Male Champions of Gender Equity Change

Report prepared by:

Professor Isabel Metz
Melbourne Business School

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I thank all the interviewees for so generously giving up their time and for sharing their experiences. Without the participation of the champions of change this study would not have been possible.
Why conduct this research?

‘No women, no work: Male Champions of Change CEOs tell suppliers to advance women or lose orders’

Fiona Smith, BRW, Leadership Section, 7 November 2013

Australia lags other similar countries in work opportunities for women and in the gender pay gap (Bellhouse, Haussmann, Tyson & Zahid, 2015). Further, many Australian organisations invest lots of resources in increasing gender diversity but miss out on its potential benefits at management and senior management levels, as evidenced by women’s continued under-representation in leadership positions (WGEA, 2016a) and the stagnant gender pay gap (WGEA, 2016b). Yet, North American and European cases exist of standout successes, such as IBM, Sodexo and Deloitte, which is mostly attributed to the commitment of succeeding CEOs to gender diversity. Thus, this project set out to investigate why some CEOs join to champion gender diversity, and how and why a group approach to gender equity in leadership might work as an effective change strategy.

The current environment

The first ‘Male Champions of Change’ (MCC) group was established in 2010 to ensure the issue of women’s representation in leadership was at the forefront of the national agenda (AHRC, https://www.humanrights.gov.au/male-champions-change-raise-bar-gender-reporting). The group’s chair is Ms Elizabeth Broderick who, together with a small group of highly influential colleagues, recognised male leaders as an under-utilised resource in changing the women in leadership status quo. In the years following its formation, these leaders used their personal and collective influence to introduce initiatives such as ‘No women, no work’ (see quote above). This group is known as the national MCC or just MCC.

Inspired by the national group, similar groups have subsequently formed in other Australian States (e.g., South Australia’s ‘SA Chiefs for Gender Equity’ and Queensland’s QLD Male Champions of Change) and in specific industries or professions (e.g., Property). Contrary to the usual change efforts that focus on women (e.g., development opportunities for women in traditionally male dominated jobs and professions) or are driven mostly by women (e.g., women’s professional networks), these coalitions are intended to leverage the role male leaders can play as change agents to advocate for and initiate workplace gender equity change.

Methodology

Sustained increased gender diversity in organisations is often the result of a transformational organisational change initiative (as challenging as, and similar in scale to, cultural change). As such, successful gender diversity change requires unwavering commitment and leadership from the CEO and her/his executive team for a long period of time. Thus, I drew on diversity management and organisational change theories to understand the factors that motivate influential leaders to join male coalitions for gender equity change. Although some coalitions of gender equity in leadership are gender mixed, the focus of this study is on male-only coalitions. Male CEO’s commitment (as opposed to female CEO’s) may be particularly effective in initiating and sustaining gender equity change, because of the perceived absence of self-interest and credibility in doing so.

I conducted interviews with over 40 members of coalitions for gender equity in leadership in five States (NSW, Vic, SA, WA and Qld) from April 2015 to April 2016. I also reviewed the literature, media releases, and websites of MCC groups.

Motives for Joining

In this study, interviewees mentioned a variety of reasons for joining groups that advocate for gender equity in leadership, such as personal values and external factors. Those motives led me to identify three categories of individuals based on their stances to change: the active supporter; the bystander; and the active resistor of change. The mix of supporters, bystanders and resistors in a group then determines how effective and sustainable the group is likely to be. For example, a group comprising more supporters than resistors of change is more likely to be effective at introducing change than a group comprising mostly resistors. This broad model of who is likely to join coalitions for gender equity is depicted in Figure 1. The model helps explain the practical implications of member mix for the sustainability of the group.

The Supporter

Personal factors are more likely than external ones to stoke an individual’s passion for gender equity issues. The main personal factors mentioned by the interviewees were values and personal experiences.

Personal values appear to influence male leaders’ interest in diversity management. For example, Prime and Moss-Racusin (2009) studied male champions of gender equity in the US and found that they were characterised by concern for others and a strong sense of fair play. In fact, a strong sense of fair play was the most significant predictor of whether or not men (not just CEOs) became gender equity champions. Similarly, almost a third of the interviewees were very passionate about gender equity and welcomed the opportunity to be in a group of like-minded individuals. Over 40% specifically mentioned value driven motives for joining coalitions or groups for change.

