

**“Instinctively collaborative”:  
are women executives changing the cultures of senior management?**

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**Introduction**

The research project on which we draw in this paper investigated the experience of women in senior managerial positions, what supported and sustained them and the impact their presence had had on the management cultures. The project capitalized on the opportunity that in some Australian organizations there were a significant number and proportion of women at senior levels of management and many had been in these positions for a significant period of time.

The project had three major objectives:

- (1) To provide an in-depth analysis of the lived experience of women at senior executive levels.
- (2) To identify, document and evaluate extrinsic (work/family policies) and intrinsic (cultural, relational and deep-structural) factors that support and sustain women in senior managerial roles.
- (3) To investigate the extent to which the presence of senior women in substantial numbers has transformed managerial cultures in selected organizations.

The project involved organizations that were acknowledged leaders in the promotion of women to senior positions, namely five universities; twelve public service departments in five states and two major financial institutions. Senior management was defined by the use of the Equal Opportunity for Women in the Workplace Agency (previously the Affirmative Action Agency, AAA) categories of Tier 1, Tier 2 and Tier 3 managers <sup>[1]</sup> (AAA, 1995). The organizations had around 30% of senior positions occupied by women.

255 interviews were completed, with 165 women and 90 men. The breakdown across the three sectors was as follows:

Private Sector		Public Sector		Higher Education	
72		102		81	
Men	Women	Men	Women	Men	Women
21	51	35	67	34	47

Tapes of semi-structured interviews averaging 55 minutes were transcribed and analysed. Ely's (1995) study of the effect of women's representation at senior levels in organizations on their gender and gender identity, which used direct quotes from interviews to illustrate participant's perceptions and experiences, provided a useful precedent in developing a strategy for representing the data. Following this approach, direct quotes are similarly used to emphasise, highlight or illustrate a particular finding.

### **Critical Mass**

The notion of critical mass was a defining feature of this project. Critical mass theory is a concept derived from nuclear physics, describing a situation where a sufficient amount of an element such as uranium is collected to cause an 'unstoppable chain reaction', changes dramatically beyond what could be predicted from the original quantity. (Norris and Lovenduski, 2001) Kanter (1977) first argued that organizational change would occur only when women were present not as “tokens”, but in sufficient numbers to assert themselves and influence cultures and values. Ely (1995) suggested that although the presence of women was critical in attracting other women, the level at which they had been appointed and the power they exercised was more important than just having a balance of numbers between men and women.

Dahlerup (1988 296-7) considered that the notion of a critical act was 'better suited to the study of human behaviour...(than critical mass since it) is one which will change the position of the minority considerably and lead to further changes.' Examples of critical acts included the recruitment of women by other women and the introduction of quotas, legislation and institutions, as well as female role models in high-profile positions. These, she suggested (ibid: 287) were more likely to lead to change rather than 'any fixed number of women.' (Honour, Barry and Palnitkar 2003) Also influential to our thinking was what Martin, Knopoff and Beckman (1998: 433) referred to as a positional version of feminist theory, namely that “ if an organization has an unusual prevalence of women, this may make visible some phenomena that would surface less frequently and less obviously in a more conventional, male dominated setting” and that “a different set of emotional norms might emerge”.

(Martin et al 1998: 433)

These theorists remind us that in speaking about changes in culture or ‘the way things are done’ we must take due account of human agency. As Bacchi (1998:78) pointed out “cultures do not spring ready-made from above: people make cultures”. Was it possible for women in senior jobs to change cultures so that workplaces became more attractive particularly to women? It is well documented that culture change is extremely slow because it is so deeply embedded (Deal and Kennedy, 1982). Yet in this research it was widely believed by both women and men across all three sectors that managerial cultures were changing and this was at least in part due to the increasing number of women in senior roles.

### **Masculine and Feminine Managerial Styles**

It was evident from our data that both men and women held quite stereotypical views of male and female management styles.

People working long hours, people not having close relationships with people they work with, people handing orders down from on high. I guess the whole culture of the leader being removed from the people they work with... and I guess I wouldn’t want to essentialise that as the male management style but would possibly feel more comfortable calling it a more traditional style.

Female, Higher Education Tier 3, 50-59

This woman went on to describe her own management style as ‘Very much a servant-leader rather than somebody standing out’.

