

NAVIGATING LOSS

Understanding the impact of psychological safety
on men's attitudes towards gender quotas



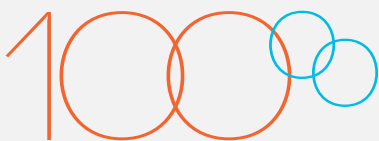
THE ONE HUNDRED
PERCENT PROJECT

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.

We exist to promote equality of choice and opportunity for women and all genders. The 100% Project challenges beliefs and paradigms to create systemic and behavioural change. 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 pays 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



David Turnbull
Co-Chair, The 100% Project

I'm grateful to have been asked to write a foreword for this White Paper. It gives me the opportunity to say what I feel about gender equality, and more importantly with regard to the use of gender quotas, feelings of loss and how psychological safety can go a long way to reducing the loss many feel when quotas are used in recruitment.

I grew up in an era when 'men were men' and women did all the housework, raised children etc., etc. At 16 I joined the Merchant Navy where ships were referred to as 'she' and the presence of a woman on board ship was seen as bad luck (this was said jokingly, as was 'do not whistle' at sea); it would anger the sea gods and cause bad weather. But I always felt there was underlying theme to this, namely that men couldn't be trusted if a woman did appear on board a ship full of men.

I didn't stay at sea long; it wasn't for me, and I had more to offer on dry land. After returning to studies, I then joined the Civil Service and never looked back. And yet, the Department I joined had a rule until 1973 which required women to resign when they got married. I'm pleased to say that this place of work made huge strides to implement equality of recruitment and D&I policies and that when I left in 2014 it was, as far as I was concerned, a beacon on progress on all this. It had to represent society. But it didn't just happen. Equality never does because it has seems to take so long to get equality policies in place and, importantly, put those policies into practice.

I'm not going to go on about statistics but there is one I've read recently which is so important, at least from where I stand with The 100% Project. Of the types of gender diversity policies implemented by OECD countries' largest firms (in terms of market capitalisation, 2019), Australia has achieved an amazing 94.7% in promulgating actual policies but only 56% in implementing them. We have achieved a lot and are doing so well in some areas but not quite getting there with 'practicing what we preach'. Why? In November 2021, an AFR article reported that half of men working in white-collar professions are tired of the gender equality discussion in the workplace and believe reverse discrimination is occurring. 48 per cent felt fatigued by the notion of gender equality and 52 per cent felt they were being discriminated against, with women being favoured for promotions and jobs on the basis of their gender.

My daughter leaves university in two years and will enter our workforce in a less than equal position (as men). Introducing a quota system to help push forwards on gender equality seems taboo. We need to be able to talk about this freely and openly have the conversation without recrimination. Without men feeling they are losing. It is said that we live in a meritocracy and yet I would argue that for too long that system has served the 'old boys' network. Quotas can put an end to this and ensure that qualified women are no longer denied access to e.g. leadership positions because of their gender.

Quotas are being used widely in many businesses and countries and achieving results, but again, change is slow. The 'glass ceiling' has cracked but has not shattered. Women are subjected to stereotypical norms about what they should and shouldn't do and this plays out across society. Cultural mores and social norms can be restrictive and immovable.

Psychological safety refers to people feeling they have the freedom to and do speak up, take risks, and express their opinions without fear of negative repercussions. A lack of psychological safety can hamper women's and men's career progression, lead to burnout, sow the seeds of poor well-being, exacerbate employee turnover and create a lethargy towards gender equality.

We need good and adaptive leadership to change this. To 'just do it', to engage and enact. Don't react, act. 'Adaptive Challenges' are uncomfortable for people and organisations to confront because they often encroach on the values and beliefs we hold deeply. They can upset the status quo. And yet the status quo is unequal, and that is unacceptable.

Herein lies the crux of the matter when we talk about gender equality, and I put it like this. Would men want to be treated the way we treat women in society with regard to gender equality? I suspect not, so why do we continue to accept that inequality?

