

Executive Women & Leadership Congress

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**"Women leaders in the new millennium:
has anything changed?"**

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Introduction

Thank you very much for the invitation to speak to you today at this women and leadership congress.

I feel privileged to be part of a programme featuring so many impressive leaders in their respective fields and I hope to contribute some useful commentary to what I feel is a topical and relevant area of discussion for all people, not just women.

My presentation today is titled, 'Women leaders in the new millennium: has anything changed?'

It's somewhat of a rhetorical question, of course, because obviously a lot has changed.

Perhaps the more pertinent question is not whether things have changed but whether things are changing fast enough.

To illustrate just how much things have changed, I'd like to quote from a 1963 Commonwealth of Australia minute paper seeking reasons to support the appointment of female trade commissioners.¹

It starts, 'In countries where publicity media is well developed, such as North America and England ... a relatively young attractive woman could operate with some effectiveness, in a subordinate capacity. If we had an important trade in women's clothing and accessories, a woman might promote this more effectively than a man. Even conceding these points, such an appointee would not stay young and attractive for ever and later on could well become a problem.'

The paper goes on to note a number of problems associated with appointing female trade commissioners, including:

- "If we engaged single graduates as trainees, most of them would probably marry within five years;
- A spinster lady can, and very often does, turn into something of a battleaxe with the passing years. A man usually mellows."

Amusing in their absurdity as such comments might seem to us today, it appears that one point noted in the paper remains an enduring issue for women. The paper goes on to say that:

"A man normally has his household run efficiently by his wife, who also looks after much of the entertaining. A woman Trade Commissioner would have all this on top of her normal work."

Well, managing a household on top of 'normal work' wouldn't be anything unusual to any working woman in this audience – I frequently struggle with such competing demands and I have an incredibly supportive husband!

¹ Commonwealth of Australia Minute Paper, 'Women Trade Commissioners?', 1963, http://www.aa.gov.au/about_us/find-of-month/find_march2005.html

Managing a paid job and our home lives is something contemporary women regularly grapple with and it is clear we still have a way to go in creating a working world that gives us the freedom we need to achieve balance in our lives.

Women as leaders

But before we consider more deeply the issues of gender representation and the choices facing today's women, let's reflect a little on women as leaders.

History is littered with examples of women who have exercised leadership at times when patriarchal societies excluded them from exerting their influence within the prevailing power structures.

Evidence also suggests that matriarchal societies have existed in the past, with a notable example still in existence today in south-east China.

And of course, we all know women who exercise leadership at a grassroots level in a multitude of domains every day.

So, there is no doubt that women have always been leaders.

I know for myself, some of the most inspirational people in my life have been my mum, my grandmother and my female relatives.

I come from a long line of strong-willed women who lived through really tough times and survived and prospered, and I think you learn a lot about the character and the resolve you need to succeed from those sorts of people.

A snapshot of some milestones in Australia's history demonstrates the pioneering spirit of many women in this country:

- One hundred and twenty-three years ago in 1883, Julia Bella Guerin, became the first woman to graduate from an Australian university.²
- In 1903 Women from all states of Australia - except Aboriginal women in some States - first exercised the right to vote in a Federal election and in 1921 Edith Cowan was the first woman elected to an Australian Parliament³
- In 1949, Dame Enid Lyons was the first woman to hold cabinet rank when she became Vice-President of the Executive Council in the Liberal-Country Party coalition ministry of Prime Minister Robert Gordon Menzies.⁴
- And in 1981, Shirley McKerrow was the first woman president of any political party, the National Party of Australia, and in 1983, Senator Susan Ryan became the first Labor woman Federal minister.⁵

² Australian Government Office for Women, 'Women in Australia – Milestones – 1871 – 1983'

³ Australian Electoral Commission, Electoral Milestones for Women: <http://www.visionpt.com.au/fitness-studios-sydney.htm>

⁴ Australian Electoral Commission, Electoral Milestones for Women: <http://www.visionpt.com.au/fitness-studios-sydney.htm>

⁵ Australian Government Office for Women, 'Women in Australia – Milestones – 1871 – 1983'

But how far have we really come in harnessing that spirit and giving it a voice in our contemporary society's institutionalised power structures?

Today, the 2006 Australian Census of Women in Leadership shows that:

- 129 directors' seats out of 1487 are filled by women
- that fifty per cent of ASX200 companies have at least one woman board director, almost unchanged from two years ago
- and that the number of female chief executives has not increased since 2003, with just six companies of the top 200 led by women.

What's more, the Forbes magazine recently published its 100 most powerful women list.

