

# BREAKING DAD:

## Psychological safety and more time at home for men.



*'Simply offering access to family friendly work arrangements is not likely to drive the change that is needed to achieve greater gender equality in parenting'*

(Roger Klinth (2008), Associate Professor and Vice Chancellor, Sweden).

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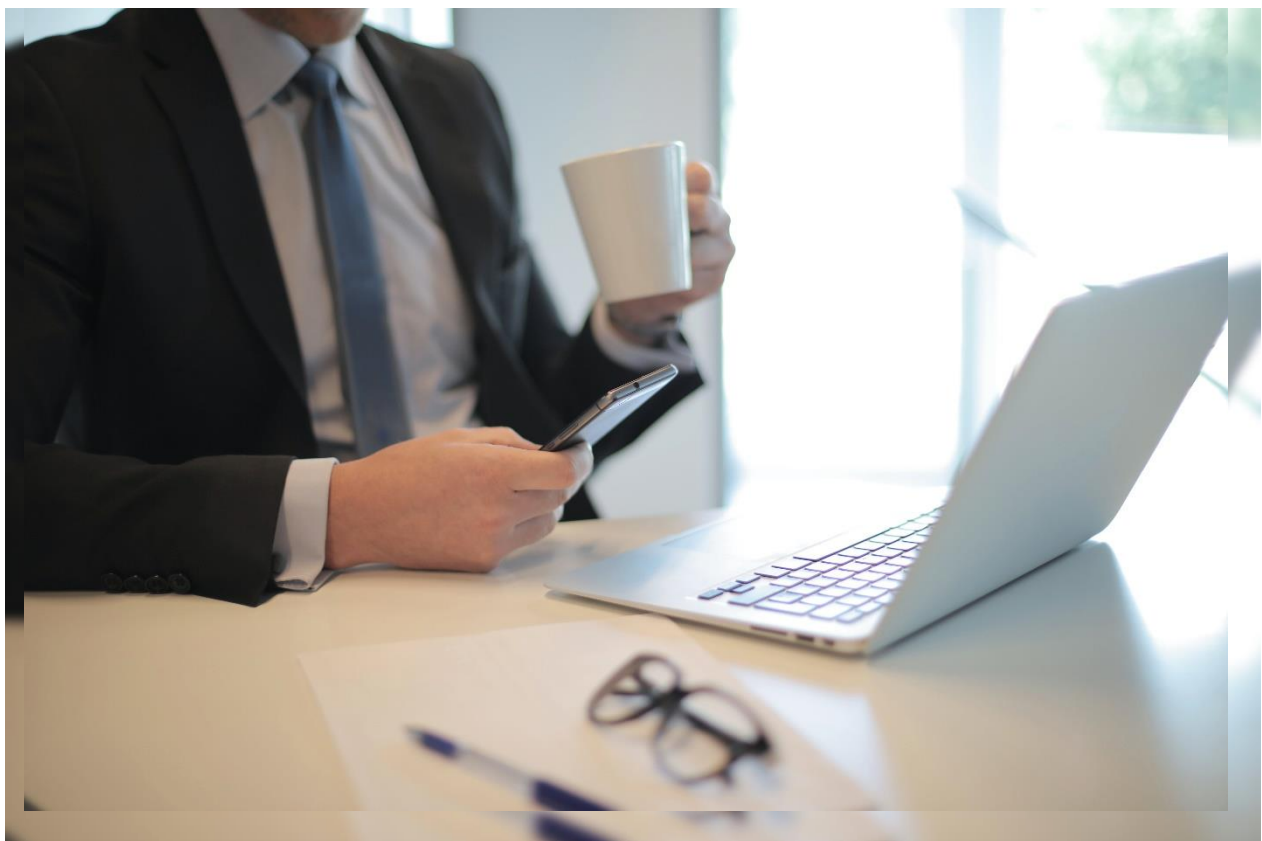
**Foreword**


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Authority

## Key Findings

- Men are more likely to request family friendly work arrangements in organisations with higher psychological safety, i.e. an environment where they feel less judged on the choices they make, even if those choices are non-traditional.
- Men who work in organisations with a psychologically safe environment are likely to experience lower levels of gender role conflict, i.e. they are less worried about how they will be perceived by others and less fearful of any negative consequences of their actions.
- Men who experience higher gender role conflict report lower likelihood to request family friendly work arrangements as they are likely to perceive family friendly work arrangements as not being 'masculine' enough.