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Foreword



Chloe Hawcroft
CEO & Director, People Measures

Through my life and career experience I have seen time and again that as long as we have gender inequality both women AND men suffer. So when the opportunity to be part of establishing The 100% Project came my way over 15 years ago I jumped at the chance. Today I am lucky to be the CEO of People Measures, an organisation that specialises in leadership assessment and development. We work with many organisations to improve gender equity and we actively support The 100% Project.

Fifteen years on, The 100% Project continues to conduct the much-needed research that shines a light on the nature of the gender equity challenge, and more importantly, the evidence for approaches that really do achieve progress. Disappointingly, we know that progress toward gender equity in organisations has slowed despite an increased awareness of the benefits of gender equity and the establishment of policies and organisational strategies to achieve change. Back in 2007 The 100% Project asked 'are gender quotas necessary to achieve change?', and today many organisations are still having this debate. Boards have made the most progress, with women making up around 50% of government and 35% of corporate board director appointments (September 2022, AICD). However, according to the Workplace Gender Equality Agency (2022) only 1 in 5 boards has achieved gender balance. In addition, only 22% of CEOs are women and 42% of women work full time compared to 67% of men. Clearly there is still a long way to go.

Until we look holistically at what needs to change, I do not believe we will get there. Men are part of the system and men must be part of the solution. Do we understand what needs to change for men as well as for women? If an organisation has quotas, what else needs to change for the quotas to be successful? How do we ensure that everyone sees the actions organisations take as being for everyone's benefit, not benefit for some (women) and therefore a disadvantage for others (men)? Do we understand why men resist quotas, and do we know how to make them see the opportunities quotas might present for them?

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This white paper is an essential analysis of these questions and some of the factors that contribute to resistance to change initiatives such as quotas. It is interesting to confirm what we might intuitively suspect; that when men associate quotas with loss of meritocracy and loss of leadership identity they are less likely to support quotas and may actively resist them. However, when men experience higher levels of psychological safety, men's resistance to quotas is reduced.

The importance of the need to create a psychologically safe environment, and addressing loss, when changing the status quo is an important finding. We are all in this together, men and women, and we need to approach the changes required to achieve equality across the systems we work and live in together. We know that faced with any change people are likely to resist based on their fear of what they might lose which interferes with their ability to consider what they might gain. This research shows that addressing perceived loss, through increasing psychological safety, is going to be an important part of any organisation's strategy to achieve and sustain change.

