



An inconvenient truth: we need more women in the boardroom

By Claire Braund

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Cricket Australia's welcome but overdue appointment of a woman to its board is a good time to discuss how gender quotas can overturn our blokey business culture, writes Claire Braund.

In 1985 Dr Sharon Lord was in Sydney to deliver a presentation to the NSW branch of the Institute of Directors in Australia.

Lord, the highest ranked woman in the Pentagon during the Regan administration and a former deputy assistant secretary of defence for equal opportunity and safety, spoke on ways to achieve full utilisation of human resources.

According to the four-page article in *The Australian Director* (June/July 1985) which Lord passed around at an event in New Zealand this week, she was "enthusiastically received" by the predominately male audience.

The article featured Lord's 10-point outline on what could arguably still be regarded as HR best management practice in 2012 and comments on how productivity is increased when "plans of action are put into place that break down barriers and discrimination" and sexism and racism are eliminated from the workplace.

"It is not cost effective to lose people the company has trained and educated because of unfair employment policy, lack of support or harassment," Lord told the directors at the Institute.

Fast forward to the last week in October 2012, when Sex Discrimination Commissioner Elizabeth Broderick released the results of a sexual harassment national telephone survey revealing:

- Approximately one in five people aged 15 years and older were sexually harassed in the workplace in the past five years
- One in four women (25 per cent) and one in six men (16 per cent) have been sexually harassed in the workplace in the past five years.
- Targets of sexual harassment are most likely to be women under 40 and harassers are most likely to be male co-workers.
- Women are at least five times more likely than men to have been harassed by a boss or employer.

The results of the survey point to a serious problem in the culture and behaviour of our workplaces despite that fact that the majority of Australian companies have excellent policies and procedures around sexual harassment.

Australia is recognised as being a masculine culture. This is understandable when you consider that for more than half a century after first white settlement Australian society was almost entirely made up of men and in 1840 the proportion of European males to females was two to one.

Men still dominate in politics, business and the top echelons of government and the community.

The Dutch sociologist Professor Geert Hofstede developed a national cultural index as part of a comprehensive study of how values in the workplace are influenced by culture. According to Hofstede, Australian national culture is non-hierarchical, highly individualistic, pragmatic, focussed on the short-term, and masculine - driven by competition, achievement and success.



PHOTO: Men still dominate in politics, business and the top echelons of government and the community (flatworldsedge: www.flickr.com) (flatworldsedge: www.flickr.com)

A high masculinity ranking indicates the country experiences a high degree of gender differentiation. Women in sport struggle for sponsorship, media airtime and public support. Our National Sporting Bodies have only 24 per cent female directors. The recent appointment of Cricket Australia's first female director on its nine person board is a step in the right direction.

However when you consider the Australian Women's 20:20 team is world champion, the test and one-day teams are highly ranked and CA has represented both male and female games since 2005, it is clear that despite their success on the field women are being excluded from the boardroom.

In recent weeks Prime Minister Julia Gillard has become a global YouTube phenomenon for calling the behaviour of Opposition Leader Tony Abbott misogynist and labelling him a sexist.

In doing this the prime minister has highlighted the critical need to address gender inequality as a primary cause of the sexism she spoke so passionately about. This is an ideal time for her to require Australia to get serious about tackling the culture of masculinity which pervades our workplaces and boardrooms.

Women on Boards advocates that the Government set quotas or mandatory targets of 40 per cent men, 40 per cent women and 20 per cent mixed gender on the boards and committees of all organisations it funds or part funds. We support the federal government's mandatory 40:40:20 gender target for its boards and committees and believe that state governments should follow suit.

ASX companies need to be firmly pressured to set their own 40:40:20 targets or face government intervention.

Lord outlined a strategy for maximising the fair and equitable use of human potential to NSW business leaders 27 years ago. It is disappointing to see that we did not pay attention then, as the results of the national survey on sexual harassment and low numbers of women in board and leadership roles reveal.

Until we have a firm commitment to achieving a minimum representation of the under-represented gender in all of our governing bodies, little progress is likely to be made.

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Topics: women, business-economics-and-finance, feminism

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