

Women need to understand the corporate 'game'

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By Mark Toner and Gunilla Burrowes

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There are at least five excellent reasons for having much greater gender balance in professions like engineering where women continue to be disadvantaged in male-dominated organisations:

- equity (equal rights for women);
- excellence (using the most talented people to achieve quality);
- efficacy (accessing all available pools of talent);
- efficiency (not wasting the talents of educated women); and
- personality-type balance (more values-based members and less impersonal, analytical types).

There is an additional reason for businesses to have women at senior management and board levels – such organisations typically produce improved financial results. This is therefore a governance issue for companies, something that most CEOs and board members are yet to realise.

But increasing the number of women attracted to engineering and science is just the start of the process. Once women are trained and working within these professions, they are being challenged by workplace cultures and practices which in some cases favour men, alienate women and cause women to leave their profession.

To simply argue that corporate cultures need to change is certainly correct in principle but does not bring about the necessary changes.

The aim of our paper was to present to women a new approach to enhancing their career prospects, allowing women to have better career options and more control over their professional lives. This does not mean they should strive to get to the highest levels of an organisation – rather, their aim should be to use their skills and experience to get to a position and to do the type of work that gives them the most satisfaction and an appropriate return on their efforts.

With this approach, more women will be able to do more appropriate and satisfying work and reach higher levels of authority in their organisations, which by itself will bring about changes beneficial to the organisation. Some of

In Australia and elsewhere, women continue to be disadvantaged in male-dominated organisations. Engineering and some parts of science remain heavily male-dominated, and so female engineers and scientists will invariably work for organisations run by men, where some cultures and practices may disadvantage them in their careers. This was the subject of a paper the authors presented to several hundred women and several men at the 15th International Conference for Women Engineers and Scientists (ICWES15), held in Adelaide last year. The conference, sponsored by Engineers Australia's National Committee for Women in Engineering and the International Network for Women Engineers and Scientists, attracted more than 500 attendees.

these women will then proactively introduce further change.

A secondary aim of the paper was to change the attitudes and behaviours of those men (and women) who deliberately or unwittingly make life difficult for female employees.

Problems and solutions

The problems many women face in business, and more particularly in engineering, have been well documented and include poor career prospects, far too much discrimination, harassment and bullying, and large pay gaps.

As an example of their poor career prospects, women comprise 53 per cent of all professionals in Australia but in the ASX200, women comprise only 14 per cent of board directors, three per cent of CEOs and 10 per cent of executive managers.

In the ASX500, only 9.5 per cent of directors are women and 267 (53 per cent) of these top 500 listed companies have no women on their boards at all. Reasons for these problems are well known, a major one being overt and covert gender bias (both conscious and unconscious), but progress in rectifying these problems has been unacceptably slow.

At the conference, Dr Cathy Foley PSM FTSE, then President of Science and Technology Australia (formerly FASTS), pointed out in a keynote speech that, at current rates, it will take a further 150 years for us to achieve gender equity in Australia.

The solution to these problems is first to attract and retain more women in engineering, the 'hard' sciences and in business generally and, second, to change the culture of the engineering profession and business to value gender diversity.

All employees are playing a corporate game, whether they realise it or not, and women can enhance their career prospects by understanding the game. It is a game because all employees are working to rules and boundaries set by their organisations and from a career point of view there are winners and losers.

To call it a game is not to trivialise its importance – it is a very serious game spanning a large proportion of our lifetime. Employees can enhance their careers by observing the way the game is played, understanding the rules (both written and unwritten) and then deciding if, and how much, they want to be willing participants.

As a prerequisite, female employees need to understand that, in general, men and women can differ in key areas like decision-making, communication style, assertiveness, competitiveness and career management, and they therefore may need to develop some new skills if they decide to play in the men's game.

The World Economic Forum's finding in 2010 that the greatest barrier to women rising to senior positions in engineering and construction world-wide is the prevalence of masculine and patriarchal corporate cultures is testament to the game being a male one, run by male managers. Because it is a male game, it is harder for women to recognise than for men, and even if they do recognise it, it is even harder for them to participate in it.

Playing the game

In order to recognise the game and participate in it, all employees, especially women, need to 'read' the game being played and understand a number of relevant issues. To read the game, an employee needs to observe and decide inter alia:

- what are the rules (written and unwritten) of the game;
- who are the people with power (official and unofficial);
- what are all the relevant relationships;
- which men are sexist or uncomfortable with women;
- what is the culture of the organisation, and is there any gender bias (systemic or personal); and
- how are employees recognised and rewarded by management, and who is likely to be promoted?

With the ability to read the game, an employee has then to decide how much she/he wishes to play it. To play it, the employee may need to both gain new insights into how the organisation actually runs and to develop new skills to effectively participate in the game. For example, good work and conscientious behaviour are by themselves generally insufficient for promotion, a fact not widely un-

derstood by many employees.

A far more important factor is the qualities management is really looking for in assessing candidates for promotion. Another insight for an employee is that 'managing upwards' and being visible to middle and senior management are important for career development.

With the right skills, women can recognise the corporate game that is typically played in male-dominated organisations and give themselves the option of whether to engage in the game and if so, how much to play it, to advance their careers.

We are certainly not saying that women should play the game, conform to male organisational cultures or act like men. We do believe, however, that women need to



Gunilla Burrowes and Mark Toner at ICWES15 with Dr Maria Jesus Prieto-Laffargue, President of the World Federation of Engineering Organisations (centre).

understand their working environment so they can make a better decision about their participation in the game and its effect on their careers.

However, the real issue is how the game can be changed to generate gender-neutral workplace cultures and true gender equity across organisations. Achievement of increased gender equity in Australia and elsewhere will only happen when progressive-minded men (and women) have the knowledge, power and commitment to effect such major change. ◀

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He is a former CEO of Kvaerner (now Jacobs) E&C Australia which was a successful but very male-dominated engineering and construction company. He and GUNILLA BURROWES run a gender consulting business, Gender Matters. Ms Burrowes is an electrical engineer with a background in both academia and industry. She has extensive experience with gender issues in engineering and helped initiate Engineers Australia's theme year 2007: The Year of Women in Engineering. Ms Burrowes has been Division President and Councillor of Engineers Australia and is currently Deputy Chair of Engineers Media. She has worked in various industry sectors, has a number of board positions and chairs an angel investment group.