“I do believe in fairness and fairness is an integral value for me…” (Interviewee #8)

“…the fact that there is not equality of opportunity, is just wrong from a moral point of view.” (Interviewee #10)

An individual’s values partly come from his/her personal experience. In this study, I found a range of personal experiences motivated CEOs to champion gender diversity in their organisations and to join advocacy groups for gender equity in leadership; these include having experienced first-hand, or vicariously through their partners, exclusion or discrimination, and having female offspring.

“I come from a background that had the gender discrimination high on the list….I grew up in all those sexist, racist, sectarian, …Homophobic, all that stuff, during my childhood…” (Interviewee #19)

“I have a wife and daughter, and I could see the struggle that my wife had gone through and I could see the struggle that my daughter was going through, and so there was an emotional resonance.” (Interviewee #10)

Personal values and experiences influence a CEO’s level of passion for the issue of gender equity. Thus, individuals who are principally motivated by personal factors to champion gender equity change are also very passionate and likely to be active supporters for change in their own organisations. They are also the most willing to be public advocates by joining coalitions for gender equity change.
Figure 1 – Model of Who Joins Male Groups for Gender Equity Change

**Possible motives for joining**

- **PERSONAL (illustrative)**
  - Personal experience with discrimination
  - Offspring
  - Values and attitudes

- **EXTERNAL (illustrative)**
  - Stakeholders
  - Government legislation
  - Institutional pressure

- **ULTERIOR PERSONAL (illustrative)**
  - Group and personal status
  - Personal visibility
  - ‘Window dressing’

**Member type**

- **Supporter**
- **Bystander**
- **Sceptical bystander and resistor**

**Groups of male champions for gender equity**

The Bystander

However, many influential male leaders with similar personal experiences and values as the supporter are ‘bystanders’. In fact, the change literature is clear that a large proportion of the individuals are ‘bystanders’ who neither actively resist nor actively support a change. In the case of gender equity in leadership, this apathy may be due to belief that gender inequities are a thing of the past (Spoor & Schmitt, 2011), gender fatigue (Metz & Kulik, 2014), insufficiently developed understanding of the business case for gender diversity (Prime & Moss-Racusin, 2009) or fear of disapproval from male peers if one takes on the gender equity cause (Prime & Moss-Racusin, 2009). However, there is increased social awareness and expectations, as well as government and regulatory focus on the gender equality of boards of directors, heads of companies, and executives. Thus, bystanders are more likely than those in the active supporter category to join male groups for gender equity change because of external factors, such as government, institutional and stakeholder pressures for more gender balanced organisations.

“ASX targets influence people I know, but I think it's part of this broader feeling that stakeholder expectations are moving and it's time to give this some serious thought” (Interviewee #6)

“I think the fact that a number of our clients are pushing this agenda is very helpful as well. So we have clients who would say that they expect to see on a pitch team that’s pitching for a piece of work an appropriate gender mix….So you turn up with all men forget it, you're knocked out.” (Interviewee #15)

Bystanders are also likely to join groups of peers because they have heard about the business case for gender diversity. For example, over two thirds of the interviewees explicitly stated that they joined a group because they want more information on the business case for gender diversity or believe in the business case. Further, approximately 70% stated that they joined the group to share their organisations’ experiences and to learn in a ‘safe’ environment, for the benefit of their organisations and/or to potentially leave a gender diversity legacy of their tenure.

