



SAVING THE FALL: CAN PSYCHOLOGICAL SAFETY HELP WOMEN NAVIGATE THE GLASS CLIFF?

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FOREWORD

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10000
THE ONE HUNDRED
PERCENT PROJECT

ABOUT THE 100% PROJECT

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

We exist to promote equality of choice and opportunity for women and all genders. The 100% Project influences conversations and beliefs to 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.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENT OF COUNTRY

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

Since its establishment in 2008, The 100% Project has been a dedicated agent for gender equality in leadership across Australian organisations. A key initiative of The 100% Project is to undertake research that raises awareness of important issues, challenges mindsets, and guides organisational practices to fully realise the potential of all leaders.

Around the world, we've seen great improvements that contribute to workplace gender equality. However, evidence shows that in many areas progress has been slow and inequalities remain stubbornly in place. Research about leadership demonstrates that we need to challenge the gendered assumptions and gender-role expectations that continue to shape perceptions and treatment of leaders. In practical terms, equality and inclusion should be a strategic priority, sponsored at the top of the organisation and embedded in the way we work.

The 'glass cliff' phenomenon was first identified by Michelle Ryan and Alex Haslam two decades ago as one of the many hurdles that women leaders are faced with in workplaces. The glass cliff is an enduring and insidious problem. In this report, Gillian Harris, Frances Feenstra and Caroline Rosenberg discuss the glass cliff and identify key causes and consequences. This report highlights several recent examples of the glass cliff in Australia; sadly, there are similar examples in many countries around the world.

Gillian Harris, Frances Feenstra and Caroline Rosenberg present a call to action for all of us, as leaders, allies, and followers, to challenge the way women leaders are viewed and treated. Reflecting their expertise in organisational psychology, the authors bring the spotlight onto psychological safety, a concept that has been widely researched across many workplace settings. There is solid evidence that psychological safety can unlock the potential for inclusive and effective workplaces. For women leaders, indeed for all of us to thrive at work, there must be safety in voicing opinions and making mistakes without fear of retribution.

The report offers fresh research and practical recommendations on how we can address the glass cliff and create psychologically safe environments. I am grateful to The 100% Project and the authors of this research for strengthening my hope that we will realise the potential of all leaders.



HELEN DE CIERI
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August 2024

FOREWORD

As I reflect on this moment, I'm struck by the paradox of our progress. We've made some very slow and long overdue advances in gender equality, yet the pinnacle of corporate leadership remains a fragile position for women. The 'Glass Cliff' phenomenon, where women are disproportionately chosen for leadership roles during crises, highlights the nuanced challenges in our pursuit of equity.

This timely research by The 100% Project brings to light a crucial aspect of gender dynamics in leadership. It's no longer just about breaking through the glass ceiling; it's about ensuring a solid and supportive foundation once that ceiling shatters.

As I interviewed senior women leaders in recent talent programs, a recurring theme emerged. Almost without fail, each shared a story about being thrust into high-profile, mission-critical roles during the COVID-19 pandemic. However, what varied significantly was the level of psychological safety and support they felt. This disparity highlights the critical role that organisational culture plays in shaping leadership experiences and outcomes.

The findings here are both illuminating and, at times, surprising. They push us to reevaluate our perceptions and support systems for leaders, particularly women leaders who lead during crises and upheavals. The revelation that psychological safety significantly influences leadership success, regardless of gender, is particularly striking. It's a call to action for organisations to create environments where all leaders can thrive, especially in turbulent times.

We must acknowledge the complexities this research reveals. The unexpected results challenging the traditional Glass Cliff narrative remind us that progress is rarely straightforward. They encourage us to delve deeper, question our assumptions, and stay committed to the pursuit of equality.

To the leaders: Use these insights to drive change. Foster psychologically safe environments where all leaders can flourish. Confront and dismantle subtle biases in your decisions. Support women leaders not only in crises but also in times of growth and opportunity. This is not just a suggestion, it's a call to action that we must all commit to.