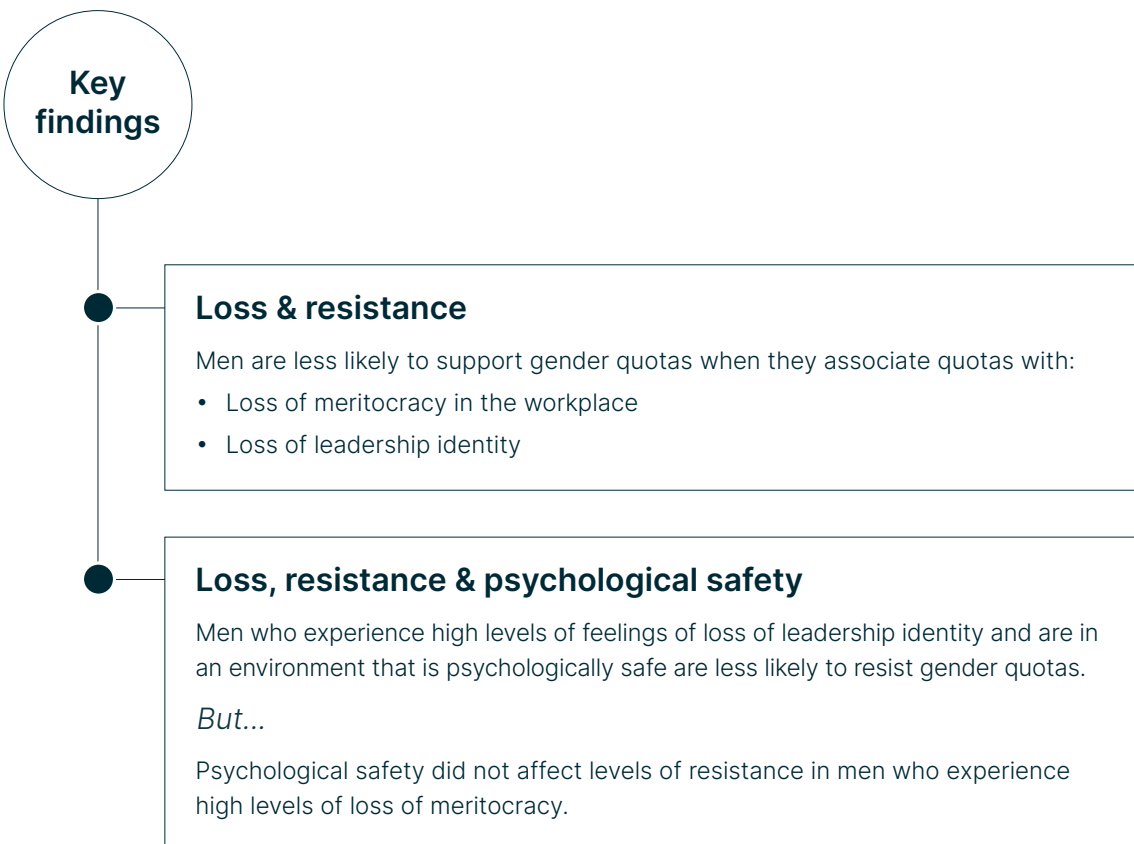
Everyone will benefit from reading this white paper, discussing it in organisations and implementing the recommendations. I would like to congratulate The 100% Project on another important study that delivers insights about how we might take action on the things that will really make a difference.

Executive summary

In January 2023, The 100% Project published a White Paper titled 'Men and Gender Quotas: What's loss got to do with it?'. This paper outlined research which found that men are less likely to support gender quotas, and may in fact actively resist them, when they associate gender quotas with loss of meritocracy and loss of leadership identity. The white paper is available [here](#) on The 100% Project's website.

This white paper is an extension of the research outlined in '*What's loss got to do with it?*' and was conducted to replicate the earlier findings, as well as build on them by investigating psychological safety as a potential strategy to alleviate resistance. The current study did replicate previous findings and found that men are less likely to support gender quotas when they associate quotas with loss of meritocracy in the workplace and loss of leadership identity. In addition, the research outlined in this white paper shows that when men experience high levels of feelings of loss of leadership identity but are also in an environment that is psychologically safe they are less likely to resist gender quotas. Psychological safety did not affect levels of resistance in men who experience high levels of loss of meritocracy.

The focus of this white paper is on psychological safety and how this may serve as part of a strategy to alleviate resistance to gender quotas (in men).