There were no Australians on the list, but New Zealand had its Prime Minister Helen Clark at number 20 and Theresa Gattung, head of Telecom New Zealand Group featured at number 49.

These statistics do not paint a pretty picture for Australian women aspiring to leadership roles and do raise questions about gender representation.

They also raise questions about Australia's future economic sustainability when we consider the skills shortages we face across a range of industries.

As a nation where resources are increasingly scarce and with an ageing population, we need to find ways to encourage gender representation as a solution, at least in part, to ensuring our society's future sustainability.

Diversity

Of course, gender representation is only one aspect of diversity.

Charles Darwin observed about the survival of the species, that the race goes not to the strongest or the smartest, "but the ones most adaptable to change."⁶

Like the survival of the species, it is also widely acknowledged that the companies that succeed are the ones that can learn and adapt the fastest.

Companies that reflect the populations they serve, that value collaboration and that embrace diversity of thought, style and culture are likely to be far more adaptable than those that don't.

For diversity to flourish, people need to observe people like themselves in leadership roles, both in their personal and professional lives.

They need to see themselves reflected in the senior management teams, and on the boards of the companies they work for.

⁶ Darwin, C 1859, *The origin of species*

Without such role models, it is unlikely that women and other marginalised groups of people, will aspire to positions that can create the kind of diversity we need at a leadership level.

I am really fortunate to come from a big, strong extended family with lots of strong female figures, and I think that has had a fairly big influence on me. I was always told that I could get where I wanted to be if I worked hard.

This early exposure to strong, capable women left me with an innate sense of my own worth and liberated me from constraints that might otherwise have limited my career success.

Not everyone enjoys the benefits of such positive role models in their formative years. And even those who do can still greatly benefit from role models and mentoring in a professional context.

In fact, the practice of mentoring is as old as Homer's *Odyssey*. When Odysseus left for Troy, he entrusted his son to the care of an old man named Mentor.⁷

Today, as in Homer's time, we all have people entrusted to our care – in a formal and informal sense – to whom we owe some responsibility to share our hard-won wisdom, and offer some encouragement.

Mentoring doesn't have to come from a person of the same gender. I know in my early career, most of the people who coached me and promoted me, and gave me the view that I could do whatever I aspired to, were men.

It wasn't that there weren't inspirational women around early on in my career, but a lot of them were so busy running their own careers that they didn't have a lot of time to spare.

And the other thing I would say is that some, but certainly not all of the women I encountered early on, had a little bit of an attitude of: 'I had to do it tough, I had to fight to get where I am and you are going to have to learn to fight just like I did'.

I am pleased to say that this is something that has changed quite dramatically over the course of my career.

Generational diversity

As women and men in leadership roles, we need to consider the impact we have on the people we work with and how profoundly we can influence the next generation of leaders,

If you look at the extensive research done on different generations, it offers some valuable insight into the motivations and behaviour of people.

Such insight will become increasingly important as we seek to retain talent and nurture leaders, especially if you consider that over the next few years, most organisations are likely to have up to four generations represented.

⁷ The *Odyssey*, Homer

In her study of leadership and generational diversity, Avril Henry found that each generation has its own values, and views of career, learning and development, family, sense of loyalty, and expectations of leaders and the work environment.⁸

For example, her studies into generation Y show that they are looking for inspiring leadership, an environment that respects skills, creativity and entrepreneurial flair, access to the most up-to-date technology and training, and a balance of work and life⁹.

Rather than fight the system, this generation of young people simply dismisses it, and if they cannot find the kind of company they want to work for, they build it themselves.

In fact, in Australia in 2004, more than 50 000 small to medium-sized enterprises were owned and run by Gen Y.¹⁰

Personally, it is very important for me to work in an environment where leadership and diversity are promoted and where I am able to develop myself as a leader through the guidance of people around me.

I know our CEO at Telstra, Sol Trujillo, is committed to diversity. In fact, there had never been a woman on Telstra's senior leadership team until Sol arrived, and he's since appointed four including me.

Sol is one of those leaders who is a real natural.

One of the things I really appreciate about him is his generosity in sharing his knowledge and experience, and the amount of time we spend in senior leadership team meetings talking about leadership and the next generation of leaders for the company.

We discuss leadership in the broadest sense looking at how we can grow our leaders, and the proper notion of succession planning that says that it's not all about the individual, but focuses on what is best for the company collectively to make sure it can continue to prosper.

At Telstra, we recognise that this will become even more important as we see the impacts of the ageing population and like every other modern company compete for scarce labour resources.

Which brings me back to diversity and why promoting it is good for business.

Companies need people from different backgrounds, different genders, different generations and people with different life experiences. This kind of diversity brings creativity, innovation, and fresh thinking.