To the researchers and contributors: Your work is invaluable. You've provided us with the data and insights needed to inspire meaningful change. Your dedication to uncovering the truth, however uncomfortable, is commendable.

True equality is about equal opportunities, support, and recognition. The Glass Cliff may exist today, but with the knowledge from this research, we have the tools to transform it into a launchpad for equitable leadership.

The journey ahead may be challenging, but it's one we must embark on together. Supporting women leaders isn't just about changing organisations - it's about changing society. And that's a cliff worth climbing.



IAIN MILNE
Director
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**PEOPLE
MEASURES**

August 2024

FOREWORD

Throughout my decades-long tenure as a director in the outplacement industry, I have seen first-hand the intrinsic challenges that executive women face when compared to their male colleagues. Observationally, female leaders are subjected to heightened scrutiny and less support. Achievements are more often diminished or unnoticed, while mistakes frequently become defining. This disparity makes it more difficult for women to secure subsequent senior roles. By comparison, the careers of their male peers seem less impacted by similar failures.

The Glass Cliff phenomenon, where women are placed in precarious leadership positions during times of organisational crisis, exacerbates the challenges female leaders face. Rather than relying on anecdotal examples, this research by The 100% Project is critical to begin understanding the Glass Cliff phenomenon. It will help businesses and institutions identify how to best support women who may find themselves in this sometimes precarious position.

The findings and recommendations not only shed light on the systemic issues contributing to the Glass Cliff but also provide actionable strategies for fostering a more inclusive and supportive environment for female leaders at all levels. By cultivating psychological safety and addressing inherent gender biases, organisations can better support women, ensuring they not only survive but thrive in their roles.

This report is an important step towards understanding and addressing the unique challenges faced by women in leadership. It serves as a call to action for organisations to create equitable and supportive environments where all leaders can succeed, irrespective of gender.



JANNINE FRASER
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August 2024

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

While men still hold the majority of leadership positions, during times of organisational crisis it is frequently women who are chosen to fill the top roles. The Glass Cliff phenomenon encapsulates this trend, where women are appointed to precarious leadership positions during times of turmoil. This not only impacts individual women's careers but also perpetuates gender stereotypes about men and women's differing leadership capabilities. Consequently, there's a pressing need to find ways to support women when they are selected for these challenging roles.

This paper outlines The 100% Project's research findings related to the Glass Cliff and whether psychological safety can serve as a protective factor for women navigating precarious leadership situations. Results indicate that psychological safety indeed plays a promisingly helpful role in helping women thrive in leadership positions.

In addition to our research findings, this paper offers actionable recommendations to promote psychological safety and assist organisations in addressing the Glass Cliff phenomenon.