## About The 100% Project

The 100% Project is a not for profit organisation with a vision to see 100 percent of Australia's leadership talent, female and male, equally contributing to our social and economic future. We exist because women are currently not given the opportunity to contribute equally. Women are under-represented on most Boards and in the senior management teams of most Australian organisations. We believe the reasons for this can be found in the day-to-day practices and mindsets that shape how most organisations are run. The 100% Project's purpose is to champion gender balance by producing and sharing research that influences conversations, beliefs, policies and practices. This research and other programs that the 100% Project undertakes are designed to challenge leaders in Australian businesses and organisations to create meaningful change. We recognise to do this we have to engage men—because men run most of the businesses and organisations where change is required and organisational culture is generally defined in male terms.



## About The Authors

### *Jennifer Winspear*

Jenny is based in the UK and a graduate of Deakin University's Master of Psychology (Industrial and Organisational) program, for which she submitted a thesis based on the data collected for the research study described in this study in 2019. She has a passion for gender equality and during her time in Australia she was a valued member of The 100% Project's research team. Since returning to the UK in 2020 Jenny has continued her relationship with The 100% Project, albeit at a distance. Jenny is currently working as consultant at Marbral Advisory based in St Helier, Jersey, UK, where she applies her knowledge of psychology to her client's issues in the workplace.

### *Frances Feenstra*

Frances is an organisational psychologist and a Director of People Measures, a firm of organisational psychologists and development experts who provide advice and solutions based on the best available evidence and up to date research in the areas of assessment, talent management and leadership development. She has held university appointments as well as senior positions with Right Management and PricewaterhouseCoopers. At PwC, she was the main driver behind the establishment of Symmetry, an initiative to connect, inspire and empower the firm's female leaders. Frances was a founder and the inaugural Chair of The 100% Project from 2008 - 2014. She continues to work as a member of the organisation's Research Committee.



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## Foreword



**Scott Wyatt**

**Chief Executive  
Officer**

**Viva Energy  
Australia**

The COVID-19 pandemic has shaped our lives in many ways. We have been confronted with disease we can't yet control and to protect ourselves we have willingly accepted decisions taken by authorities to restrict our movement and curtail civil liberties that we have always taken for granted. We have been consigned to our homes for long periods of time, taken greater responsibility for educating our children, become better cooks, and blurred the lines between work and home as we navigate both under the one roof. It has presented considerable economic and mental health challenges, but it has also been a great leveler which has forced us to experience new ways of working and reconsider our traditional gender roles and stereotypes.

Throughout the various lockdowns associated with managing the pandemic, both men and women have directly experienced the daily challenges of balancing priorities, working flexibly and sharing household responsibilities in ways that they may not have before. We have done this in a very visible way by bringing workmates into our homes through video conferencing, indirectly sharing our personal lives, and discussing this openly as we collectively worked out how to navigate this. We have also become more accepting of change as we dealt with impacts to our professional and private lives that we would have never thought possible but are now our new normal.

As we emerge from the pandemic, we have a fantastic opportunity to lock in the best of these changes and transform our ways of working for good. There is an overwhelming movement from employees to retain the unexpected benefits that have come from working in very different ways, and as a result businesses and governments are adapting policies and work practices to support everything from flexible working, working from home, and childcare arrangements. It is exciting to see men driving this just as much as women and in many ways we can thank the pandemic for this.