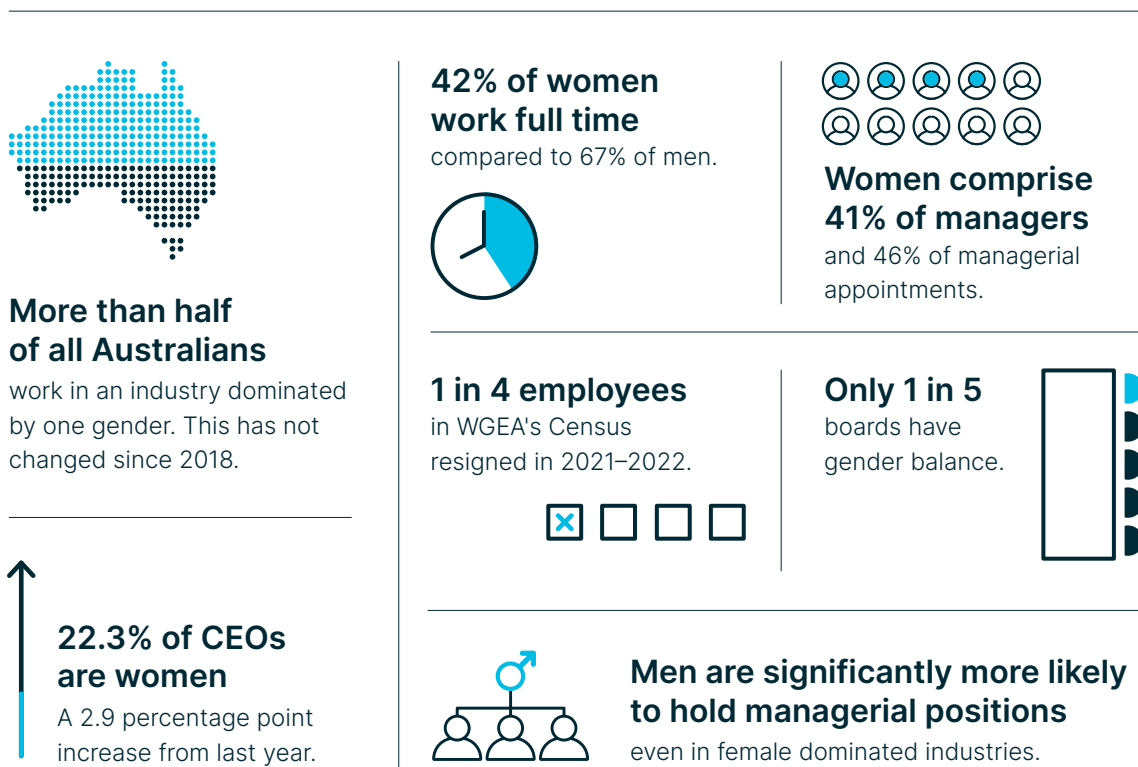
Where are we now?

The benefits of gender-balanced leadership are these days well-understood and the introduction of government policy and organisational strategies to increase the representation of women in leadership roles continues apace. However, despite all efforts, barriers continue to exist that prevent Australian organisations achieving gender parity in senior positions and (white) men continue to occupy the majority of leadership positions (see Figure 1).

In fact, WGEA's Gender Equality Scorecard (December 2022)¹ shows that "progress towards gender balance in decision-making roles has slowed. Men still make up the majority of boards and governing bodies". In 2021–22 the proportion of women who are board members has risen by 1% from 33% in 2020/2021 to 34% in 2021/2022, and the proportion of women chairs has remained the same (18%).

For the past 15 years, The 100% Project has been persistent in its message that gender equality in Australia is doing harm not only to women but to men as well, and that real progress and change has yet to be made. Trying to understand what lies behind this gender inequality is crucial if we want to gain the benefits from more gender balanced leadership in Australian organisations.

Figure 1: A snapshot of the current state of workplace gender equality¹



What are the benefits of gender equality?

The 100% Project has outlined the benefits of gender equality in other white papers, however it is worth reiterating again how much we have to gain. 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.^{2,3,4,5}

Economic benefits of gender balance in leadership include:

- Improved financial performance; associated with increased stock price, shareholder returns and overall profitability.
- Increased innovation.
- Better problem solving.
- Greater market insight.
- Enhanced decision-making capacity.
- Ability to cater to a diverse client market.
- Increased perspectives and ideas, bringing a competitive and strategic advantage.
- Talent retention.

Beyond the business case for gender balance in leadership, gender balance can increase the reputation of organisations as it aligns with current ethical and social standards. Benefits of a positive corporate reputation can include high job satisfaction for employees and talent retention. In addition, there are benefits for society more broadly, as 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.⁶



Psychological safety – what is it and what are the benefits?

There is no doubt that over the past decade or so, psychological safety has become a much-used term in the business environment, both globally and in Australia. However, while leaders and employees at all levels regularly hear and/or use the term, many may not actually know what it means. So, what is psychological safety?

Psychological safety can be defined as a work environment in which people feel comfortable to speak up and share mistakes without fear of embarrassment or being judged.⁷ In short, this means that anyone can ask questions, admit a mistake, or speak up about concerns without feeling that they look 'stupid'. It also means that anyone can voice ideas, share respectful criticism, and ask for feedback without feeling embarrassed or judged. A work environment that is psychologically safe doesn't just welcome individuals speaking up and voicing concerns but expects this to happen. The benefits of psychological safety are endless at both the individual and organisational level.