“I had identified it as an issue within the firm… I wanted to make a priority… I really needed help to understand how to go about fixing the issue as a CEO and so I thought [this] would be a terrific group to join to learn from the other CEOs about how they went about change in their own organisations.” (Interviewee #14)

“… being a CEO is quite … a lonely spot … you don’t have many peers and so I saw it as a great opportunity to talk to other men in similar positions of authority …. and to learn from them what they were doing so that I could if it had application apply it, apply their initiatives in the [organisation].” (Interviewee #18)

“when I leave, gender diversity … should already be engrained, like safety, in the culture of the organisation…got to have it engrained in the organisation so that …whether I’m here or not… the focus on gender diversity should stay …” (Interviewee #4)

In sum, in line with the change literature, the majority of the interviewees could be categorised as ‘bystanders’; male CEOs who do not oppose gender equity change and who are willing to actively support it if part of a group of like-minded individuals. Once in a group, the journeys of the bystander male champions of gender equity change reflect transitions from bystander to supporter.
The Resistor

The individual least likely to champion gender equity is the ‘resistor’: the individual who actively or passively resists change. Resisters might, for example, be sceptical of diversity benefits or attribute the absence of women in leadership to factors seemingly outside their control such as the small pool of female candidates to choose from.

None of the interviewees could be categorised as ‘resisters’, even though some admitted to having been unaware of a gender equity issue or initially sceptical about joining a group of influential men advocating for gender equity.

“If I go back to before 2002 … I was not even aware of the issue at all” (Interviewee #9)

“I was sceptical to start with and I thought … if I’m ever in [the] role I wouldn’t bother going onto [the group]. … a male who’s never had to deal with that stuff, it’s an educational thing as much as anything else.” (Interviewee #15)

Most people (including CEOs) resist or are ambivalent about change. Resistance mostly comes from individuals who do not understand the reasons for change, and/or benefit from the status quo and fear loss of status and privilege. The issue of women’s inequity in leadership, and some proposed solutions (e.g., targets; quotas), often evoke strong emotions and impulsive responses. Increases in the representation of women, particularly at coveted leadership levels (e.g., executive and Board of Directors) can threaten the majority and generate backlash. In very male-dominated industries, such as construction, champions may encounter particularly strong opposition to change. Aurizon’s CEO, Lance Hockridge, started a gender diversity initiative in 2011. He described the hostile reception he subsequently received at worksites: “It was like I had a target on my back’ (Sier, 2014). Thus, many leaders may be reluctant to champion gender diversity change efforts alone or at all. Some, however, might do so as part of a collective or peer group.

“… when I was dealing very publicly with that issue … the level of support provided by the Male Champions of Change at an individual level was just fantastic… that was terrifically affirming for me…. you’re not standing by yourself anymore” (Interviewee #18)

“these guys had real status in the business community. So, for them to stand up and say ‘I’m standing for this topic’, that made other CEOs stand, look around and they were peer pressure. ‘If those guys are doing it I have to do it too’. And [the group] was always set up to be about peer pressure.” (Interviewee #7)

It’s possible that influential male leaders who remain resisters or sceptics of change after joining a group for gender equity are the same people who would decline to participate in this kind of research. However, a more likely explanation is that resisters would not join a group for gender equity in leadership or exit the group soon after joining. As one interviewee explained, resisters and sceptics would be likely to voluntarily leave the group because they would find it a waste of their (scarce) time. So, current members advise potential members:

“be very clear about why you want to be in this group. If you are in this group for the networking, or whatever that is, then don’t bother. There are more fruitful and less frustrating ways of doing that” (Interviewee #8)

Gender equity change is a difficult and unpopular cause as evidenced by the resources that organisations have expended over the years to become more gender balanced, often with little success, and by the commonly held view among some that gender equity initiatives amount to discrimination in favour of women. So, what was it that influential leaders felt groups could achieve beyond what they could as individuals?

Champion Group Efficacy

We know from the literature that peer groups provide inter-personal instrumental and socio-emotional support necessary to engage in difficult or unpopular causes. In the case of the MCC coalitions, these groups are regarded by almost all interviewees as sources of learning and information. This strong driver for joining peer groups stems from our tendency to perceive members of our own social identity group as more trustworthy, capable and credible than non-members. Coalitions of male leaders also provide a ‘safe’ space for influential men who are supporters of, or ambivalent about, gender equity in organisations to obtain information from members of their social identity group of CEO, Managing Director or Chair without risk of rejection or embarrassment. Thus, groups appeal as spaces to brainstorm solutions to complex problems. In addition, many interviewees believe that they have the opportunity to create bigger, more sustainable legacies if part of a group, because groups have more potential for ripple effects.