The Breaking Dad research sets out the case for men to spend more time at home sharing in our most important parenting and household responsibilities and balancing the needs of work and home. The research tells us that men need to feel safe, supported and encouraged to take these important steps, but that if we get this right then careers and productivity do not suffer and together we can improve gender equality. The steps we take from here as we emerge from the pandemic will be very important to ensure that we do not squander the opportunity we have to drive a very important societal change. I congratulate the authors on this work and encourage all senior leaders to embrace this opportunity and not let us slip back to the habits of old.

## Foreword



**Justin Untersteiner**

**Chief Operating  
Officer**

**Australian Financial  
Complaints Authority**

In 2017 my son Jack turned one. And as a senior executive in a large organisation, I spent most of his first precious twelve months in this world – time that I will never get back - holed up in the office, travelling around the country and living out of a suitcase. Even when I did manage to be at home, I wasn't really present; I was checking emails, on the phone, or thinking about work. I recall coming home late one Friday night and, once again, I had missed Jack's bedtime. I faced the stark realisation that although I had always dreamed of being an extremely hands on and present father, the reality was unbearably different. I was missing out on my son's childhood and effectively leaving my wife to carry the parenting burden. How had I ended up in this position? I knew one thing for sure – I needed to change.

My wife and I sat down and worked out how we could better share home and caring duties. I won't lie - it was confronting and scary. Our plan required me to fundamentally shift the way I had operated for my entire career. But I was committed. And it worked. It took time to adjust to the new normal, but soon we were both working part-time, sharing all domestic and child caring duties, and alternating who looked after Jack if he was unwell.

This new way of operating significantly improved our lives. Working more flexibly means I am happier - not just a little happier - but much happier. As I sit back and reflect, I am truly proud of the deeper and more meaningful relationships I have built with my son and daughter (Ava, who came along in 2019). Now when I tuck my kids in at the end of each day, I feel a greater sense of fulfilment than I ever got working endless hours in the office. And as a result of my wife and I having greater levels of flexibility, we are both kicking career goals. I am now a better leader; my lived experience means I am more supportive of my people to be their best at work and at home.

While this has been one of the best decisions I have ever made, it hasn't been without challenges. Even though my employer at the time was highly supportive of my arrangements at a strategy/policy level, I still faced discrimination on a day-to-day basis. People joked about my lack of commitment to work, deliberately planned important meetings on my days off (and expected me to attend), and very senior people asked me if my 'holiday' was over. This had an incredibly negative psychological impact on me and made me question whether I had made the right choice. But it was also eye-opening: if this was my experience as a senior executive, how much more difficult would it be for someone more junior trying to work flexibly?

We still have an awfully long way to go if we are to normalise flexibility for men. Not only does the current 'system' create barriers for men (such as offering lower levels of parental leave or less flexibility for dads particularly in the first years of a child's life), but even if these options exist, we are still burdened by long standing social norms which discourage men from working differently.

The Breaking Dad research provides valuable insights on these ongoing challenges for dads, which continue to be inextricably connected to those faced by women. It shows that where men are fearful of being subject to gender role conflict, they are much less likely to seek family friendly work arrangements. And this hurts everyone – men, women, and children.

