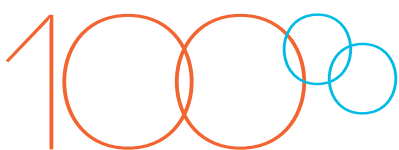


# Men and gender quotas

What's loss got to do with it?



THE ONE HUNDRED  
PERCENT PROJECT

## About The 100% Project

The 100% Project is a not-for-profit organisation with a vision is to achieve 100% gender balanced leadership in Australia, contributing to our social and economic future.

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We exist to promote equality of choice and opportunity for women and all genders. The 100% Project influences conversations and beliefs create evidence-based systemic and behavioural change in workplace policies and practices. Through our research we share data and information that provides thought leadership and prompts discussion and debate.

The 100% Project acknowledges the traditional custodians of country throughout Australia and pay respect to their Elders past, present, and emerging. We celebrate the diversity of First Nations peoples and their continuing connection to land, water, and community. We extend that respect to Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people who are part of The 100% Project and our research partners.

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## Foreword

**by Jane Caro AM**

Many years ago, a relationships counsellor used a diagram to explain to me how relationships break up. She drew a large circle on a whiteboard. "All relationships have a finite amount of space" she said. Then she drew two more circles inside the big one. One of those circles took up most of the available space and the other, much smaller, was squeezed in beside it. "In most relationships in our society, one partner – often the man – takes up more room than the other. When the partner with the least amount of space wants to grow, there are only two things that can happen. Either the partner with more space has to get a little smaller, or..." and at this point she rubbed a large hole in the biggest circle with her finger, "...the relationship breaks up."

I have often thought about this simple but compelling representation of human relationships, particularly over the last few decades as I have watched women across the world grow and change and the sometimes overwhelming backlash that has greeted women when they begin to take up more economic, political, intellectual and emotional space in our society.

Active as I am in the fray, when I step back and think about that diagram, I can understand the backlash. To be asked to get smaller, to literally take up less room is hard, especially if you've never actually felt you were all that big in the first place. Nevertheless, I now think it is inevitable. Even in brutally misogynistic societies like Afghanistan under the Taliban and Iran or Saudi Arabia, women are insisting on taking up more room.

*I see quotas as simply a method for readjusting the space available to men and women. They are designed to create an actual meritocracy, rather than the pretend, male-centric one we have had until now.*

But nor do women and, I hope, men want to see the relationship between genders irretrievably break down. That will do none of us any good. I see quotas as simply a method for readjusting the space available to men and women. They are designed to create an actual meritocracy, rather than the pretend, male-centric one we have had until now.

But, I acknowledge that for many men, quotas – symbolic as they are of the shifting available space – may feel unfair, as if they are being asked to give something up. But, as every partner in a healthy and successful long-term relationship has found, by shrinking a little you can gain a lot.

Equally sharing the available space will enable both genders to have more balanced and fulfilling lives. For example, men can have more time to be fathers and care for ageing parents and maintain friendships and exercise and rest and recreate. Women will have more opportunity to use their education, earn the money they need to avoid poverty and develop their intellectual, creative and organisational skills.

So I am grateful for this research, which explores how men's attitudes towards quotas – and resistance to their implementation – is influenced by the (conscious or unconscious) fear of loss that accompanies a more equal sharing of the space available. Understanding and acknowledging that loss may be the first step towards finding out how to better support men through inevitable change.

*Understanding and acknowledging that loss may be the first step towards finding out how to better support men through inevitable change.*

When women attempt to take up more of the available room – via quotas or anything else – this research reveals we need to help men understand, acknowledge and process that loss. Only then will they be able to understand what they could gain. The relationship counsellor saved marriages with her diagram, helping her clients to better understand the perspective of the other. All human beings, no matter how they identify, share a finite space – namely the planet we live on. We can all make more room for one another – including room for the sense of loss men may experience as well as women's hopes for a brighter future.



## Foreword

### **By the NSW Treasurer and Minister for Energy, The Hon Matt Kean**

The Western liberal tradition is based on the belief that every person is endowed with unique characteristics which makes them special, is entitled to the dignity of their humanity, is of value and has value to add.

That's why we should give every person the freedom to pursue the opportunities that best fit their aspirations and capabilities. But for half the population – women – too many barriers remain.