In an empirical study of differences between male and female management styles in a large airline, Rutherford (2001: 341) found that both males and females perceived that the management style of women was better than men’s in terms of people skills, fewer status concerns, and better managerial skills eg flexibility, multitasking, creativity. Yet she also found a “narrowing of the difference between men and women as women reached more senior positions”. Wajcman (1999) also found that women in senior positions behaved more like male managers.

In contrast to these research findings, both male and female managers in our research believed that, in general, women’s management styles were different to those of men. Women were seen by our interviewees to encourage greater collaboration, more consultative decision making processes and more collegial workplaces. They were described as encouraging to staff and colleagues and as showing more ‘emotional intelligence’. This supported the findings of Billing and Alvesson (2000) that women managers are often seen to be able to especially contribute to the following aspects of leadership: communication and co-operation, affiliation and attachment, power, and intimacy and nurturing. This need not essentialise women’s talents. Women have entered management in significant numbers at a time when characteristics often seen as ‘feminine’ such as collaboration, team working and consensus building have also come to be associated with more effective ways of managing. Women might not have influenced change, but benefited from changing views on what constitutes ‘good’ leadership. Meyerson and Ely (2003) suggested women “must be able to use their cultural identity differences – which give rise to different life experiences, knowledge and insights - to inform alternative views about their work and how best to accomplish it.”(138)

In the following quotation a senior male public servant described how he had seen his Department change as more women entered management positions:

In the past within the Department, going back before the last restructure about ten years ago, it was a very male-dominated organization, it was real mateship sort of stuff, hierarchical, very male-dominated, so the people side of it tended to fall away. Since we’ve turned that focus around, to be focused on the clients, it actually comes with a whole lot of different ways of not only operating but also decision-making and the way we go about decision-making. So I would say it’s taken a long time but I would say the distinction between male and female way of thinking and decision-making is probably quite close now whereas I think in the past it wasn’t. I have a fair number of senior managers who are female and we have a very collaborative way of working and that’s been a development in cultures. Broadly speaking we make decisions on a consultative basis, it’s not autocratic and I love that way of working. So for instance in the past when it was hierarchical and a bit male-dominated, people just did what they were told so we had a culture which was more about waiting for the orders to come down whereas now it’s consultative.

Male, Public Sector, Tier 2, 40-49

This man emphasised that there had been a convergence between the management styles of senior men and women and that both now displayed consultative and people-focused behaviours.

### **Collaboration**

Collaboration, ‘removing silos’, was stressed by many interviewees as a particularly effective way to achieve outcomes and women were seen to favour more collaborative ways of working. Managers felt that it increased the trust between team members, involved staff in deliberation and made decisions transparent:

I run a very collaborative Department. I very rarely make single-minded decisions, most of the decisions that are made here are done through my corporate executive and frequently are on a collaborative basis. It’s difficult for me to judge how this compares with other people. There are certainly some fairly autocratic rulers around. I don’t think I’m an autocratic ruler for the most part, occasionally I am. I think I’ve got a collaborative style and that’s probably at the more extreme end of collaborative although some people would probably feel differently. .... I know there are probably better words in management jargon that I never entirely trust. I think if you asked me what the single greatest goal is in terms of my style of management it would be collaboration.

Female, Public Sector, Tier 1, 40-49

Many of the women interviewed claimed that they were not interested in claiming individual achievement; that their interest lay in producing the best outcome. They preferred to share success and praise with their staff, and were more interested in encouraging and motivating staff than exercising their own power, a trait called “inclusive leadership” (Eveline, 2004). In the private sector interviewees reported that 'mavericks and bullies' who did not like collaborative styles of working were actually leaving the organizations, but some recognised that within financial organizations, there were still rewards for competitive behaviour:

The stated position rewards collaboration but in practice I think it’s variable. I think we try really hard but there are clear examples where we revert to type and reward competitiveness.

That’s I think very destructive.

Female, Private Sector, Tier 2, 40-49

### **Consultation and Consensus**

Billing (1994: 190) suggested: “The idea of a basic, essential contradiction between feminism and bureaucracy must be rejected. ... It seems to be possible to create ‘soft’ bureaucracies.” She argued that women were able to break down hierarchies and combine management with a range of consultative techniques which involved all.

Women indicated that they were interested in taking many opinions into account and deliberating decisions, rather than reaching them quickly. One woman reported that in her workplace handing out orders from 'on high' was not tolerated

Well I think my management approach is probably what I’ve seen described in management text as being more typically feminine or female and that is, we do a lot of consultation and I would rather put in a solution to a problem that is 80 to 90% of the desirable solution but has buy in from all the stakeholders than try and drive through something I think is 100% right when I know people aren’t buying into it.