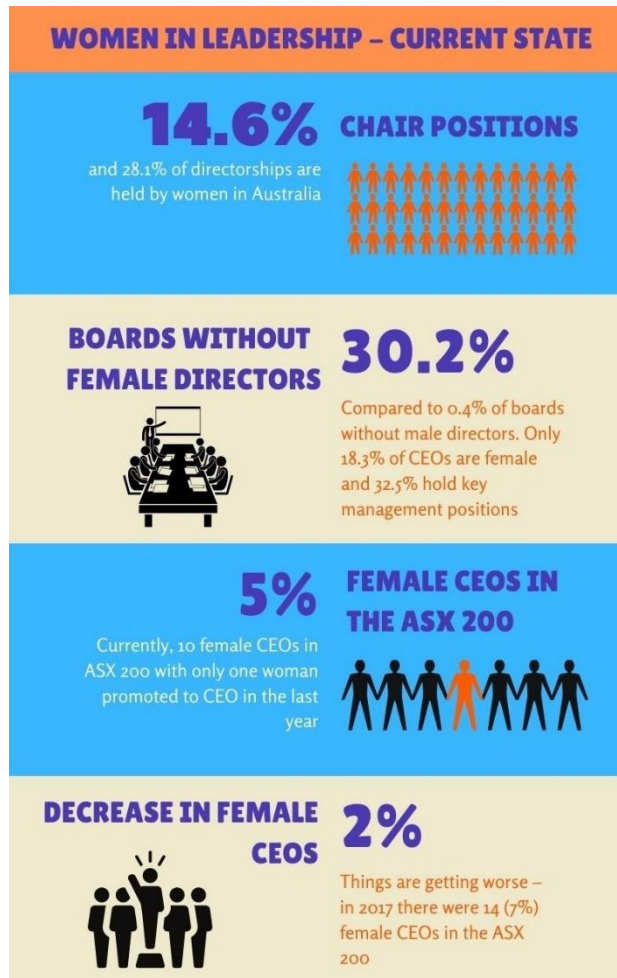
I applaud the authors for bringing much needed attention to these issues.

The research, and my own personal experience, highlights that organisational policies alone are not enough to drive the necessary change – more is required. It is time to reframe beliefs that no longer serve the evolved nature of work and family. We need to educate and build understanding in the workplace and, at the same time, create safe empowering cultures for men, inside and outside of work. Only then will we see the shifts we need to normalise flexibility for men, and open up opportunities for women, which will be healthier for all of us.

## Introduction

The more progress we make towards better gender balance in Australian workplaces, the more productive and progressive our society becomes, but progress continues to be very slow, especially in leadership ranks where women are scarce. Despite making up just over half of the Australian workforce, women are not reaching leadership positions at the same rate as men. Efforts to address the problem over the last decade have had some impact, however numbers of women remain stubbornly low, and are in some cases going backward.

The recent statistics from the Workplace Gender Equality Agency (2020)<sup>i</sup> and the Chief Executive Women annual census<sup>ii</sup> paint a bleak picture for progress toward more women in leadership positions in Australia (see Figure 1).



Research over the past decades has clearly shown that organisations are more likely to reward and promote individuals into leadership positions when they meet ‘ideal worker norms’<sup>iii</sup>. These norms include working full time, being visibly seen in the office or working ‘on-site’ and putting in long hours<sup>iv</sup>. While there are many and complex variables at play in the inequality between men and women in the Australian workplace, one of those variables is likely to be parenting, or, more specifically, gender inequality in parenting.

The most recent gender indicators released by the Australian Bureau of Statistics<sup>v</sup> revealed that 93.5% of primary parental leave between 2018-2019 was taken by women (in the non-public sector); women spent almost three times as much time taking care of children each day than men; and on average, men spent twice as long as women in paid work in their life. It is difficult for women to be seen as the ‘ideal worker’ when they have so many other demands on their time.

At the start of 2020, with the advent of the global Coronavirus pandemic hopes were entertained that the move to home-based working would lead to a significant rearrangement of workloads within the home itself. However increasingly the signs are indicating that the gendered patterns remain all too familiar and initial research into the effect of the pandemic appears to indicate that gender equality may actually go backwards

as a result of the crisis. Professor Lyn Craig, well-known for her research into the gendered division of labour in the home, conducted a study in 2020 with Brendan Churchill looking at behaviour among families in COVID-19 lockdown<sup>vi</sup>. Results showed that for heterosexual nuclear families, daily unpaid work rose by 8 hours a day; 3.5 hours for fathers and 4.5 hours for mothers. While women shouldered the majority of these hours, men narrowed the gender gap in active and supervisory care of children. However, as Craig and Churchill point out, the increase of hours for men is associated with the care of children rather than with housework and household management which is consistent with global trends showing that men’s time in childcare has grown more than their time in housework, leaving mothers with the more boring and burdensome tasks in the home.