For example, research has consistently shown that psychological safety has a positive impact on the implementation of new practices and technologies.^{8,9} One study revealed that psychological safety facilitated the process of learning and experimentation, leading to the successful adoption of best practices. Similarly, Edmondson's study emphasised the significance of psychological safety in the establishment of new routines, particularly in contexts where the implementation of new technologies disrupts existing status relationships. Collectively, these findings underscore the crucial role of psychological safety in fostering an environment conducive to engagement, collaboration, and the open sharing of insights and concerns, which paves the way for the effective implementation of new practices and technologies.

In addition, other research indicated that psychological safety creates an environment where employees feel secure to communicate openly and admit mistakes without the presence of threat.¹⁰ When psychological safety is established within a team or organisation, individuals are more inclined to share their thoughts, concerns, and ideas freely, fostering a culture of open communication, free of judgement. This level of psychological safety enables employees to admit mistakes and/or acknowledge areas where they may require assistance or further development. The absence of threat allows for a greater willingness to take risks, voice dissenting opinions, and engage in constructive discussions.

Further studies have shown that psychological safety enables individuals to change and engage in learning behaviours by providing a supportive environment that encourages risk-taking and open communication, which in turn fosters a culture of learning and innovation.^{6,11} When people feel psychologically safe, they are more likely to feel empowered to explore new possibilities, experiment with different approaches, and collaborate effectively.



How is this relevant to resistance to gender quotas?

As our previous research established, men's resistance to gender quotas elicits feelings of loss; specifically, feelings of loss of leadership identity (a traditionally 'male' identity) and loss of meritocracy (the belief that outcomes and rewards are based on effort, input, and skills).¹²

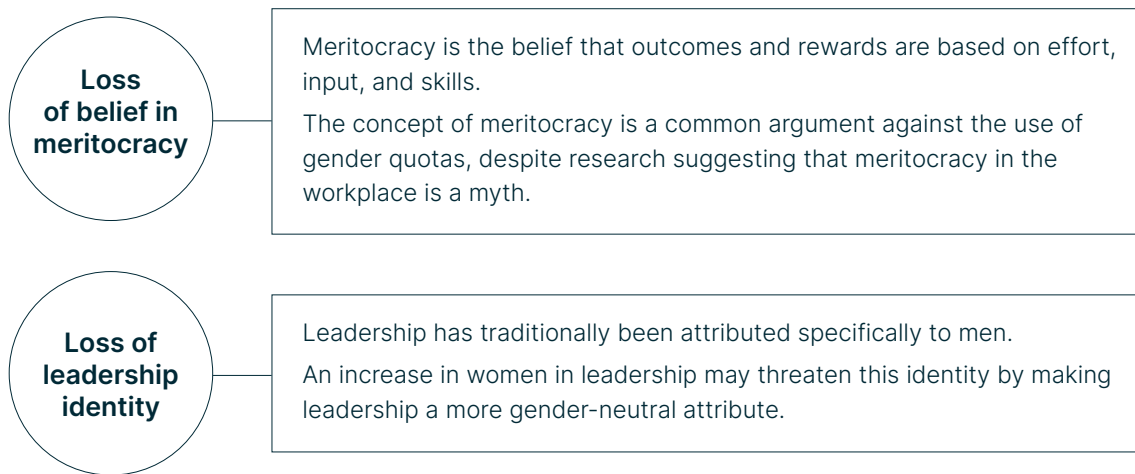
Traditionally, strategies to address resistance to change tend to consist of promoting benefits rather than addressing underlying reasons for resistance. However, such strategies generally fail to address resistance successfully as individuals can both understand the benefits associated with a change and simultaneously experience negative emotions toward this change.¹³ A more effective way of addressing resistance to gender quotas may be to take the concept of loss into account. This is supported by research that suggests that it is crucial to acknowledge resistance and loss as an underlying mechanism.¹⁴ Given the potential emotional vulnerability associated with discussing feelings of loss, psychological safety may help to address resistance through facilitating learning and understanding.