Lingering cultural barriers such as the ongoing prevalence of workplace harassment or the societal blight of sexual assault – deny too many women the same opportunities as men.

Economic barriers – spanning the cost and scarcity of childcare to the failure to close the gap in superannuation earnings over a lifetime between men and women – inhibit their financial freedom.

And of course, too many women are held back from climbing the corporate or political ladder because their contribution is overlooked. I've heard too many stories of a woman raising an idea in the workplace to see that idea rejected, only for it to be embraced when raised by a man. When that happens, it is not about the quality of the idea.

We should never miss out on the next ground-breaking technology, life-saving medicine or game-changing start-up because of the gender of their owner.

That's why I welcome The 100% Project's latest Research Paper, *Men and gender quotas: What's loss got to do with it?* It clearly confronts the concept of merit, and the fact a loss of belief in meritocracy and leadership identity shapes men's opposition to gender quotas.

The fact is, a truly merit-based economy and society would see women who have the same competency and capabilities as men in far more leadership positions today.

But this is often not the case.

And quotas can help shift the dial to create a country where the baby girl born today has the same opportunities and liberties as the baby boy born in the hospital room next door.

I congratulate everyone involved in The 100% Project's research work, and hope it helps drive the change that is needed to lift the prospects of every woman living in Australia.



*I welcome The 100% Project's latest Research Paper, Men and gender quotas: What's loss got to do with it? It clearly confronts the concept of merit, and the fact a loss of belief in meritocracy and leadership identity shapes men's opposition to gender quotas.*





# Executive summary

Gender imbalance in senior leadership positions is still prevalent in Australia. There are many challenges that women face when striving to gain these positions, such as gender stereotypes and gender discrimination. One strategy suggested to correct the imbalance at the top is the use of gender quotas. Whilst this strategy has shown success in a number of countries around the world, Australia appears to be more hesitant to implement the use of gender quotas.

Gender quotas often cause controversy, and their use is frequently met with resistance, with a large proportion of both men and women not supporting gender quotas. Recognising what is behind this apprehension is essential if gender quotas are to play an increasing role in corporate Australia's journey to improving gender equity. In their book *Leadership on the Line*, Heifetz & Linsky (2002) suggested that people don't resist change per se, but rather they resist the loss that comes with change. Whilst the 100% Project has conducted research that explores resistance to gender quotas and the concept of loss for men and women, in this white paper we discuss findings from our research which focused specifically on men's attitudes to gender quotas and the potential effect of loss on their resistance. Overall, our findings show that the notion of loss is indeed at work when men resist quotas, especially when it comes to the notion of meritocracy and leadership identity.