“The first thing was recognising that we weren’t alone, so that we were on a journey and … we all had to find our own way forward. But we could learn from one another…. it gave us leverage and were able to go faster. But it also [helps] inside the [organisation] by saying ‘Well here we are, we’re doing this jointly with [X firm] or doing this jointly with [Y firm] and so it just gave, it gives a greater sense of momentum.” (Interviewee #2)

“Its main value has been it’s a pretty high trust environment so people do speak pretty openly; … we don’t see ourselves as competitors for this purpose. And people are openly sharing ideas for how to do better and so challenges of what’s hard in a real peer environment” (Interviewee #6)

Thus, it appears that individuals (‘supporters’ and ‘bystanders’ alike) join groups first and foremost in the hope that experience sharing and idea generation will break the impasse on gender equity change in their organisations. A strong, but secondary, motive is the belief that, as a group of high profile leaders, they can influence change in others by example and by presenting a united stance on the gender equity in leadership issue. As two interviewees succinctly stated:

“…what attracted me to the group was just the calibre of people and also externally just observing some of the successes that some of them in particular had achieved … to me it was the group in the marketplace that had the ability to affect the most change, because of the calibre of the people that were in the group.” (Interviewee #14)

“I actually believe there’s a lot of people out there, a lot of males out there who would like to help but haven’t, don’t quite know how to do it…. I think there’s a legitimacy factor [in being in an advocacy group of influential people]” (Interviewee #1).

Based on publicly available information, much of this rationale characterises the first (national) ‘Male Champions of Change’ group. The group has enjoyed extensive media coverage in Australia and overseas highlighting its elite composition and social purpose, its goals, and its initiatives. As a result, new members have joined (or are keen to join) the original ‘Male Champions of Change’ group over time.

“…it does carry profile, it is something that I can assume most men in CEO roles would like to be part of, it gives me leverage and were able to go faster. But it also [helps] inside the [organisation] by saying “Well here we are, we’re doing this jointly with [X firm] or doing this jointly with [Y firm] and so it just gave, it gives a greater sense of momentum.” (Interviewee #2)

The ease with which the national MCC group attracts new members reflects its allure to the bystander male leader who prefers to champion gender equity change in the psychological safety of a male peer group. In addition, male coalitions for gender equity change appeal to the ‘supporter’ leader as a springboard for action. For example, collectively the national MCC members have started disrupting the status quo by introducing initiatives such as the ‘non women, no work’ and the panel pledge. The panel pledge is an undertaking by the national members to ask event organisers about the gender composition of their panels before accepting invitations to participate as panellists. In doing so collectively, the male champions force event organisers to consciously seek talented men and women for speaking events, thus also giving women the opportunity to become visible as leaders. Few champions would have the same ability to change corporate event practice if they acted in isolation.

A question on the minds of some, however, is how can these groups be sustainable and effective as a change strategy?

“… there is a real danger … which I think we saw in Australia after the introduction of the affirmative action, … there was a spike, … and then it just plateaued and people think it’s done” (Interviewee #2)
Champion Group Challenges

Group composition and dynamics influence group outcomes and viability. As a rule, not all groups are effective and the MCC groups are no exception to this rule. Some interviewees expressed their disappointment at their groups’ progress.

“I think there’s a bit of a level of frustration with the group; we haven’t kicked enough goals… I don’t think we’ve had enough focus on that…” (Interviewee #3)

“I’m slightly more cynical about it now because I invested a lot of time … with this group and I didn’t get a lot of return, so personally I was a bit jaded… I would love to give more to the group than to get out of the group, because for me the group was always about how do we take the voices of these very powerful people and amplify them and … leverage the platform… Everybody is tired of the diversity dialogue to be honest… So from that standpoint I don’t think we are going to anything else but the challenge… That’s where having a structure and having somebody be the catalyst and just ensuring that were holding people to account and holding their feet to the fire I think would make a big difference, and that’s what’s been missing… we’ve all gone back to our busy lives and nobody is asking the question how is this working for you.” (Interviewee #8)