Female, Higher Education, Tier 3, 50-59

One senior woman was convinced that women were more committed to reaching a consensus than men and were also focused on getting results:

They are just more willing to make decisions and reach consensus. They don’t try and bully, they don’t try and get aggressive, they try and work it through. I mean some women are aggressive but they don’t resort to that. ... Lots of men, their natural behaviour is to be aggressive and then apologise. There are some women like that but they are few and far between. Overwhelmingly they will try to work through an issue and keep working at it until they can resolve it. They won’t just grandstand and they won’t just dig in and they won’t just decide to be incredibly aggressive and hope that can get their way.

She gave a powerful example of a Commonwealth State Ministers meeting that had occurred the previous week, where ‘suddenly the gender balance (had) just completely tipped.’ In this particular area, the Commonwealth Minister, 3 State Ministers and several senior bureaucrats were now women. She explained that every previous meeting of this group that she had attended had ‘ended in

disaster’ since the Commonwealth and State representatives, mainly men, fought over funding. In this case ‘This ended in collaboration, in people agreeing they were going to sort a whole lot of mess out.’ The interviewee saw this exemplifying a female tendency to try to reach consensus and to achieve a result, rather than either blaming others for a lack of solutions or making stands on points of principle:

Suddenly it had changed. Suddenly it was just a different group of people sitting around a table. ... Suddenly people were in a ‘Let’s try and work this out’ kind of mode. And yet the policy parameters were actually harsher than where we were four years ago.

Female, Public Sector, Tier 1, 40-49

Women were described as having the appropriate skills to run successful consultations and to explore more areas before making decisions:

I tend to listen. I tend to reflect and then I tend to add my considered opinion. My male colleagues tend not to listen. They tend to outspoke each other and they shoot from the hip. There is no real considered response, it’s just what ever comes to them at that point in time.

Female, Private Sector, Tier 3, 30-39

### **Friendly and Collegial Working Environments**

In all three sectors women were seen to be particularly ‘good’ at encouraging a friendly environment, being an approachable leader, a culture where people could be honest with each other and a no-blame atmosphere. In one university, with a high proportion of women at management levels, interviewees ascribed the friendly atmosphere to their influence:

Anyone you speak to in this University who is a relatively recent arrival will almost certainly comment on that positive aspect of the place, that it is a pleasant place to work, that people do observe the basic levels of courtesy and friendliness.

Male, Higher Education, Tier 2, 50-59

In this university a senior administrator described how the other senior women had welcomed her arrival, sending flowers and greeting cards. In another university, a senior woman, recently appointed, described her disappointment when male colleagues did not introduce themselves at meetings. These two narratives demonstrated how women were more likely to place emphasis on

building an atmosphere of friendliness in the work environment.

There were expectations that women managers would be open and approachable. A woman CEO emphasised that support from her staff was important to her. But she did not want this to be unquestioning support. She appreciated honesty within her relationships with her staff and was prepared to take criticism of her performance:

I would have to say that one of my characteristics in fact is I probably use humour too much (laughs). But the executive that we have is a very good executive and they have a terrific sense of humour and they're self-effacing, they don't mind having jokes on themselves and I don't mind that either so... In fact we had this (in a previous position). I'd been in a policy area and after a year in they did a roast of me which was one of the funniest things I've ever seen in my whole life, I laughed for forty-five minutes solidly. So it's a great climate I think for the organization because they know I can laugh at myself and they laugh at themselves as well.

Female, Public Sector, Tier 1, 50-59

A senior man in the private sector emphasised how important the promotion of women had been in breaking down traditional male groupings:

It has broken down, the male clubbing. So that's so much less a feature of business in this organization than it used to be. Interestingly enough it's all about more transparent practices.

Male, Private Sector, Tier 2, 40-49

The research found that women discouraged competitive behaviours, seeing them as disruptive to work environments, and this could influence men:

Because there are more women around there is less testosterone every so often, so you tend to get less ranting and raving, less thumping of the desk, less screaming and shouting. So as an organization that sort of behaviour is just not tolerated. So that's a behavioural issue and whether that's because women are in the organization or not is a question mark. ... There is a correlation I would suggest.