## Key findings

1

**Men are less likely to support gender quotas when they associate quotas with:**

- Loss of meritocracy in the workplace
- Loss of leadership identity

*But...*

2

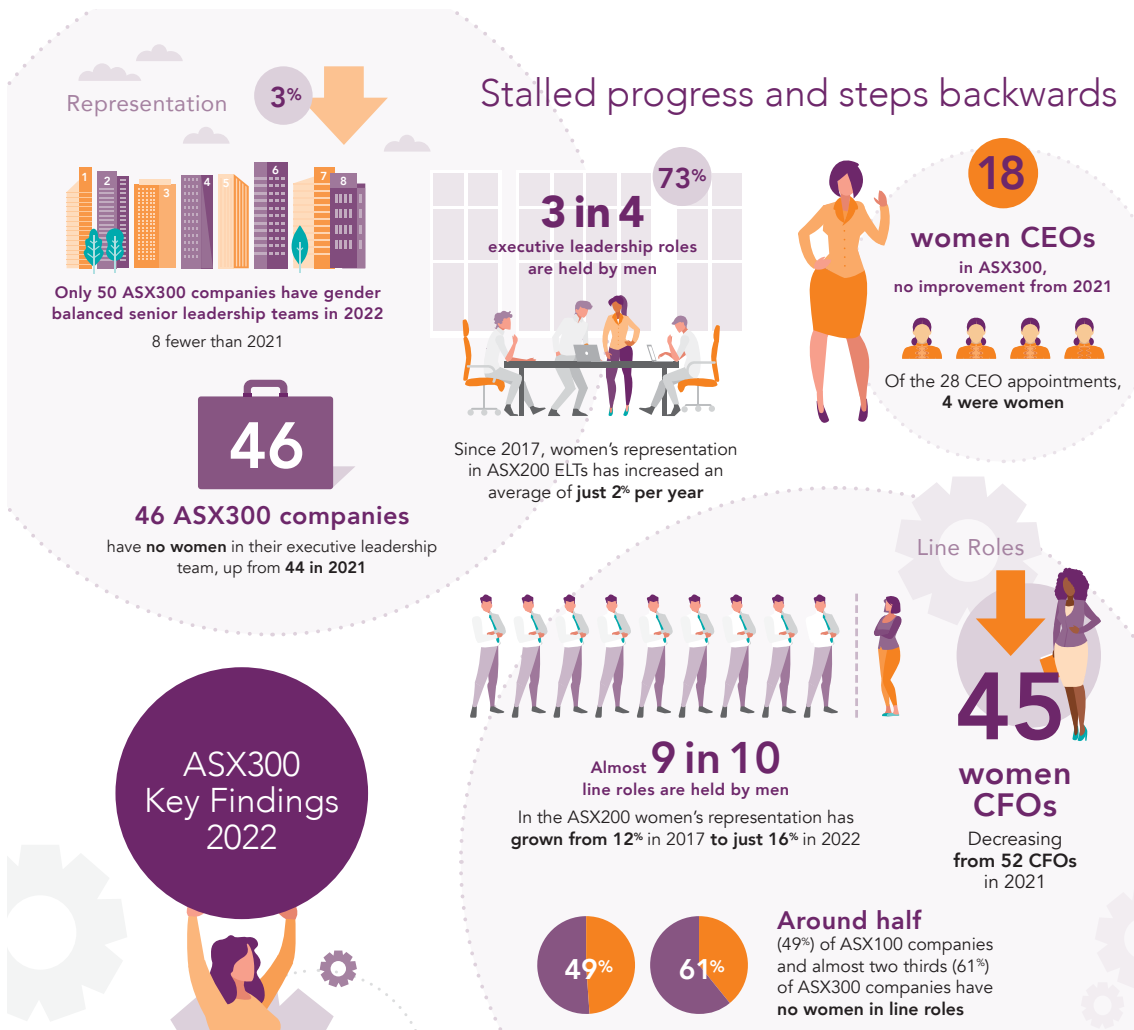
**Loss of leadership opportunity does not influence men's support of gender quotas**

## The current landscape

Gender equality in corporate leadership is now well accepted as the optimal structure to deliver the best outcomes for an organisation. Despite this well-established fact, gender imbalance in senior leadership positions (board and C-suite positions) is pervasive in Australia, with men historically and currently occupying the majority of leadership positions (see figure 1'). Despite efforts to introduce government policy and organisational strategies to increase the representation of women in leadership roles, barriers continue to exist that prevent Australian organisations achieving gender parity in senior positions. For example, 66 of ASX200 companies and 127 of ASX300 companies have not achieved 30% of their directors being women.<sup>2</sup>

Latest WGEA<sup>3</sup> statistics from 2020–2021 show that women comprise 17.6% chair positions, 31.2% of director positions, 19.4% of CEOs and 34.5% of key management people.<sup>4</sup> Organisational strategies such as flexible work arrangements and maternity and paternity leave programs have been introduced in an attempt to minimise the gender gap in leadership, although these measures alone have not achieved the level of equality that Australia should be achieving.

Figure 1.



The 100% Project is persistent in its message that gender equality in Australia is in a bleak state and real progress and change has yet to be made. These figures on gender inequality serve as a continual reminder that more work needs to be done.

Further, whilst in the past it might have been argued that there are not the same proportion of women with the appropriate skills or education, this argument becomes less relevant now, given the fact that more women than men are graduating from university, having relevant post-graduate qualifications, and are working in professional occupations. Moreover, women are also achieving generally higher academic outcomes than men and as such they are as qualified as men for leadership positions. Whilst this is more of a historical barrier for women gaining leadership positions, there are more contemporary challenges that need to be addressed.

Trying to understand what lies behind this gender inequality is crucial if women are to play an increasing leadership role in corporate Australia.

