

09. Leadership:



: women,
equity,
architecture.

We need the best people to lead the profession (women and men) at both practice and industry levels.

Women are significantly underrepresented at the senior levels of architectural practices and in leadership roles in the profession. Yet substantial research shows that companies and organisations with diverse leadership groups consistently outperform those without. The ethical and business cases for gender-diverse leadership are abundantly clear – architecture needs to catch up.

This guide addresses the obstacles women may face in attaining seniority, offers women tips on positioning themselves for leadership roles, provides guidance on promoting and supporting women, and outlines the role leaders in the profession can play in facilitating change.



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TO EQUITABLE
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What is leadership?

Leadership is a core professional skill in architecture, and architects use leadership skills on projects daily. However, it is a topic that is little discussed in research on the profession, and is not always considered in context of an architectural workplace.

Leadership vs management In a business setting, the terms ‘leadership’ and ‘management’ are often confused or used interchangeably. However, they’re not the same thing. Managers look after a multitude of tasks. They plan, supervise, hire and fire. They’re responsible for workflow and performance. They deal with the fine detail. But a leader’s focus is often squarely on the big picture. The best leaders engage and inspire employees. They generate enthusiasm, increase motivation, and create a culture of trust, respect, teamwork and collaborative achievement. They give credit where it’s due, develop strong relationships with employees, and work on developing the skills and careers of others. Sometimes managers are also leaders (but not always).

Leadership styles The stereotypical ‘leader’ is often an authoritarian, competitive character, or the biggest personality in the room. Unfortunately, this is the way many employers perceive the ideal leader, and they appoint senior roles accordingly. Many women may bring a different style to the table, which is not always valued. However, firms may be missing out on the very skills that are often the most effective. Successful leaders are often honest, trustworthy and genuine. They’re the first in the fray when there’s a problem, and they’re not afraid to take the blame if something goes wrong. They are attuned to their employees and know how to get the best out of them.

Why don’t more women reach the top?

The underrepresentation of women in leadership and senior management roles is a difficult and complex problem, but Australian research points to work/life demands and negative perceptions about women’s leadership abilities as the key reasons behind the disparity.

Work/life balance Competing demands is one of the critical issues that still affects women much more than men. Women who seek to achieve a balance between their work and family are often perceived as lacking commitment to their work and career progression. When female architects embark on parenthood, they often find that their advancement slows, or stops altogether. Their commitment is called into question, and there is a perception that they will always prioritise family over work. Flexibility is often unavailable to those in senior roles, and talented women may have to knock back opportunities that are simply incompatible with family life. A lack of recognition of the inevitable disruption to a linear career path makes it hard to get that career back on track as family commitments ease.

Unconscious bias However, all women – including those without children – are inevitably affected by the unconscious bias that has traditionally favoured men when it comes to leadership positions. There is still an all-too-common perception in some practices that women are not cut out to be leaders – that they lack the leadership qualities that senior roles require. In many workplaces, leadership is implicitly gendered, with traditional ‘male’ traits (such as confidence, decisiveness and assertiveness) trumping all others. In reality, there are many different leadership styles. While many women may bring a different leadership style and skillset to the table, it’s no less legitimate or valuable.



Why does it matter?

The argument for gender equity in senior leadership roles is compelling, whether you look at it from a moral or a commercial point of view. It makes good business sense for practices to gain access to the entire talent pool – not just 50% – and to maximise the potential of all employees, regardless of gender, race or family background.

Recognising and valuing a diversity of leadership styles and perspectives also helps to avoid a ‘group think’ culture and encourages creative thinking and problem solving.

Practices

There are clear correlations between gender diversity, innovation and competitive advantage. Gender diversity can also help promote and develop unfamiliar approaches to organisations, projects and problems.

There’s a strong business case for increasing the number of women in leadership roles in architecture. Building strong female representation in the senior ranks can help encourage and sustain other women in the profession, leading to increased retention of staff within practices. Advancing women can ensure that practices are developing and leveraging their talent pool, maximising the productivity and personal satisfaction of all staff, and stemming the tide of women leaving architecture in frustration.

Diversity and inclusiveness at a senior level is also a more accurate reflection of wider society, and helps to build a company’s reputation in the marketplace, particularly as clients increasingly ask questions about the team. Often women drive a higher proportion of decision-making and spending – dismissing their perspective and abilities is an outdated view that may prove costly in the future.