Introduction

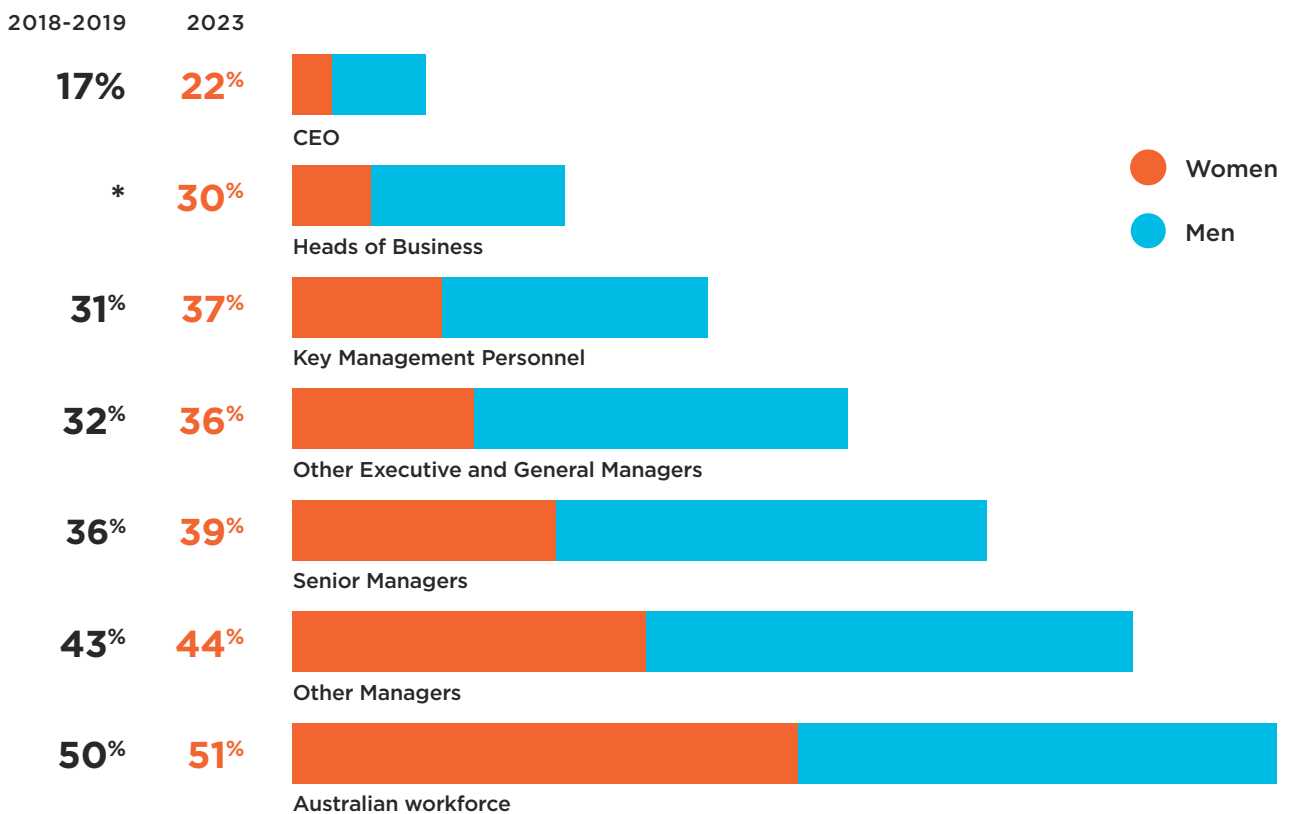
In recent decades, women’s strides towards workplace equality have been noteworthy, yet leadership positions remain predominantly filled by men. The business case for embracing diverse perspectives has been extensively documented,^{1,2} supported by robust research illustrating not only positive correlations but also direct links between women in leadership roles and enhanced organisational financial performance.^{3,4} As corporations broaden their definition of performance to encompass environmental, social, and governance (ESG) factors,⁵ gender diversity at the top has emerged as a key driver of corporate success, governance, and community engagement.^{6,7} Despite incremental progress, the journey towards achieving gender equality in leadership roles has been slow.

WGEA’s 2022-23 Employer Census reveals a notable ‘seniority drop-off’, indicating a decrease in the representation of women as the managerial hierarchy ascends (see Figure 1).⁸

Amid some gender equity progress, the so-called Glass Cliff, a phenomenon initially coined by Ryan and Haslam (2005), has increasingly captured the attention of researchers and business leaders alike.

The Glass Cliff describes the tendency to appoint women to precarious leadership positions during times of organisational crisis or significant change.⁹ This phenomenon has far-reaching consequences, including career impacts for the women involved, but also in shaping perceptions of women’s leadership capabilities more broadly.

Figure 1: Percentage of Women in Leadership Positions



Understanding the Glass Cliff

The Glass Cliff describes the phenomenon of women being elected to leadership positions that are more precarious and where the risk of failure is high. Many studies have supported the existence of this phenomenon whereby during times of poor organisational performance women are more likely to be selected as leaders than men.^{10,11}

We can see possible examples of the Glass Cliff phenomenon in many recent Australian leadership appointments. Vanessa Hudson and Michele Bullock, recently appointed to lead Qantas and the Reserve Bank of Australia respectively, share the distinction of being the first women in their roles, as well as having to navigate turbulent times for their respective organisations.