## What are the benefits of gender equality in leadership?

The business case for gender equity in leadership has been widely researched. It has been shown that organisations with greater gender parity on boards and in C-Suite positions report better performances than those who do not display equality in these leadership positions.<sup>5, 6, 7, 8</sup>

Benefits of gender balance in leadership include:

- Improved financial performance; associated with increased stock price, shareholder returns and overall profitability
- Increased innovation
- Problem solving
- Market insight
- Decision making capacity
- Ability to cater to a diverse client market
- Increased perspectives and ideas, giving them a competitive organisational advantage
- Talent retention

Beyond the business case for gender balance in leadership, gender balance aligns with current ethical and social standards which can increase the reputation of an organisation. A positive corporate reputation has several benefits for the organisation and for its employees including high job satisfaction and employee retention. Gender balanced leadership is also associated with wider societal benefits where women have been found to have a higher regard for social issues and demonstrate more benevolence than men, and therefore often engage in more socially responsible business practices.<sup>9</sup>

## What are the current barriers to gender equality?

Despite the clear evidence that gender diversity and gender balance in leadership is beneficial, women still face many challenges as they attempt to rise to these positions. The 'glass ceiling' effect refers to the many barriers preventing women from entering positions of senior leadership. Among many others, these include issues such as gender stereotypes and gender discrimination, which lead to men being favoured as leaders.

Women are often stereotyped as being warm, obedient, kind, sensitive, nurturing, and understanding, whereas men are often stereotyped as being dominant, assertive, independent, and being task and achievement focussed. These gender stereotypes can be problematic for women when trying to gain leadership positions, because men are stereotypically associated with more traditional leadership behaviours, and women are seen as less suitable. Research indicates that women are given less responsibility and fewer tasks of significance than men due to these gender stereotypes, and that women are often perceived as being less physically, emotionally, and mentally capable when it comes to being considered for leadership positions.

Gender stereotypes can also lead to workplace discrimination which can prevent women from moving into leadership positions. It is common for leadership roles to be withheld from women due to the belief that they are less competent than men and do not have leadership-like attributes. Research has found that substantially more women than men believe that gender discrimination is present in workplaces.

Women also face structural, systemic issues, such as lack of flexible work practices, the gender pay gap and lack of respect for caregiving which create significant barriers for gender equality.

## How can we make meaningful progress on gender equality?

One strategy proposed to address the lack of women in leadership is gender quotas. Gender quotas refer to legislated mandates that require women to make up a certain amount of a body (such as boards or in leadership positions). Historical efforts to address the lack of women in leadership positions have had limited success, so it is argued that gender quotas are necessary to address the gender disparity as they create direct change at a fundamental and systematic level.

Gender quotas were first introduced in 2003 in Norway, and the country subsequently achieved approximately 43% women representation across boards. Gender quotas have since been introduced, or are currently being considered, in a number of other countries, and have shown to improve gender balance.<sup>10,11</sup> It is argued that beyond increasing the number of women in leadership positions, gender quotas normalise and de-stigmatise the presence of women in leadership. This also reduces the tokenism, marginalisation, and stereotyping women can experience in leadership positions.

## It's not so easy...

Although gender quotas have been demonstrated to be effective, the topic of gender quotas is often highly emotive. Some factors contributing to negative emotional responses to quotas include belief in traditional gender roles, belief that gender discrimination does not occur, and justification of current organisational practices.

### Change and Loss

During times of change, individuals can either be or believe they are being deprived of something they once had. Individuals may therefore experience a perceived sense of harm and personal cost. Due to this perceived 'loss,' individuals are likely to resist change.

Research indicates that some people believe that quotas unfairly advantage underrepresented groups (in this instance – women), undermine the skills of people selected under quotas, and further stigmatise people selected using quotas. The topic of gender quotas may activate emotions such as anger, fear, discomfort, and distress, as people believe that gender quotas are an unfair way of creating change. Thus, gender quotas are often met with high levels of resistance.

In organisational research, resistance is often attributed to the traditional view that people resist change in general. It is common for people to protect and preserve the status quo when it is under threat and as such research has found that approximately 70% of organisational change initiatives tend to fail.<sup>12</sup> However, beyond the traditional notion of resistance to change, another way of viewing resistance can be explored through the notion of loss. Ronald Heifetz and Marty Linsky developed the concept of adaptive change, which calls for people to reconsider and revise their deeply held views and opinions. They argued that people do not resist change per se; they instead oppose the loss associated with change<sup>1</sup> – in this case the losses, or perceived losses, that come with the introduction of gender quotas.