Employees

There remains a huge gap between the proportion of female architecture graduates and those represented in the formal leadership roles of architecture firms and the profession. Whether this is due to the work/life balance problem, a lack of confidence and persistence, or plain old garden-variety discrimination, the resulting stagnation or premature conclusion of many architectural careers is simply a waste of highly educated, talented staff. A higher proportion of women in senior roles will also undoubtedly have an important influence on women in the junior ranks, with more female mentors and role models providing inspiration and advice on realising career ambitions.

The profession

With the profession facing challenging times we need outstanding leaders with diverse experiences – and this should include a much higher proportion of women.

The 2003 RIBA, report ‘Why Women Leave the Profession’, identified the lack of demographic diversity – in terms of gender, ethnicity and socio-economic diversity – as having a key role in negative perceptions of the profession.



What can we do?

Practices, individual employees and professional organisations all have important roles to play in increasing the proportion of women in leadership roles within architecture.

We also need strong male leaders to leverage their capacity to promote the business case for gender diversity. The ‘champions of change’ movement does this as the argument for the equitable representation of male and female senior staff grows among corporations and government in Australia, and internationally.

Practices

The dearth of women in senior leadership roles is a complex issue, but removing barriers and obstacles to promotion and advancement is critical to addressing the lack of equity in the industry.

Acknowledging the value of a more balanced workforce, and understanding the business case, are fundamental first steps for practices, followed by an assessment and potential adjustment of the structures and biases that have created the existing workplace culture.

Visibly value difference

Clearly recognise and celebrate difference and diversity to employees, clients and the industry at large. It’s important to be aware of the need for gender equity within architecture, but even more important to communicate this understanding to all. Be a good example in policies and actions.

- Incorporate the practice’s intention to promote and support diversity into its mission statement, HR policies and business plan.
- Ensure employees are aware of any company policies and actions to improve diversity in the senior ranks.
- Make sure you have diverse teams presenting to clients, to professional and government bodies and awards juries.

Define the leadership model that works for your practice

Leadership and management structures can vary greatly, from the very formal and hierarchical to informal, flat structures. All can bring advantages. Many architectural practices grow organically and in response to external opportunities and pressures, sometimes with little consideration of how leadership and management structures develop.

- Understand the leadership model and structure currently in place. Does it work effectively? Does it encourage or discourage women to put themselves forward? Are there clear steps in place for those who are interested in leadership positions?
- Be clear about what model works for your practice and articulate this to your employees.
- Be clear about the expectations you have of those in leadership positions and ensure that these are not overlaid with gender bias.
- Communicate with employees who are interested in leadership positions about what steps they need to take to progress.

A distributed leadership culture

The great thing about leadership, recognition and success is that they aren’t finite commodities. A leader isn’t just the person who leads the team. Leaders show initiative, think creatively and solve



problems autonomously. They inspire and encourage others. These are skills that are valuable at all levels of the organisation.

‘Distributed’ leadership encourages a culture whereby individuals at all levels see what needs to be done, and are willing and able to influence others to make things happen. This can be a good way to move beyond a hierarchical leadership culture in which individuals await direction from above. It can instil a stronger sense of accountability and ownership in individual staff and help to create stronger job satisfaction throughout the practice.

- Understand leadership in its broader sense and try to make opportunities for staff to show and develop leadership skills.
- Consider giving employees the freedom to make decisions, to be creative, inventive and bold.
- Explore a distributed leadership culture that can give employees leadership experience at all levels, and can help establish pathways for women to access senior leadership roles.

Be aware of unconscious bias

Even the most progressive and well intentioned among us tend to default to our culture’s norms and stereotypes regarding occupations and behaviours, a phenomenon known as ‘unconscious bias’. Many masculine-defined norms still underpin Australian architecture and its leadership. This means that employers need to be aware of their concept of who ‘seems’ like a leader or has ‘potential’.

- Remember, leadership comes in many guises. A leader may well be the charismatic, confident speaker in the middle of the room – but they might also be the calm, disciplined multi-tasker, who knows the strengths and weaknesses of every employee, and knows how to get their best work out of them.