## Why is more time at home for men important?

### Business Case

- Better financial outcomes
- Access to an optimal talent pool
- Increased innovation and creativity
- Builds reputations
- Flexibility and responsiveness
- Improved customer understanding

The organisational benefits of promoting more women into leadership positions has been well documented in the literature (see sidebar). In fact, a joint report released in 2020 by WGEA and Bankwest Curtin Economics Centre (BCEC) established for the first time a clear and convincing causal relationship between increasing the share of women in leadership and subsequent improvements in company performance. The authors concluded that “The findings in this report provide clear support for the business case. More women at the top means better company performance, greater productivity and greater profitability”<sup>vii</sup>. However, while the benefits are clear and the vast majority of senior leaders recognise the impact of gender diversity on business performance, this belief has not (yet) translated into the desired outcomes.

While the *business case* for gender equality is well-established and generally understood, the effects of gender inequality on individuals is less often talked about. Although causes of diminished mental and physical health and wellbeing are many and varied, research shows that gender inequality plays a

significant role in outcomes for women<sup>viii</sup>. Gender role conflicts, total workload, and unpaid work have adverse effects on women’s wellbeing and long-term health as well as career development<sup>ix</sup>.

In Australia, women spend on average 64% of their working week in unpaid care work, they retire with less superannuation and are thus more likely to experience poverty in their retirement years.<sup>x</sup> The irony is that it is not only women who pay a price for gender inequality, men, and children, do too.

Previous studies have found that parents, regardless of gender, generally experience higher levels of wellbeing from spending time with their children<sup>xi</sup>, father involvement is important for bonding<sup>xii</sup>, and fathers perceive their time spent with children as rewarding and fulfilling<sup>xiii</sup>. Research has also found that closeness to fathers during childhood is positively related to children’s educational and occupational mobility, psychological adjustment, and wellbeing<sup>xiv</sup>. Additionally, children who spend more time with their fathers engage in less anti-social behaviour and are more successful in intimate relationships later in life<sup>xv</sup>.

And men *want* to spend more time at home with their families. A 2014 study by the Australian Human Rights Commission showed that three in four dads indicated that they would have liked additional leave and/or to spend more time with their children. Similarly, a 2013 study by The 100% Project found that 87% of men surveyed were not satisfied with the contribution they made to their family, and 76% felt like there had been a time in their life where they needed better work balance<sup>xvi</sup>. This so-called work-family conflict has a negative influence on work, non-work, and personal outcomes such as productivity, job satisfaction, turnover, family wellbeing, health and stress<sup>xvii</sup>. It seems therefore reasonable to suggest that not only would greater gender balance in parenting benefit women and potentially enhance their access to more senior positions, but it also would result in more positive outcomes for fathers and children, families more broadly, and organisations.

### And...what are (some of) the barriers?

Given the evidence cited above, it seems reasonable to ask ‘*so what’s stopping us?*’ or maybe more specifically ‘*what’s stopping men from accessing family friendly work arrangements and spending more time at home?*’.

In terms of workplace policy, there has been a cultural and societal shift to allow greater choice for men who want to spend more time at home with young children. In most Australian workplaces today the same flexible working choices are offered to men as are offered to women, and parental leave is becoming more of a choice for parents as to who will take the time off. And yet, the statistics are clear, women are still utilising family friendly work arrangements to a far greater extent and at a far greater rate than men<sup>xviii</sup>. In heterosexual couples, men spend significantly less time at home than their female counterparts.