# This research

We sought to understand the factors that may prevent men from supporting the use of gender quotas, which, if used, may subsequently increase the gender balance in leadership.

Our research investigated the notion of loss in relation to men's attitudes to gender quotas, specifically investigating whether the following losses impacted the way in which men either support or do not support gender quotas:

## Loss of belief in meritocracy

Meritocracy is the belief that outcomes and rewards are based on effort, input, and skills.

The concept of meritocracy is a common argument against the use of gender quotas, despite research suggesting that meritocracy in the workplace is a myth.

## Loss of leadership identity

Leadership has traditionally been attributed specifically to men.

An increase in women in leadership may threaten this identity by making leadership a more gender-neutral attribute.

## Loss of opportunity

More women in leadership may lead to a perceived or real decrease in the leadership opportunities available to men.

A total of 204 Australian men over the age of 18 completed the online survey/ questionnaire. Participants were between 18 and 79 years of age, with 78.9% of participants indicating they were employed on a full-time basis and 21.1% are employed on a part-time basis.

## Key findings

**Men are less likely to support gender quotas when they associate quotas with:**

- **Loss of belief in meritocracy in the workplace**
- **Loss of leadership identity**

*But...*

- **Loss of leadership opportunity does not influence men's support of gender quotas**

In the current study, men who believed that gender quotas violated the notion of meritocracy, were less likely to support the use of gender quotas. This is in line with previous research conducted by The 100% Project which found that individuals who believe that recruitment and rewards in the workplace should be based on performance and qualifications over demographic variables (such as gender) were less likely to support the use of affirmative action strategies. It is likely that participants in the study who believed that gender quotas violated current organisational systems and functioning which they believe to be fair and based on merit were therefore likely to resist the implementation of gender quotas. There is no research demonstrating that women who are selected for leadership positions via quotas are "less qualified." In fact, studies show that women are often required to demonstrate *more* qualifications and experience than men to be equally considered a legitimate candidate for leadership. These results again shed light on the barrier that the concept of meritocracy presents to the implementation of gender quotas.

As expected, men who believed that gender quotas accompany a loss in leadership identity were less likely to support quotas. Leadership has traditionally been viewed as a masculine attribute, with the stereotypical gender attributes of men including 'success driven' and 'assertive'. An increase in women in leadership may threaten this identity by making leadership a more gender-neutral attribute.

Finally, contrary to expectations, findings suggested that men did not believe that gender quotas would lead to a loss of leadership opportunity for themselves, and therefore this did not affect their support for gender quotas. This may be because both historically and currently, men take up the majority of leadership positions and may therefore trust that leadership opportunities will continue to be available for them, even if more women enter the leadership ranks.

These findings provide useful information about potential factors that underlie the attitudes of men toward gender quotas and further, provide useful information in relation to why men may resist gender quotas. Insight into what drives the attitude of men towards gender quotas is valuable given men currently hold most of the positions making decisions regarding policy and development. A shift in support for the use of gender quotas could potentially mean that more organisations and individuals would have access to the benefits of gender balanced leadership.

## Recommendations

This study showed that loss plays a role in men's resistance to gender quotas. As a result, we believe that the more we understand what we are asking men to 'lose' and help them work through these losses, the more likely we are to gain support for the use of quotas. We know quotas are not a silver bullet, but that they are likely a crucial tool that can assist in increasing the proportion of women leaders.

The 100% Project recommends organisations consider the following actions:



### Acknowledge loss

When considering the implementation of gender quotas, acknowledge the loss associated with this change. One of the reasons change initiatives fail is because the positives are over-emphasised and 'sold' to stakeholders and the losses are not acknowledged. The loss is real, not imagined, and stakeholders' feelings of loss should be respected. In fact, when such feelings are not acknowledged and respected, resistance is likely to increase.



### Don't shy away from quotas because of loss

Quotas are not the entire answer to the issue of gender imbalance at the top of organisations, but they can play an important role. When implementing quotas, it is important to remain realistic and real. Acknowledging loss can be hard work and there may be a temptation to shelve the quotas initiative when it feels like it is all getting too hard. Don't. Don't pretend loss is not happening, but also don't allow it to derail the process. To acknowledge and respect loss does not mean to stay with the status quo.