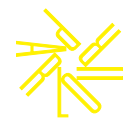
- It’s human nature to have biases. Be aware of your own and develop strategies to recognise and manage them. Studies have revealed that people instinctively preference people who resemble themselves.
- Recognise and celebrate different leadership styles.
- Aim for diversity on interview panels, with a mix of genders and ages.

Take concrete steps towards diverse leadership

Gaining awareness of the specific statistics within your firm is an important step to take. The federal government’s Workplace Gender Equality Agency (WGEA) can help you do the numbers, and believes that the best way for a practice to tackle a lack of gender diversity within is to set voluntary organisation-specific representation targets.

Inhouse targets (rather than external quotas) allow a practice to gradually make cultural and structural changes, taking into account the circumstances of the individual practice and its employees. Additional steps include being as aware and inclusive as possible when recruiting, promoting and assigning work and professional development opportunities.

- Access and utilise the WGEA’s guidelines and calculator on setting gender diversity targets.
- Ensure that talent is developed equitably. Assign the ‘hot jobs’ equitably. Give both men and women access to formal leadership development programs.
- Choose to interview at least one woman for any position.
- Ensure that in-house teams are gender-balanced.
- Encourage staff members to nominate for committees in professional organisations.



Offer flexibility at senior levels

Evidence suggests that flexible working practices are still expected to cease at senior levels in many practices. For those with caring responsibilities, this loss of flexibility can deter aspirations to leadership positions – and this can impact differentially on women in the workforce.

Embracing career flexibility in the workplace is an important first step for practices on the road to gender diversity. It can bring enormous dividends, not only in the retention of key staff, but also in their level of commitment, company loyalty and productivity. As flexible working conditions are in high demand for women and men, it's also a valuable way to retain existing or future leaders within the practice.

- Build a culture of trust with all employees. Set goals and measure performance. Focus on outputs and achievement rather than time in the chair. Where and when the work is done may not need to be as rigid as you imagine.
- Emphasise the importance of good communication, whether an employee is in the office or not.

Encourage women to put up their hand

Research suggests that many women can be tentative about putting themselves forward, while many men will put their hand up even when they don't have all the requisite experience. This can be readily addressed with encouragement.

- Look out for women who show leadership skills in their day-to-day activities. Encourage them to put their hand up for leadership roles both within the practice and within the wider professional environment.
- Offer support and mentoring to those who you see have potential.

Communicate expectations and provide adequate support

Support comes in many forms, and from many directions. When putting people into senior positions, the focus can be on facilitating the promotion itself rather than clarifying what is expected at the new, higher level. Some new responsibilities and expectations may be explicit, but others may not.

- If you've been involved in the decision to promote someone to a leadership position, be clear on why you think they're a great fit for the job, and what the new role entails.
- If the leap to a more senior level means new responsibilities outside an employee's previous area of expertise, consider providing training.
- Keep an eye out for any overt hostility or resistance from employees working under female managers or associates. The situation may simply require a gentle reminder, or formal intervention and disciplinary action may be necessary. Remember, under workplace law, the employer is responsible for the actions of employees, and this includes discrimination and bullying.
- Where possible, actively support women participating in the broader profession. This could involve making some office time available for these activities, offering to be a sounding board about initiatives, or facilitating introductions to others with relevant interests and connections.



Employees

There's much to be done by practices and the profession as a whole when it comes to promoting and supporting women in leadership roles, but it's also important for individuals to take responsibility for their ambitions and to strategise to make them happen. There are many steps individuals can take to maximise their career potential, to increase their opportunities for advancement and to be prepared to take that leap into leadership when the opportunity arises.

Build your confidence

Spending time and effort on building your confidence is an incredibly useful investment. Research has found that underselling capabilities is a common trait for many women, and the responses to the Parlour surveys indicate that some women in Australian architecture have doubts about their skills and experience. (This was not evident in any of the responses from men.)

A lack of confidence can often manifest itself in a reluctance to speak up or seek further challenges and remuneration. This is very damaging to career progression.

- Identify and focus on your key professional skills, abilities and strengths, and regularly revise the list of achievements.
- Say what you think, be visible, take risks.
- If you lack confidence, develop your ability to project it and to speak with confidence and authority. You'll convince others, and ultimately yourself.
- Say yes to new opportunities or projects whenever possible. They could be valuable stepping-stones to future leadership roles. Your confidence will grow with every new accomplishment.

