



THE LEADERSHIP CONTEXT

5 ways to increase your female CEO Talent Pipeline

Inspired by a conversation with Susan Metcalf, CEO of
Chief Executive Women

By: Pod O'Sullivan



“It will take 65 years or until 2086 before women make up 40% of line roles in executive leadership teams, based on CEW Census trends from the last five years.”

CEW Census report 2021

The lack of female representation in executive leadership positions in Australia (or internationally) is not a new conversation. But it persists, signalling the complexity of the issue. This is not a straight-forward conversation with simplistic issues and even more simple solutions. Rather, this is a tapestry of occurrences and outcomes at social and business levels. A natural reaction is to be overwhelmed and frustrated with the sense of the inability to affect change. But in a recent [Leadership Diet Podcast](#) with Susan Metcalf from Chief Executive Women, the conversation forced me to consider what was something that can be actioned now, by the people who listen to this podcast? Here are five ideas.

[Chief Executive Women \(CEW\)](#) has 640 members who hold leading roles in Australia’s largest private and public organisations. Through advocacy, research, targeted programs and scholarships, they help to remove the barriers to women’s progression and ensure equal opportunity for prosperity. Through the conversation with Susan, one area that is vital to ensure this is to make sure there are enough women in the actual talent pool from which CEOs are drawn. It is possible but it will take effort.

Australian women [are the most educated](#) in the world, according to Nabila Ahmed from Bloomberg, and have more women graduating from university than men. Access to education and intellectual capacity is not in question. Yet, women make up a quarter (26%) of roles on Executive Leadership Teams and there are only 18 women CEOs in the top 300 ASX-listed companies (6.2%).

There is a gap here that can be addressed. What we also know is that most CEOs (78%) in 2021 were appointed from line roles with profit and loss accountability and women make up just 14% of those line management roles across the ASX300. The pool from which CEOs are sought does not contain enough women. There are women in business but they are more often employed in senior



functional roles such as HR, Corporate Affairs, Marketing, Sales, Legal, Risk, Strategy or Technology which are not traditional CEO pathways.

So, something that is available to everyone who aspires to CEO and / or executive leadership is to pursue roles and experience in the line roles with carry profit and loss accountability or commercial and operational oversight. These are springboard roles, and the objective has to be to get more women exposed to these roles, if having a stronger or equal representation of women in CEO roles is the outcome being sought. This is also an obvious call out to every organisation, mentor, CEO, people leader, leadership and organisation development practitioner is to create, promote and enable (even mandate if necessary) the movement of female talent into these roles.

*“You can’t be what you can’t see” -
Marian Wright Edelman*

1. Actively recruit women into line management roles.

If there is a shortage (which is often the feedback that we hear) learn from organisations that recognise supply challenges and war for talent. If your current processes are not working, then learn from someone else. In recent years, SEEK.com as example has recognised the supply of women in broader technology sector with product development or coding skills was not as readily available from the existing graduate pool. So, they have gone further down the supply chain to the high school students. They provide opportunities for high school girls to attend multi day learning workshop within SEEK before they complete HSC, to encourage enrolment into technology style degrees. Whilst this is a long-term strategy, it does address the pipeline of future female leaders at the very starting point. Interestingly SEEK are noted in the CEW report as having a 50:50 split at the executive leadership team. What can you be doing beyond asking the recruiters to provide you a shortlist to ensure that you are attracting quality candidates into your pipeline? Who is currently working in the line that could be encouraged and mentored to pursue leadership positions?



2. Ensure that all women in executive development programs have experience in a line management role as a cornerstone of the program.

This may require a fundamental mindset shift for the organisation, but it sends a very clear message about the seriousness with which CEO/ C suite succession and development planning is taken in the organisation. Sometimes this might take encouragement to move people from their comfort zones. My experience in assisting C-suite development suggests rotation of roles or expansion of responsibilities amongst the expanded leadership team, fosters greater understanding of the whole of business view among the leaders and brings a stronger decision capability to strategic conversations, rather than what is often considered to be a functional only approach.

3. Create organisational cross functional projects that have P&L or operational responsibility, with the female talent as the leader and include these in development processes.

This comes back to two core principles. One is if organisations truly want to have their client base represented by the make of their leadership teams, then having a larger number of women represented in key commercial roles makes sense. Secondly, if there are obvious springboard roles that lead to CEO succession pipelines, then get more women into those roles as often as possible. Exposure to commercial and operational oversight comes with specific roles. But exposure can also come from cross functional organisational wide projects.

One healthcare company we have worked with created a role that encompassed pre-product launch activities, sales force efficiency activities, data insights gathering and GTM analysis with a heavy lens towards their R&D expertise. The female leader of the R&D department took this role as an expansion of her functional leadership role. Five years later she



became the Managing Director, which would have been unheard of had she only stayed in her functional role.

4. Remove the structural barriers.

Too many times we have seen examples of a role that is a perfect next step or a building block to a wider scope of leadership been created, only to find it has inherent designs in it that limit many candidates, especially working mothers. Next time a new role is created, or an opportunity emerges that allows for a vacant role to be redesigned, as part of the design process, also ask, what is in the design and nature of the line role that would make someone say “no thanks” to doing it? Maybe it takes more design work to enable flexible work arrangements and normalise uptake across levels and genders. Let us not forget the extraordinary pivoting that has taken place all over the world in 2020-2021 from perspectives that were once held as sacred cows. Once held views sounded like, ‘they must have x and y to do this senior leadership role, or they must be based in X location to do this role’. Many of those pre held convictions have been proven to no longer be true.

5. Be unapologetic about actively sponsor rising women.

The notion of targets and quotas raises concerns and can be an emotive conversation, depending on the points of view expressed. My personal view is that targets are already in place for almost all aspects of business. As a former headhunter/ search consultant, I never left a client briefing session without absolute clarity on what the organisation was targeting as the ideal candidate they wanted me to find. Targets exist whether they are overt or not.

The use of mentoring, network opportunities, study programs – many of these already exist in organisations. My view is there is still room for specific focus on developing line management aptitude and appetite for women who demonstrate capability in their functional expertise and illustrate promise of more, were the doors to be opened to different opportunities.



This can sometimes be a very challenging hurdle for individuals and organisations to overcome but the numbers are in – there needs to be a change and this is something that can be done.

Pod O'Sullivan is a partner with [The Leadership Context](#), a boutique consultancy that works with CEO's and leadership teams to help them scale their leadership to enable the organisational strategic imperatives, particularly during complex times. His podcast, [The Leadership Diet](#) is widely regarded as an intimate and insightful look at senior leadership for all its aspirations and realities.





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