If society's attitudes have shifted and organisational policies are inclusive of men, then a look at the psychological and social constructs that may be acting as a barrier for men to request family friendly work arrangements might bring us a step closer to understanding their reluctance.

### *Gender roles*

Gender roles may be one of the psychological barriers that slows down the movement towards gender equality in parenting. Gender roles are the socially constructed roles, behaviours, activities and attributes that a given society considers appropriate for men and women<sup>xix</sup> and can exist consciously or unconsciously (i.e. men should be the 'breadwinners'; women should be the 'homemakers'). A 2019 study by ING found that while 76% of both men and women surveyed believed that both parents should be permitted to take equal leave after the arrival of a newborn, 41% of male respondents felt they would be judged by their work colleagues or manager if they were to take extended leave after a child was born. Similarly, an unconscious bias study conducted by The 100% Project<sup>xx</sup> found that men unconsciously believe that work-life balance policies and flexible working arrangements are more appropriate for women rather than men, and only 39% had actually asked their employer for greater work-life balance at some time in their career due to the perception that employers look negatively on men who take advantage of work-life balance initiatives. A systematic review of masculinity conducted in 2012 suggested that 'manhood is seen as a precarious social status that is both difficult to achieve and tenuously held' and 'manhood must be earned and maintained through publicly verifiable actions'<sup>xxi</sup>. As a result of this, men experience more anxiety over their gender status than women do, resulting in a negative impact on work-life balance, stress and mental health. In turn this means that men will be less likely to take risks if it might threaten their status as a male. It could be argued that asking for family friendly work arrangements constitutes such a risk.

### *Gender role conflict*

Gender roles may be acting as a barrier to increasing gender equality in parenting for men, but only when the individual in question believes (consciously or unconsciously) that acting in a way that is inconsistent with gender norms will have a negative impact on their image as a man. This has been described as *gender role conflict*, a psychological state in which socialised gender roles can lead to some men experiencing personal and relational distress when they do not adhere to rigid, dysfunctional, masculine role norms<sup>xxii</sup>. Research indicates that individuals who experience high gender role conflict are likely to feel compelled to act in a way that is consistent with gender norms, resulting in personal restrictions and self-devaluation, ultimately impeding human potential as a whole. In the context of family friendly work arrangements, studies have shown that men report weaker intentions to seek flexibility at work because they expect others will view them as less masculine for doing so<sup>xxiii</sup>. Interestingly, and in contrast to men's *internalised* beliefs, recent research has found that men who are primary caregivers are often perceived more favourably by their workplaces than men who take on the breadwinner role<sup>xxiv</sup>. In fact, research suggests there is even a 'fatherhood' bonus in which men are viewed more favourably than women for requesting workplace accommodations to be able to spend more time with their families<sup>xxv</sup>.

## **So what can be done?**

In 1990, William Kahn, the psychologist who developed and named the theory of employee engagement, stated that 'Psychological safety is being able to show and employ one's self without fear of negative consequences of self-image, status or career'<sup>xxvi</sup>. It seems intuitively likely that a psychologically safe workplace could increase men's likelihood of requesting family friendly work arrangements. Psychological safety in the workplace is characterised by a climate of mutual respect and trust in which people feel comfortable being themselves and feel it is safe for interpersonal risk taking<sup>xxvii</sup>.

Research has shown that when psychological safety is present in teams, team members think less about the potential negative consequences of expressing a new idea, are more likely to speak up, and have less fear about potential negative consequences of their actions on self-image, status or career<sup>xxviii</sup>. An example of research investigating the impact of psychological safety on attitudes is a study from 2017 by Yener, which examined the effect of psychological safety on feminine role stress<sup>xxix</sup>. Feminine role stress occurs when a woman acts in a way that is not consistent with gender norms. For example, being the breadwinner would be inconsistent with traditional gender perceptions for women and results in stress for women because it is not what society expects. Yener's findings demonstrated that psychological safety significantly decreased the influence of gender perception on feminine role stress.

