling in positions of management. You have got to be highly accountable to a female boss."

"When I needed the support from females in the area, it was like I needed to earn my stripes and I was out in the cold for a number of years"

Then there is the other side of the coin, where because there are so few women in senior positions, they can stand out as applicants, as one senior female told Andi:

"I think sometimes being a women helps when there are 75 men and 5 women applying for the job. That's when being a woman makes you visible"

Following on from this comment, female CEOs' performance is also regarded as more visible than male CEOs. Our own research highlights the view that female CEOs are judged more harshly than their male counterparts and this has implications for other women pursuing CEO roles. One of our respondents suggests:

"When a female CEO is seen to have failed, Councillors are likely to disregard other women for the job, believing that women are not up to it. Yet when a man stuffs up he is regarded as a dud and it does not have implications for other men"

So what can be done?

Having more women in leadership roles in Australian local government may be a good thing. It opens local government to the possibilities of a more inclusive way of working with its constituents. But it brings with it a degree of discomfort among peers and subordinates of both genders. Nothing will change significantly until this is acknowledged. Until the stereotyping of leaders as heroes is broken down, women and men will still have to struggle to do leadership differently (Sinclair 1998).

Some of the difficulties facing women at present include the difficulties that some women have with 'selling themselves', the fear that some women have of being token candidates and 'interview fodder' and the impact of holding a senior job on family life (Fox and Broussine 2001). Our own research highlights the implications of this perception, in that some female CEOs suggest that they believe they need to work harder and outperform their male colleagues to stay in the game.

Ragins et al. (1998) identified four significant strategies as identified by successful female

senior executives and Chief Executives for breaking the glass ceiling. These include:

- Exceeding performance expectations,
- Developing a style that male managers are comfortable with,
- Seeking out difficult and challenging projects and
- Having influential mentors.

The ongoing, coordinated commitment of senior management is a crucial element in creating change within the senior ranks (Mattis 2001). Senior management involvement creates the visibility as well as the impetus for promoting diversity programs (McCarty et al. 2005). Senior management needs to help others manage discomfort and challenge perceptions and stereotypes (Thomas 2001). Our research confirms these findings:

"Having strong networks, and opportunity to share issues and compare notes is the only way to survive"

"I have always had strong mentors, who have provided me with a challenging environment but I have toughened up as a result and learnt a great deal along the way"

Providing mentors, supportive managers and an expressed policy of assisting women managers will all go some way to changing the balance, as will acknowledgment of the complexity of leading in a local government authority for either gender. Our studies have shown that local government leaders experience conflict in the practice of management between the values they hold and the orthodox view of leadership. We conclude that leadership is not a set of tools to be learned or a set of personality traits that one is born with. It is a complex interaction between the leader and those who are led, involving both rational and irrational factors and it is linked with mythical archetypes, especially of father figures.

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