We already know that psychological safety facilitates learning behaviour (see above). Given that the acceptance of gender quotas may require modification of individuals' attitudes and beliefs, some form of learning is required. However, a man who experiences feelings of loss and resists gender quotas may believe that their emotions are not socially acceptable, given the various associated benefits of gender equity for the organisation and society. Admitting the experience of loss openly could therefore be seen as an interpersonal risk that poses a threat to the individual. Further, individuals may resist quotas without understanding the true underlying reasons why they resist. A psychologically safe environment may give men the opportunity to explore emotions associated with gender quotas and learn new beliefs and attitudes to accept quotas.

This research

Given the importance of men's role in the battle for gender equality, it is critical to understand how they can be supported to best support the cause. Given men currently hold most of the decision-making positions, insight into what drives their attitudes is crucial.

Therefore, in this study we firstly sought to replicate previous findings that suggested that loss of belief in meritocracy and loss of leadership identity both play a role in resistance to gender quotas in men. Secondly, we expanded on that research by investigating whether psychological safety may provide an avenue to help men process and thereby alleviate some, or all, of this resistance.



A total of 189 Australian men over the age of 18 completed the online survey. Participants were between 18 and 80 years of age, with 90.5% indicating they were employed on a full-time and 9.5% on a part-time basis.

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Key Findings

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

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

However

Men who experience feelings of loss of leadership identity and are in an environment that is psychologically safe are less likely to resist gender quotas.

But

Psychological safety did not affect levels of resistance in men who experience high levels of loss of meritocracy.

Loss of meritocracy

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 replicated the findings of the previous study.¹¹ It suggests that individuals who believe that gender quotas violate current organisational systems and functioning which they believe to be fair and based on merit are more 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, in Australia, more women (60.4%) than men (39.6%) graduate from university and female senior executives are more likely to have post-graduate qualifications that are relevant to their roles when compared to men.¹⁵ These results show once again the barrier that the concept of meritocracy presents to the implementation of gender quotas.

Contrary to expectations however, psychological safety did not influence the association between loss of meritocracy and resistance to gender quotas. This suggests that a work environment that is psychologically safe may not be enough to facilitate acceptance of gender quotas in men who experience feelings of loss associated with their belief in meritocracy.

There is no research demonstrating that women who are selected for leadership positions via quotas are 'less qualified'.

Loss of leadership identity

As expected, and in line with the results from our earlier study, the current study showed that men who believed that gender quotas are accompanied by 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.

In terms of psychological safety, the current study found that the effect of loss of leadership identity on men's attitudes towards gender quotas is moderated/influenced by psychological safety. This result suggests that psychological safety can play a role in reducing resistance to gender quotas, by allowing men to process their feelings of loss and understand more fully the reasons for their resistance. This finding is in line with previous research which indicated that individuals who find themselves in a psychologically safe environment can openly admit and talk about emotions without fearing negative consequences.⁹ In addition, the acceptance of gender quotas can be viewed as an adaptive challenge where attitudes and beliefs are likely to require modification which in turn is likely to be facilitated by engaging in learning behaviour. As discussed earlier, psychological safety is likely to motivate and facilitate learning behaviour.^{6,10} Thus, findings of the current study suggest that psychological safety may well play a role in facilitating acceptance of gender quotas in men who experience feelings of loss leadership identity.

These findings provide useful information about potential factors that underlie the attitudes of men toward gender quotas and why men may resist gender quotas. Further, these findings provide evidence for the utility of a psychologically safe environment as a way to enable men to process feelings of loss in relation to gender quotas. Having processed these feelings, this may enable them to engage in learning behaviour and adopt a state of mind that allows for the acceptance of gender quotas. We know that gender quotas are not a silver bullet, but they have been shown to be a tool that can assist in increasing the proportion of women leaders.¹⁶ A shift in support for the use of such quotas could potentially mean that more organisations and individuals will enjoy the benefits of gender balanced leadership.