There is increasing speculation about the impact of psychological safety on other phenomena in the workplace. Among other things, research has shown the potential of psychological safety to positively impact diversity and innovation<sup>xxx</sup>; bullying and harassment<sup>xxxi</sup>; and team performance and innovation<sup>xxxii</sup>. The investigation of the



relationship between psychological safety and its impact on gender norms in academic literature however, is lacking.

Based on the existing literature, we investigated whether those organisations which were judged by their male employees as having greater psychological safety, would enable men to request family friendly work arrangements, and would result in lower levels of gender role conflict in men. This study also predicted that men with higher gender role conflict would report lower likelihood to request family friendly work arrangements.

## The research

This research examined the effect of psychological safety for men in the workplace, specifically in relation to family friendly work arrangements. That is, men's perception that they are able to request family friendly work arrangements without feeling they will be judged by their colleagues/managers, or suffer any negative consequences for doing so.

A total number of 310 adult males participated in this research study by completing an online questionnaire. An inspection of demographics indicated that there was an even distribution across age, industry and size of organisation. Median age range was between 35 and 44 years (34.5%). Other demographic observations to note were that the majority of participants were employed on a full-time basis (88.7%) and had children (64.2%).

Questionnaire responses were anonymous, however only responses from current employees of Australian organisations over 18 years old were used in the analysis of the data.

## Results

### Key Findings

- Men are more likely to request family friendly work arrangements in organisations with higher psychological safety, i.e. an environment where they feel less judged on the choices they make, even if those choices are non-traditional.
- Men who work in organisations with a psychologically safe environment are likely to experience lower levels of gender role conflict, i.e. they are less worried about how they will be perceived by others and less fearful of any negative consequences of their actions.
- Men who experience higher gender role conflict report lower likelihood to request family friendly work arrangements as they are likely to perceive family friendly work arrangements as not being 'masculine' enough.

The aim of this study was to investigate the relationships between psychological safety, gender role conflict and likelihood to request family friendly work arrangements in men. This was to better understand what psychological constructs may influence men's likelihood to request family friendly work arrangements.

The results demonstrate the potential that creating a psychologically safe environment at work could have on increasing men's likelihood to request family friendly work arrangements. Psychological research has shown that individuals, men and women, weigh up the costs versus benefits of their behaviour, and where the costs outweigh the benefits are unlikely to proceed<sup>xxxiii</sup>. Potential perceived costs that may be involved in requesting family friendly work such as career penalties, threat to masculinity, and fear of others judgement may be ameliorated by the presence of psychological safety. A psychologically safe environment is one where there is less fear of being judged and less fear of any negative consequences on self-image and career. Results of this study suggest that organisations should be investing more time in creating psychological safety to achieve greater gender equality in their workforce.

These findings also suggest that higher psychological safety results in lower levels of gender role conflict in men. As previously discussed, gender role conflict results from an individual feeling worried about how others will judge them if they are to act in a way that is inconsistent with gender norms, resulting in stress. Conversely, psychological safety creates an environment where individuals are less fearful of how they will be judged and of any negative consequences of their actions on their self-image<sup>xxxiv</sup> (Edmondson, 1999).

It is possible, even plausible, that the fear of the reaction from others when acting inconsistently with preconceived gender roles goes beyond the reactions of colleagues in the workplace<sup>xxxv</sup>. However, this study demonstrates that the perceived attitudes of people at work affects at least part of the decision-making process for men considering to request family friendly work arrangements.

Finally, this study investigated whether higher gender role conflict would result in men reporting lower likelihood to request family friendly work arrangements, and results indicate that this is the case. The 'breadwinner / homemaker' model results in socialised gender roles that are reinforced over time and often exist unconsciously making them harder to change<sup>xxxvi</sup>. The consequence of this is that men who have higher gender role conflict are likely to perceive family friendly work arrangements as not being 'masculine', and fear judgement for doing what they perceive, or what they think others will perceive, as being 'a woman's work'.