Jayne Hrdlicka was also appointed to lead Virgin when it was on the brink of collapse. Other instances include Amanda Bardwell taking on the role of CEO at Woolworths during a period of public scrutiny, allegations of price gouging, and a downturn in the company's share price, as well as Catherine West's appointment as the new chair of Nine Entertainment, amidst a company culture crisis. These examples underscore the challenges women often confront when taking on leadership positions.



MICHELE BULLOCK
Governor of RBA
SEPTEMBER 2023

"She will bring a fresh perspective."

- Treasurer Jim Chalmers, 2023

"So often, the need for 'fresh perspectives' and renewal are sought just as an organisation is on the precipice."

- Women's Agenda ²⁷



VANESSA HUDSON
CEO of Qantas
SEPTEMBER 2023

"Hudson is stepping into the role of Qantas CEO after her predecessor Alan Joyce moved his retirement two months early amid a wave of criticism and public backlash against the company."

- SBS News, 2023 ²⁸



JAYNE HRDLICKA
CEO of Virgin
NOVEMBER 2020-2024

"Virgin Australia's Jayne Hrdlicka has decided to step down as Chief Executive after successfully steering the airline out of administration and into profitability."

- SBS News, 2024 ³¹



AMANDA BARDWELL
CEO of Woolworths
COMMENCING SEPTEMBER 2024

"It is unfortunate that the appointment of Woolworths' first female CEO happens to come just as public scrutiny of the supermarket giant has further ramped up."

- Women's Agenda, 2024 ²⁹



CATHERINE WEST
Chair of Nine Entertainment
JUNE 2024

"In taking over from former federal Treasurer Peter Costello as the Chairwoman of the country's largest media company, West finds herself dealing with the fallout of a major cultural crisis."

- Australian Financial Review, 2024 ³⁰

Causes and Consequences

There are many possible influencing factors that lead to the Glass Cliff phenomenon, which may explain why women end up in these precarious leadership positions. One explanation for appointing women in times of crisis may be the influence of gender stereotypes. Research has revealed that people tend to choose men with stereotypical masculine traits to lead successful companies, while opting for women with stereotypical feminine traits, such as superior interpersonal and supportive skills, in times of crisis.¹²

Another explanation for the Glass Cliff phenomenon could be the desire to signal change, with research suggesting that organisations may strategically appoint women to leadership positions during times of failure to convey a shift in direction to investors.¹³ This preference for women leaders during crises is especially pronounced when previous leadership has been predominantly male.¹²

The repercussions of the Glass Cliff extend beyond individual women leaders and their careers, also impacting broader perceptions of women's capabilities more generally. Research has clearly demonstrated that leaders appointed during challenging times face increased scrutiny and are less likely to secure future leadership roles.¹⁴ Non-prototypical leaders such as women, often experience heightened consequences for mistakes,¹⁵ posing a threat to efforts to secure gender equality in leadership.

A case study illustrating this is Christine Holgate, former CEO of Australia Post, who encountered intense scrutiny for rewarding executives with Cartier watches, despite the fact that the value of the watches in question was not excessive when compared to routine bonuses paid out by other CEOs. The scrutiny, as well as unnecessary comments from then Prime Minister Scott Morrison, led to Christine Holgate's resignation amidst a public outcry.¹⁶

In comparison, the repercussions faced by Eddie McGuire despite his controversial behaviour present a stark contrast. Regardless of a history of racist and misogynistic remarks and facing disciplinary action in 2013 for a racist comment made about Indigenous AFL player Adam Goodes, McGuire maintained his media entertainment career and remained in his position as Collingwood Football Club president until 2021, raising questions about the consistency and severity of consequences for individuals in positions of power.