### Exercise leadership

Every change process has loss inherent in it; for one stakeholder, for some stakeholders, or for all stakeholders. As Heifetz, Grashow, and Linsky (2009) state: "...leadership almost always puts you in the business of assessing, managing, distributing, and providing contexts for losses that move people through those losses to a new place."<sup>14</sup> This means the deliberate exercise of leadership is required.





### **Reframe meritocracy, but don't expect miracles**

While education related to meritocracy, or rather the myth of it, should continue, organisations need to be aware that those who believe that Australia operates under meritorious conditions, by default do not want to give up this belief. As such, an emphasis on education alone, and a stubborn repetition of the untruth of the 'myth of meritocracy' is unlikely to help. People who feel cornered and are made to feel 'dumb' are unlikely to become supporters of quotas.



### **Revise current notions of leadership identity**

Talking about, and emphasising, leadership identity as encompassing traits such as task orientation and achievement focus as well as collaboration and compassion, without attribution of these traits specifically to either men or women will, over time, help to revise the notion that leadership is associated with traits traditionally more often associated with men. This will require a deliberate and sustained effort by senior management in organisations and a requirement that this is cascaded down to other levels of leadership in organisations, both in word and deed.

## **A final note: research in the pipeline**

There is a lot more to learn about loss and its effect in the workplace. The current study focused on men's attitude towards gender quotas and the potential effect of loss on that attitude. However, men are not the only stakeholders when quotas are introduced, women are stakeholders too.

The 100% Project has conducted a similar study on women's attitude towards quotas and the effect of loss. This research will be released later in 2023. In addition, we have looked at the concept of psychological safety and the possibility that psychological safety may help individuals process loss more effectively. This research will also be released later this year.





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## About the Authors

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Phoebe is a psychologist who completed her Master of Organisational Psychology at Deakin University in 2020. She completed her thesis in collaboration with The 100% Project. Phoebe currently works in the mental health space, enjoying assisting others to live a fulfilled and happy life. Previously she has had experience in both internal roles and in consulting within the organisational psychology field.

### Frances Feenstra

Frances is an organisational psychologist with more than 25 years' experience and a Director of People Measures, a firm of organisational psychologists and development experts. She has held university appointments as well as a number of senior positions with Right Management and PwC. At PwC, she was the main driver behind the establishment of Symmetry, an initiative to connect, inspire and empower the firm's emerging female leaders. Frances was a founder and the inaugural Chair of The 100% Project until 2014. She also chaired the Advisory Board for the Australian Centre for Research into Employment and Work (ACREW) at Monash University, and is a supervisor and examiner for postgraduate research students at Deakin University (Victoria). She continues to work as a member of The 100% Project's Research Committee.

### Caroline Rosenberg

Caroline is an organisational psychologist at Deakin University and Positive Psychology Centres. Her PhD research focused on the use of humour in leadership, and she also works on gender DEI, graduate work readiness, and employability. As a supervisor of postgraduate research and organisational psychology registrar program, she is dedicated to mentoring the next generation of psychologists and advancing organisational psychology in Australian organisations. Caroline has been a member of The 100% Project since 2017.

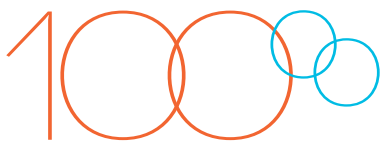
### Gillian Harris

Gillian Harris is a Master of Organisational Psychology student at Deakin University. She is currently undertaking a research project with the 100% Project, as part of her Master's thesis on the Glass Cliff and psychological safety. Gillian works part-time as a consultant at People Measures, developing her skills in leadership development and culture assessment. Gillian joined the 100% Project's Research Committee in 2022.

### Kat Stevenson

Kat Stevenson has been Chair of the Research Committee since 2021 and a Committee member since she completed her Masters thesis on gender quotas and meritocracy in conjunction with The 100% Project in 2016. As a registered Psychologist (Organisational & Industrial), Kat is passionate about making work a place where people belong, grow and thrive. With several years' experience in the sports industry (currently at Richmond Football Club), Kat focuses in the areas of leadership development, diversity and inclusion, mental health and wellbeing and people and culture.





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