Recommendations

This study showed that loss plays a role in men's resistance to gender quotas. This suggests that the more we understand what, and how much, we are asking men to 'lose', and then find ways to help them work through these losses, the more likely we are to gain support for the use of quotas. And from the results of this study, it appears that psychological safety can serve as a starting point/strategy to alleviate resistance and enhance acceptance of gender quotas.

The 100% Project recommends organisations consider the following actions in creating a psychological safe environment to enhance acceptance of gender quotas:

Consider the following actions:

Acknowledge loss

We recommended this in our earlier paper and believe it cannot be emphasised enough. 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 considered, resistance is likely to increase.

Leaders need to walk the talk

It is crucial for leaders (both men and women) to understand that their attitudes and behaviour have a significant impact on their people. Thus, when they talk about the need for greater gender balance in leadership, they need to think about how they themselves are 'walking the talk' and what they need to do to create the conditions under which more women can be promoted to senior leadership positions.

Creating a psychologically safe environment to help reduce resistance to measures such as gender quotas is, as we have seen, a critical step. Leaders who can create psychological safety by establishing the right climate, attitudes and behaviours within their teams act as catalysts for change. They facilitate and empower other individuals on the team to foster a psychologically safe work environment by role modelling and reinforcing behaviours they want to see in the rest of the team. An important driver for psychological safety is a positive team climate where team members cherish contributions and care about the wellbeing of others.¹⁷ By role modelling such behaviours, leaders can exercise significant influence over their team members' psychological safety, and by extension over the attitudes towards measures such as gender quotas.

So... where to start?

At this point, leaders and senior executive might be thinking “this sounds sensible but where or how do I start?”. No organisation or team is the same, which means that a comprehensive strategy to establish a psychologically safe work environment will be different for each workplace. That being said, there are a few foundation principles that can be set up in any environment to help create psychological safety. The 100% Project recommends organisations consider the following actions in creating a psychological safe environment to enhance acceptance of gender quotas:

Regular check-ins with your team

Regular check-ins can be daily, weekly or even monthly, but they should be focused on how people are, rather than become ‘just another meeting’ focused on what needs to be done. Make it interesting. Instead of just asking your team how they are, ask more specific questions. Perhaps you can discuss a different topic each time so that you and others can learn more about each other to enhance trust (e.g. what was your first job, what is your go-to meal, where is your favourite place to travel to). Over time the questions may become a little deeper (e.g. what are you hoping people won’t notice about you, when was the last time you failed) to start making people more comfortable with more emotive topics and conversations. This will start to set a foundation for conversations about loss and how to work with that.

Practice active listening

Show your team that you want to understand their viewpoint and treasure the difference that exists within the team. Active listening encourages respect and understanding. When a team member outlines an idea or voices a concern, demonstrate that you are really listening by practising five well known active listening skills: paying attention, showing that you are listening, providing feedback, deferring judgement and responding appropriately.

Avoid blaming

When one of your team members admits that they made a mistake or something went wrong, don’t blame them. Instead ask how this could happen, ask how we as a team can make sure it works out better the next time. Work with the team and help them see that mistakes are opportunities for learning and growth. This will be invaluable when the times comes to process loss, as it is almost impossible for people to admit to feelings of loss if they fear being judged or blamed.

Please note: For more recommendations specifically in relation to loss, it would be helpful to look at our earlier white paper: ‘Men and gender quotas: What’s loss got to do with it?’¹¹

If you are unsure about how to implement the recommendations outlined above, or you have questions about any part of this research, please reach out to: **[The 100% Project](#)**

A final note: research in the pipeline

There is a lot more to learn about loss and its effect in the workplace. The January 2023 study and the current study focused on men's attitude towards gender quotas, the potential effect of loss on that attitude, and the utility of psychological safety in processing that loss and minimising its effect. 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 are currently engaged in a study investigating whether psychological safety can mitigate the glass cliff effect. The findings from this study will be released in 2024.



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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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