Left:
Christine Holgate
photographed
by Stephen
Chee for Sydney
Morning Herald.

Psychological Safety as a Protective Factor

Addressing the Glass Cliff phenomenon is a considerable challenge, ultimately demanding a broad societal shift in attitudes and behaviours. While this shift is crucial, in the interim The 100% Project wanted to conduct research to investigate ways to support women to help them remain 'safe' and excel even when they find themselves on the Glass Cliff. One supportive factor may be that of workplace psychological safety, conceptualised as the belief among employees that it is safe to take interpersonal risks and where individuals feel free to voice opinions without fear of rejection.¹⁷ Research has shown that high psychological safety in organisations can influence a number of factors such as increases in employee commitment, engagement,¹⁸ trust in co-workers,¹⁹ willingness to take risks,²⁰ ability to cope with organisational change²¹ and employees being unlikely to reject others for being different.¹⁷

Thus, in an organisation with a high level of psychological safety, where risk-taking and embracing diversity are valued, defying the status quo may be more readily tolerated. These research findings provide support for the possibility that psychological safety will influence attitudes and behaviours of employees and that high levels of psychological safety can create an environment conducive to providing support for a newly appointed woman leader. This, in turn, may mean psychological safety can play an important role in aiding those who find themselves on the Glass Cliff.

PSYCHOLOGICAL SAFETY

“...when people have psychological safety at work, they feel comfortable sharing concerns and mistakes without fear of embarrassment or retribution”.

– Amy Edmonson ³²



THE RESEARCH

This current research sought to delve into the phenomenon of the Glass Cliff, as well as focusing on the possibility of organisational psychological safety acting as a protective factor for women leaders navigating precarious leadership situations.

The two main objectives of the study were to:

Firstly, verify the persistence of the Glass Cliff phenomenon by posing the question: when women are appointed to leadership positions, are they more likely to be appointed to a failing organisation than one that is succeeding?

Secondly, explore how women on the Glass Cliff may be supported by asking: does psychological safety act as a protective factor for women facing the challenges of the Glass Cliff?

The research involved analysing the outcomes of a scenario-based survey. To measure the Glass Cliff, participants were presented with two scenarios, each depicting a company either performing well or poorly with a vacant CEO position.

Three candidates' profiles were provided:

- Candidate 1 (a highly qualified woman),
- Candidate 2 (a man with lesser qualifications),
and
- Candidate 3 (a highly qualified man).

Participants rated each candidate on leadership skills, credentials, and suitability. Finally, they nominated their preferred candidate for the

CEO position.

To measure the influence of psychological safety, participants also received one of four additional scenarios, each describing a company performing poorly with either high or low psychological safety and a recently appointed CEO who was either a woman or a man. Participants were then asked to evaluate the likelihood of the newly appointed CEO's success.

The survey was distributed through both social media and professional networks to individuals aged 18 and above, currently employed or recently engaged in employment. The study gathered responses from a group of 206 participants, consisting of 64 men, 141 women, and one participant identifying differently. Notably, 76% of the respondents were aged 36 or older and the type of industry that participants work in varied, with most in the Health and Community Service industry (35.4%) or in the Professional Services industry (18.0%).

Research Findings

THE GLASS CLIFF:

1. Women were more often selected for the CEO position than men regardless of the organisational condition.
2. The percentage of participants selecting the woman candidate did not significantly differ when presented with scenarios that represented failing or succeeding organisational conditions.



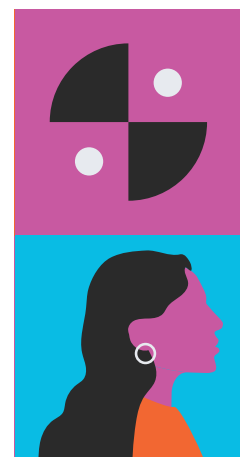
The study's surprising results revealed that women were more frequently chosen for the CEO position than men, irrespective of organisational performance. This unexpected result contrasts with prevailing industry statistics reflecting a predominant representation of men in Australian leadership roles.²¹

Additionally, the study found no difference in the percentage of participants selecting the woman candidate between failing and succeeding organisational conditions, contradicting the Glass Cliff phenomenon, where we would expect more participants selecting the women as CEOs in failing organisations than a successful organisation.