“I think we haven’t had nearly as much momentum as we could have or should have and I think it’s primarily because the people involved have been so busy that coordinating diaries and getting them all together at the right time has been a real frustration… consequently we’ve been making headway far more slowly than I would really have liked.” (Interviewee #17)

Thus, knowing why powerful individuals join groups for gender equity should be a key selection criterion of group membership. For groups with the primary purpose to keep gender inequity in leadership at the forefront of the national agenda, having all supporters or a healthy mix of supporters and bystanders is desirable to maintain issue commitment over a long period of time. In contrast, having a sizable proportion of sceptical bystanders and resistors might be content to do nothing, including regularly failing to attend meetings. Their passivity, lack of co-operation and poor attendance, however, create tensions and, in extreme cases, lead to high membership turnover and threaten group viability. Thus, group member selection criteria should include scrutiny of candidate’s sympathy or advocacy for, or demonstrable action on, gender equity to ensure group and issue sustainability. However, no formal criteria for membership exist for most groups yet. Further, informal member selection / acceptance criteria vary across groups. These informal criteria also vary in interpretation and application across members of the same group. That is, in the absence of explicit criteria, different individual-based understandings arise of who might constitute a suitable MCC. For example, some mentioned the importance of a CEO’s reputation on this issue, others spoke of the need to cover the major industries (that drive the economy) in a particular State, and yet others thought the organisation (e.g., its size) mattered more than the individual (e.g., CEO or Chairperson).

“they had shown some leadership in this area” (Interviewee #10)

“What are the biggest sectors here… and I have a responsibility therefore to deal with my industry… the whole concept was let’s see if we can cover the majority of the sectors … because they all have… different challenges …” (Interviewee #4)

“Generally it’s been more about the company than about the person, though in the sense of Company X wants to join, is that too many, is it the right sort of company, versus X wants to join do we have a view on him?” (Interviewee #6)
Conclusion

This project set out to investigate why some CEOs join groups to champion gender diversity and how such a group approach to gender equity in leadership might work as an effective change strategy. I found that influential male leaders join groups for gender equity in leadership for a mix of personal and external reasons. However, passion for this issue is more likely to derive from personal experiences than from external factors. Male champions of change who are passionate about gender equity are likely to be (and have always been) active supporters of change. The remaining male champions of change are (or were initially) bystanders (or passive supporters) of gender equity in leadership. The interviews demonstrate that many bystanders become quite passionate about gender equity after joining, as their understanding of the issue increases. As passion is needed to maintain change efforts over a long period of time, the most effective groups will be those with a majority of ‘supporters’ and ‘bystanders’ who transition to becoming active supporters of gender equity.

Further, for these groups to be effective vehicles of gender equity change in leadership in Australia, each current and future member needs to be (or needs to be open to becoming) passionate about this issue. ‘Passion’ includes committing time and financial resources, being prepared to be a public advocate, and understanding that this is a long-term commitment with lots of upside but also plenty of downside.

“I had a history of being disappointed that talented women weren’t staying the course and it was only later when I got to the Male Champions I understood the reasons why women were leaving me.” (Interviewee #12)

“My fear is that if we don’t make significant progress, then there’ll be a backlash, and they’ll go I told you so, this is just puffery and they’ve not made progress and we should out them.” (Interviewee #10)

“...you’re more likely to get criticised than you are to get praised...I don’t think I had a full appreciation of that until I sat in the seat myself and watched them in these male champions meetings... it takes courage...” (Interviewee #11)

Nevertheless, members of effective groups recounted personal stories of success (see Box of illustrative stories). As a coalition of male champions of gender equity in leadership, one interviewee summed up his group’s achievement as follows:

“Whenever we had suggestions, we all [implemented] them. We were A type personalities. We said what we thought... As a group, I think we made it really difficult for any CEO not to talk about gender advancement... we started a National conversation.” (Interviewee #7)
Further Reading

If you would like to read some of my own research on gender in organizations, I refer you to:


If you would like to learn more about (1) why it is important for CEOs to commit to gender equity change, (2) how to successfully lead change, or (3) effective groups, I recommend the following sources:


References cited in text