These findings support the conclusion that simply offering access to family friendly work arrangements is not likely to drive the change that is needed to achieve greater gender equality in parenting<sup>xxxvii</sup> (Klinth, 2008), as a precursor to greater gender equality in leadership.

A final important note, and some good news, is that responses from participants in this study suggested that attitudes towards masculinity are changing and younger generations and those with children are more accepting of requesting family friendly work arrangements than older generations. However, the bad news is that the data also shows that attitudes are not changing as quickly as desired in order to achieve greater equality in parenting in the near, or even the medium term, future.



## Recommendations

This study showed that there is an important link between psychological safety in organisations and the likelihood of men requesting access to family friendly work arrangements. Organisations that focus on concepts such as psychological safety and its applicability in the workplace help create a society with greater equality which gives way for individuals to reach their full potential, leading to more productive organisations and a more psychologically 'well' society.

The 100% Project recommends organisations consider the following actions:



### **Developing, embedding and rewarding the behaviours at individual, team and organisational levels that create the environment necessary to build and support a psychologically safe culture. This includes:**

- a) *Asking the difficult questions and promoting healthy conflict.*  
Asking difficult questions and healthy conflict might be considered one of the riskiest interpersonal endeavours. It follows that we should strive to create conditions for the healthiest form of conflict. Asking questions in a certain way "allows others to feel that you respect them and are debating their ideas rather than judging them because of their ideas. Doing so promotes healthy conflict, and others will not hesitate to bring you even those seemingly whacky ideas that prove to be invaluable"<sup>xxxviii</sup>.
- b) *Earning and extending trust*  
Edmondson's research connects trust to psychological safety: "It describes a team climate characterized by interpersonal trust and mutual respect in which people are comfortable being themselves." Interestingly, trust is identified in Google's Project Aristotle as a key requirement for the perfect team. But it's not enough to acknowledge that trust is critical—you need to build it, keep it, and be an example for others.
- c) *Creating safety by being vulnerable*  
When leaders in particular are able to demonstrate vulnerability, that they don't have all of the answers and can also struggle at times to juggle the expectations they have of themselves and others have of them, this can create a safe environment to share. Challenges and opportunities are then able to be discussed with empathy in an open and authentic way to develop fit for purpose solutions.
- d) *Putting the spotlight on (senior) management*

When it comes to psychological safety senior management have an opportunity to demonstrate empathy and respect non-judgemental behaviour. For example, when leaders hear baby news or see a new baby photo from a male colleague, making a deliberate effort to have a conversation with that person about taking parental leave or how to enable flexible work arrangements. Having a superior bring up the topic reduces the anxiety or pressure on the individual and is also a positive behavioural indicator for a psychologically safe work culture. At the same time, organisations need to create support systems for managers who need additional resources and guidance in navigating workload fluctuations created by more people taking advantage of family friendly work arrangements.

### Other opportunities include:

- a) *Continued education about the benefits of family friendly work arrangements both for organisations and individuals.*  
Leverage internal communications to promote a positive image of men who are taking family friendly work arrangement and sharing their stories in public forums to “re-set” the narrative associated with gender roles.
- b) *Pro-actively working to enable men to request access to flexible work.*  
Invest and implement appropriate process and system changes to enable flexibility, so there is no guilt associated with men taking alternative work arrangements. Make conversations about flexible work options a part of annual or six-monthly development planning discussions.
- c) *Promote women and men who take up flexible work arrangements.*  
Ensure that women and men who have a flexible work arrangement are promoted and that access to flexibility does not disqualify you from access to advancement, development and critical roles. Communicate internally that the flexible working arrangement carries into the new role.

If you would like to explore how to create or embed a psychologically safe culture in your organisation we encourage you to reach out to us at [www.the100percentproject.com.au](http://www.the100percentproject.com.au)



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