One plausible explanation for these results may be a priming effect,²² where the study's focus on supporting women in leadership roles may have unconsciously influenced participants to favour gender diversity, leading to higher likelihood of selecting the woman candidate in this exercise.

Social desirability bias and evolving societal attitudes toward women in leadership positions likely impacts the interpretation,^{1,2} with increased awareness of gender disparities potentially influencing decisions and diminishing the traditional manifestation of the Glass Cliff effect.

Moreover, with around two-thirds of study participants being women, this demographic composition may also have played a role in shaping the findings, possibly reflecting heightened sensitivity and advocacy for gender diversity in leadership roles among these participants.



Research Findings

PSYCHOLOGICAL SAFETY:

1. Participants were more likely to indicate that both a man and woman CEO would be more successful in a high psychological safety condition compared to a low psychological safety condition.
2. Participants were more likely to indicate that a woman would be more successful in a low psychological safety condition than a man.



The study also explored the interplay of psychological safety and gender on the success of newly appointed leaders. In situations of poor organisational performance and high psychological safety, participants perceived both men and women CEOs as more likely to succeed, than when psychological safety was low. This finding is consistent with previous research that suggests that psychological safety positively influences organisational outcomes^{23,17} and thus could have positively influenced participants' perceptions about leadership success.

In failing organisations with low psychological safety, participants believed women would excel, possibly due to entrenched perceptions of women leaders possessing specific interpersonal and supportive skills that would be perceived as useful in this environment.^{12,24} This perception aligns with the concept of benevolent sexism, wherein women are often associated with nurturing and caregiving qualities.^{25,26}

Whilst there was no apparent evidence for an overall Glass Cliff effect evident in the above results, this unanticipated outcome introduces the possibility of the Glass Cliff manifesting under particular convergent conditions. This implies that women might be considered particularly adept at navigating the *combined* challenges posed by both internal factors like a lack of psychological safety and external factors like organisational crises.

This perspective aligns with the overarching concept of the Glass Cliff, supporting the idea that women are elected to leadership positions in times of organisation crisis, and where the risk of failure is high.⁵ In essence, the interaction at play in the low psychological safety and failing organisation condition could have accentuated participants' gender stereotypes, thereby explaining the emergence of a Glass Cliff phenomenon within this unique context.

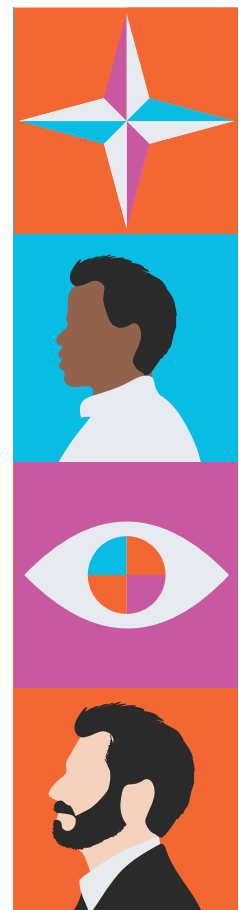
Significance

The results of this study have implications for organisational culture and the equitable representation of women in leadership roles. Whilst the study revealed a potentially shifting cultural perception that women can excel in leadership positions, it is important to note that in reality gender-related disparities persist, with women still encountering challenges in accessing leadership opportunities.

Furthermore, despite the seemingly positive trajectory in attitudes of the perception of women as potentially more successful than men in the context of low psychological safety and during organisational failure, it is important to recognise that this outcome is not inherently advantageous for women. Research highlights that women in leadership often encounter heightened scrutiny and encounter significant obstacles when seeking reappointment following a leadership failure.¹⁵

Consequently, findings from this research that suggest women will often be in leadership positions where the chances of succeeding are stacked against them have profound implications, with ramifications not only for the woman affected but also for the broader pursuit of workplace equity.