⁸ Leadership & Generational Diversity, Avril Henry, 2005

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¹⁰ Leadership & Generational Diversity, Avril Henry, 2005

While it is a real temptation to surround yourself with people just like you – because it's safe and comfortable – it actually doesn't create a sustainable foundation for the future.

Beyond diversity to the question of choice

So, why are there so few women in positions of leadership in Australia's corporate world?

In a feature in the Sydney Morning Herald recently, Elisabeth Sexton questioned the dearth of women at the top in Australia's institutions of power.¹¹

I think we'd all acknowledge any disparity in representation is not due to a lack of talent or skilled women entering the workforce.

We know that in terms of tertiary education representation and performance, females consistently outnumber and outperform males.

Yet as women, we often find ourselves making choices about our working lives in a world of work created by men for men, at a time when women were mainly 'bit players' on the fringe of the working world.

We are no longer 'bit players', but the world of work still clings to its historical constraints that are only now starting to be broken down as more family-friendly policies are introduced by some employers.

But such employers are not universal and people – especially women – still face tough choices in terms of managing their careers and taking care of their families.

Our careers are not something we think about in isolation to our broader lives.

We all have partners, children, extended family, and personal pursuits that are as important – in some cases perhaps more important – than career advancement on its own.

Balancing these competing priorities is something we all grapple with and what we decide is so often dictated by other imperatives such as financial considerations, the nature of our work, family responsibilities, and our expectations in terms of standards of living.

All of these factors come into play and can influence the trajectories of our working lives.

It's interesting to look at the choices some influential Australian women have made, most recently, Natasha Stott Despoja's decision to quit politics in favour of spending more time with her family.

I guess the irony for me is that I never really thought of myself as being the ambitious career type.

¹¹ Sydney Morning Herald, "Where have all Australia's female firebrands gone?" 28-29 October, pp27

If my life had turned out differently, I would have been happy to stay at home and raise my family.

I made pragmatic decisions about what I wanted to do based on what I was interested in and what was good for our family unit.

Over time we made decisions as a family which found me pursuing my career more fully than my husband.

I certainly appreciate how fortunate I am that my husband and I have been able to come to an arrangement that allows us to manage the raising of our children and for me to develop my career.

So being a leader in my field is something I take very seriously and I recognise that with the opportunities I have been given come responsibilities.

I know it isn't always possible for other women to make the same choices I have been able to make.

This is why we have to continue to agitate for change: changes in our world of work that will allow more men and women to balance a satisfying personal life with professional fulfilment.

Leadership style in action

So, having achieved a measure of success and found myself in a position of leadership, what observations would I make about leadership style?

Firstly, I believe that while you might need an understanding of the theory to raise your awareness, the world is full of real people who don't always fit into 'boxes'.

I like the practical reality of the real world and I put more faith in my emotional intelligence which is why I do a lot of things on instinct.

Secondly, I would say you must be yourself. I've always been absolutely adamant about being true to myself. I don't want to be 'spun'.

Early on in my career, I found that the women who aspired to senior roles had to be tougher than the blokes and this was the image they portrayed. Thankfully, I think this is a thing of the past.

Thirdly, integrity is really important to me.

I've always strived for the highest ethical standards in the way that I do business and I've found that most people recognise that and respond accordingly.

Fourthly, I believe a collaborative approach is far more powerful than a hierarchical one.

I'm not a believer in being too authoritarian. Two heads are better than one.

I prefer to speak directly with the person who knows the stuff and has done the work. It's the reason why I insist that wherever possible the person who does the work, is the one who presents it.

Finally, it's also very important to establish your credibility and communicate clearly. To influence people, you must have your facts and data in order. And by being direct and open, people tend to trust you. I like to tell it like it is.

Conclusion

So, to return to where I began with the question, 'women leaders in the new millennium: has anything changed?'

Well, as the immortal words documented in the 1963 minute paper of the Commonwealth of Australia demonstrate, yes, much has changed. Imagine the reaction to someone writing that today!

But more will need to change if all people – including women – are to have the opportunity to fulfil their potential as leaders in our society.

Women are almost equally represented in higher education but still vastly over represented in the lowest paid vocations.

With the ageing of the population and shrinking numbers of workers, it will become increasingly important for companies to provide choice to their employees.

It is through offering people choice that companies will retain talent and develop their leaders of the future.

And it is within a world of work that universally promotes diversity and choice that I believe we can create a new generation of leaders; a generation who will not ask the question, 'women leaders in the new millennium: has anything changed?', but will wonder why we ever needed to ask such a question at all.