Promote yourself

Self-promotion may not come naturally to you, but it is incredibly important to gain the visibility required for advancement. If you work hard but sit in the corner waiting to be noticed, you'll be waiting a long time. Make sure others are aware of your abilities and ambitions.


- Get involved in the public culture of architecture. Join committees, speak at events, network. Involvement in the public culture can change the perception of you within the practice and can be useful in promoting your worth to management.
- Use social media. Blog, tweet, speak up, gain followers. Maintain a strong digital footprint that emphasises your skills, opinions and professionalism.
- Critique your attitude at work. Do others perceive you as a positive, can-do person? Or are you burdened by negativity and over-involvement in office politics? If necessary, choose to lean towards the positive. The pay-off to your work reputation could be huge.

Be proactive

Be proactive at work. Speak to your employer about your ambitions and put yourself forward when there is an opportunity for new challenges and personal growth.

- Search out the people, skills and jobs that you need to take you where you want to go.
- Ask questions, keep abreast of what's happening within your firm, and the profession as a whole.
- If you are unhappy with your progress at work, consider moving to another firm that can offer you fresh skills and opportunities for advancement.
- Identify companies with equitable recruitment and promotion policies in place. Make contact.



- Volunteer for inhouse tasks that will test your leadership abilities and show your employer that you're capable of more.
- Find a mentor.  See Parlour guide: **Mentoring**.

Know your own leadership style

Some female professionals feel enormous pressure to follow the leadership style of their male counterparts when it comes to managing teams and projects. The stereotypical male interaction style is loosely characterised by decisive action and an authoritative approach.

It's important to learn leadership skills and techniques, but not at the expense of your own natural style and skillset. Increasingly, so-called 'feminine' traits – such as patience, flexibility and good communication – have been identified as being highly effective in leadership roles.

- Stay true to your own style of management and leadership. Explore ways to work with this and leverage it.
- Recognise that you have innate strengths. If creativity, collaboration and support are your main drivers, trust in them. They can foster enormous benefits for business, such as team-building and increased personal investment and commitment from project participants.
- If your instinctive leadership style does not conform to the clichés of 'feminine' attributes, don't try to change in that direction either.

Persist, persist, persist

That elusive leadership position will likely only come after years of persistence. There will inevitably be missteps along the way. You may fail at the first attempt. But it's essential to keep your ambition in sight and continue to work towards your goal.

The profession

Professional bodies and organisations are in a strong position to formally recognise the need to increase the participation of women in senior leadership roles, and to facilitate change within practice and within the public culture of architecture.

Advocacy and research

Increasing the proportion of women in leadership roles will take time. Professional organisations are in a good position to raise awareness around the issue, and to educate architects on the importance of gender equity.

- Conduct or sponsor further research and provide resources relating to women's representation within senior roles in architecture.
- Promote universal access to flexible working conditions within architecture.
- Highlight and formally recognise the practices that successfully achieve diversity within their senior ranks, and advocate for equality across the industry.

Equitable female representation in the professional organisations

There are many leadership opportunities within professional organisations, and women should be encouraged and supported to participate.

Encourage the setting of targets

The professional organisations could throw their weight and support behind the Workplace Gender Equality Agency's initiative for individual companies to set internal targets to raise the proportion of women in senior roles.



Further resources

There is a large amount of material available on women and leadership from other fields and professions. Much of this is readily applicable to architecture and is well worth reading in detail.

How to Set Gender Diversity Targets

Workplace Gender Equality Agency

<https://www.wgea.gov.au/sites/default/files/SETTING-GENDER-TARGETS-Online-accessible.pdf>

<https://www.wgea.gov.au/learn/about-setting-gender-targets>

Women in Leadership

Human Rights Commission

<http://www.humanrights.gov.au/publications/women-leadership>

Increasing the Number of Women in Senior Executive Positions

Business Council of Australia

www.bca.com.au/publications/increasing-the-number-of-women-in-senior-executive-positions

Why Diversity Matters

Catalyst

<http://catalyst.org/knowledge/why-diversity-matters>

What Stops Women from Reaching the Top? Confronting the Tough Issues

Bain & company

http://www.bain.com/offices/australia/en_us/publications/what-stops-women-from-reaching-the-top.aspx

Good Intentions, Imperfect Execution? Women Get Fewer of the 'Hot Jobs' Needed to Advance

Catalyst

<http://www.catalyst.org/knowledge/good-intentions-imperfect-execution-women-get-fewer-hot-jobs-needed-advance>

The Business Case for Women as Leaders: One Woman is not Enough

Chief Executive Women (CEW)

<http://www.advancingwomen.com.au/public/The-business-case-for-women-as-leaders.pdf>

continued overleaf ...