Female, Private Sector, Tier 3, 40-49

### **Developing and Nurturing Staff**

Women were seen to be committed to developing staff. They were keen to encourage them to move their careers forward and to reward them for their efforts. One man saw this as part of the long-term impact of having women in senior positions:

Look having known the organization for a little while before the restructure when it was very male-dominated, I think that the women have made a difference in the organization. I think that the management style is different. As I say not exclusively but I do think that the majority of women managers that I've encountered in the Department have taken more of a developmental role and are a bit more of a mentoring partner in their role with staff, more engaging with staff than the kind of strict hierarchical administrative traditional model this Department had.

Male, Public Sector, Tier 2, 40-49

In universities most senior women interviewed emphasised the importance of assisting other staff and students to fulfil their potential:

I personally liked being Dean. About seventy percent of it is drudgery but what is very fulfilling about such a position is your ability to make things happen for other people, to see the potential that exists in activities and people and to be able to structure the kind of administrative systems and the resources so that you actually enable those things and spark them off.

Female, Higher Education, Tier 3, 50-59

Valuing staff included nurturing and encouraging them. One woman had gone to work a shift with some of her staff whose job was particularly difficult:

So I went and did a shift to watch one of the peak hours. ... So during the shift, chat, chat, chat, work, learn. And when I first arrived they wanted to know why I was there, what was I investigating and all these questions. I said 'I'm not. I'm here to learn from you. I can represent you better if I understand what your job is because I think often your job is poorly understood.' So during the shift, I walked around, talked to staff. And what I do, because

I've now done a number of them, is I use them to give positive feedback to the staff so I reflect back to them what I see of their practice. ...My aim is at the end of the shift they feel valued, they can understand what they do and that each shift I have given them feedback, I've said thank you. ... I think that's what I have to do and if they can see that I can model being strong and clear but also compassionate with the staff then I think that it's more likely I can then reflect back to them those attributes that we know we need for the future. I'm more likely I think to get success than by issuing yet another rule.

Female, Public Sector, Tier 3, 50-59

It was quite clear from this research that many women in senior management roles used the skills of nurturing, caring and being more compassionate. They stressed the need to know their staff as individuals, and to show some interest in the whole person. These managers claimed that an emotional investment in staff was repaid in loyalty, but acknowledged that this could be a 'double edged sword' if the personal problems of staff became an issue.

Females look at the small items, the small things. If you walk out and the receptionist is crying, I would say a male Dean would just continue walking, but a female Dean is going to notice it and come back later and find out why. Females seem to take more account of the people issues, and it's the people who keep this place going. So that's one small example of where I think there is a difference between a male and a female.

Female, Higher Education, Tier 3, 50-59

Concern for individuals did result in painful emotions for some women managers:

Obviously there's the other whole side which is managing people and retrenching people or managing people out, and I find that emotionally very draining. I hate to see people in pain and personally suffering and I've had to do more of that in the last 18 months than I've had to do for the rest of my career all added up. To see someone struggle, personally struggle and personally suffer. And everyone has a life outside so those people have families and things like that. It is a very difficult thing to and I have found that very hard, very hard. Although it doesn't mean I'd make a different decision or do anything differently, it certainly means that I wake up at 3 in the morning and lie awake for an hour thinking about it. Or spend all

Saturday thinking about it in the back of my mind.

Female, Private Sector, Tier 2, 40-49

Billing and Alvesson (2000) suggested that the discourse of female leadership showed that women managers were expected to be more caring, softer, more listening in comparison to men. As Thomas and Davis found in their study on female academics in British universities, “it was *expected* that (women) should ‘naturally’ take on pastoral work as this equated with familial discourses of ‘women’s work’” (2002:387). Women’s ‘emotional intelligence’ not only reinforced stereotypical views on women but also demanded from women emotional commitment that was time-demanding and exhausting.

## **Conclusion**

The findings of our research would seem to suggest that a critical mass of women at senior levels is changing management cultures. It is not suggested that there is a causal relationship between the presence of women in senior management and the changes in culture that participants believe have taken place. It can be seen, nevertheless, that establishing and maintaining cultures that have the attributes discussed flow from having more women at senior levels in the organization. Perhaps more importantly change seems more likely to take place when women and men are committed to embedding these characteristics in the culture of their organization.

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“They made a demonstrable difference”:

Page 14 of 14

[1]

Tier 3 Management level includes those managers who are responsible for the formulation of programs and policies and assume accountability for financial, employment and human resource aspects of a specific work area. Tier 2 Management level is responsible for leadership and strategic direction and supervises Tier 3 Managers. Tier 1 Management is defined as having ultimate control of the organization and usually there would only be one person in that category in each organization.



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