Furthermore, the research highlights another crucial implication, i.e. the significance of psychological safety as a catalyst for leadership success, for both men and women. This should prompt organisations to prioritise the cultivation of a safe and supportive workplace environment and the fostering of an atmosphere where individuals feel secure in taking risks, voicing opinions and learning from failures, regardless of gender.



RECOMMENDATIONS

1. ADDRESSING THE GLASS CLIFF

Gathering honest and transparent data about Glass Cliff scenarios in your organisation is crucial for fostering inclusivity and addressing systemic issues.

MONITOR LEADERSHIP TRENDS

Regularly monitor leadership trends and organisational decisions to identify patterns that may indicate the emergence of the Glass Cliff. Implement mechanisms for continuous assessment to proactively address situations where women are disproportionately appointed to leadership roles during challenging times.

COMBAT BENEVOLENT SEXISM

It is essential to honestly acknowledge any pockets of individuals within the organisation holding sexist views, enabling targeted interventions to foster a culture of gender equity. Implement awareness campaigns and training programs specifically targeting benevolent sexism within the organisation.

Educate employees about the subtleties of benevolent sexist attitudes, emphasising that seemingly positive stereotypes can still reinforce gender inequalities.

SUPPORT FOLLOWING FAILURE

Develop robust support mechanisms for individuals, especially women, following leadership failures. Create structured processes for reappointment considerations, focusing on providing mentorship, skill development, and avenues for professional growth. This can help mitigate biases associated with leadership setbacks and encourage resilience.

2. CREATING A PSYCHOLOGICALLY SAFE ENVIRONMENT

Cultivate a workplace culture that emphasises psychological safety, creating an environment where both men and women feel secure in taking risks, expressing opinions, and learning from failures.

REDEFINE ROLES

Redefine the responsibilities of both the boss and team members within an organisation. Traditionally, the leader is perceived as holding all the answers, issuing commands, and solely evaluating performance. However, in a revised perception, the boss is seen as someone who establishes direction while actively welcoming input and fostering an environment conducive to ongoing growth. Similarly, the traditional perception of team members is that they should follow orders unquestioningly. In a revised perception, team members are encouraged to offer their expertise and perspective through active contribution, thus helping to promote psychological safety within the workplace.

ESTABLISH A CULTURE OF EMBRACING CHALLENGES

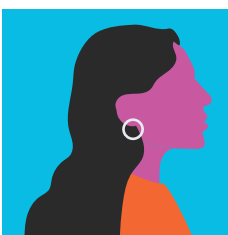
Conduct peer review sessions involving individuals offering constructive feedback on others' work and identifying areas for improvement in a collaborative manner. Host challenge workshops where teams convene quarterly to question their operational methods, confront prevailing norms, and challenge group consensus to foster psychological safety. Create a continuous improvement board, virtual or physical, where employees can pin suggestions for enhancement, fostering an ongoing cycle of learning and providing a space for anonymous expression of opinions.

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ABOUT THE AUTHORS



GILLIAN HARRIS

Gillian is a registered psychologist, with a master's in Organisational Psychology and works as a consultant at People Measures, a firm of organisational psychologists and development experts.

Gillian has many interests within the organisational psychology space, one of which is diversity in leadership.

She joined The 100% Project's Research Committee in 2022 helping to champion gender equity by producing and sharing research and informing organisations about the value of gender diversity in leadership.



FRANCES FEENSTRA

Frances is an organisational psychologist with more than 25 years' experience and a Director of People Measures.

She has held university appointments as well as a number of senior positions with Right Management and PwC.

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 was a supervisor and examiner for postgraduate research students at Deakin University (Victoria) for many years.

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 was a member of The 100% Project Research Committee and a Board member from 2017 until 2023.

THE 100% PROJECT

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