Rights and responsibilities

The *Sex Discrimination Act 1984* makes it unlawful to discriminate against an employee because of their gender (or any characteristics specific to gender or generally believed to be specific to gender). The Act states that it is unlawful for an employer to deny an employee access to opportunities for promotion, transfer or training, or to any other benefits associated with employment.

The *Workplace Gender Equality Act 2012* focuses on gender equality between women and men in the workforce, and promotes the elimination of discrimination based on family and caring responsibilities. It acknowledges that workplace practices have not caught up with the modern world, and companies need assistance in making the necessary adjustments. It requires that all non-public sector organisations with 100 or more employees report on actual gender equality outcomes within their organisation. The Workplace Gender Equality Agency is charged with collecting the data, identifying problems and offering companies the opportunity to work with them to improve their outcomes.

Note: This is offered as an overview only. Readers are reminded that legislation may change and they are advised to check current legislation at the time of reading.



Credits

The Parlour Guides to Equitable Practice are an outcome of the research project 'Equity and Diversity in the Australian Architecture Profession: Women, Work and Leadership' (2011–2014), led by Naomi Stead of the University of Queensland.

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Women in Leadership: What Will it Take to Get Australia on Target?

Ernst & Young

[http://www.ey.com/Publication/vwLUAssets/Women_in_leadership._What_will_it_take_to_get_Australia_on_target/\\$File/What_will_it_take_to_get_Australia_on_target.pdf](http://www.ey.com/Publication/vwLUAssets/Women_in_leadership._What_will_it_take_to_get_Australia_on_target/$File/What_will_it_take_to_get_Australia_on_target.pdf)

Women in Leadership: How Smart are You

Ernst & Young

[http://www.ey.com/Publication/vwLUAssets/Women_in_leadership._How_smart_are_you/\\$FILE/Women_in_leadership_Nov2010.pdf](http://www.ey.com/Publication/vwLUAssets/Women_in_leadership._How_smart_are_you/$FILE/Women_in_leadership_Nov2010.pdf)

Women in Leadership: Engaging Australian Business

Ernst & Young

[http://www.ey.com/Publication/vwLUAssets/Women_in_leadership._Engaging_Australian_business/\\$FILE/WomeninLeadership.pdf](http://www.ey.com/Publication/vwLUAssets/Women_in_leadership._Engaging_Australian_business/$FILE/WomeninLeadership.pdf)

Cracking the Code: Getting More Women into Senior Executive Roles

MWM Consulting, London


<http://www.mwmconsulting.com/wp-content/uploads/2012/07/Cracking-the-Code1.pdf>

How to Engage Senior Men to Promote Women to Decision-making Positions

European Commission's Network to Promote Women in Decision-making in Politics and the Economy

http://ec.europa.eu/justice/gender-equality/files/gender_balance_decision_making/working_paper_engage_men_promote_women_en.pdf

Further reading

See Parlour  for a range of essays on leadership, gender and architecture.

<http://www.archiparlour.org/topics/women-and-leadership/>

'Group Think is the Kryptonite of Leadership'

Kevin Evers, Harvard Business Review

<http://blogs.hbr.org/2013/09/group-think-is-the-kryptonite-of-leadership/>

'Persistence: The Difference Between Achieving and Merely Trying'

Jane Benston, Women's Agenda

<http://www.womensagenda.com.au/career-agenda/builders/persistence-the-difference-between-achieving-and-merely-trying/201403173744>

'Self-Promotion is Not Crucial (Unless You Want to Get Ahead!)

Margie Warrell, Forbes

<http://www.forbes.com/sites/margiewarrell/2013/04/29/self-promotion-is-not-crucial-unless-you-want-to-get-ahead/>

'Are You a Boss or a Leader? There are Four Key Differences'

Sarah Creelman, Women's Agenda

<http://www.womensagenda.com.au/career-agenda/leaders/are-you-a-boss-or-a-leader-there-are-four-key-differences/201402163584>

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