

MEDIA RELEASE

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Australian leaders urged to confront resistance to advancing women

Senior leaders in business, government, education and community are calling on all employers to continue to improve the representation of women in leadership, address resistance and be prepared to engage with the range of responses to gender equality initiatives.

Backlash and Buy In: Responding to the Challenges in Achieving Gender Equality released today by Chief Executive Women and Male Champions of Change acknowledges that backlash is a natural part of change. Leaders must accept that gender equality initiatives are embraced by some and resisted by others, and make efforts to uncover the underlying drivers of resistance.

“When you’re making a change of this kind, if things don’t work it’s because there are forces that keep it in place. They deal with status, with political power, with economic power, and it takes courage and tremendous work to change,” says Andy Vesey, CEO AGL.

Resistance can come in the form of claims of ‘preferential’ treatment for women in hiring, development and promotion opportunities through to more insidious forms of backlash when resistance goes underground or manifests as public criticism.

Elizabeth Broderick AO, Convenor Male Champions of Change, asserts that a certain level of backlash is to be expected and is a sign of progress.

“Bringing about change requires perseverance and courage. It also calls for change makers to engage with the range of responses, rather than dismissing the views of those who stand in the way of reform.” said Elizabeth Broderick.

Kathryn Fagg, President Chief Executive Women agrees. “Backlash comes in many forms – it’s not always obvious, it can be confronting and requires a human response.

“Now more than ever it’s important for CEOs and Chairs to show they are neither fazed by backlash nor will their commitment waver. Leadership is key to achieving gender balance in Australian organisations,” says Kathryn Fagg.

Leaders from many of Australia’s largest and most powerful institutions are behind the report *Backlash and Buy In: Responding to the Challenges in Achieving Gender Equality*.

The report explains the drivers of resistance (lack of understanding, fear, change fatigue, cultural norms and industry norms) and provides guidance to help organisations understand and address a range of responses to gender equality strategies.

Referencing case studies from public and private employers Arcadis, Australian Federal Police, CBRE, KPMG and South 32 the report demonstrates that like any business change, understanding the response is the first step to progress.

Communication and transparency are paramount

The report contains the perspectives of several Australian business leaders who all confirm that communication and transparency are crucial in confronting resistance and progressing gender equality initiatives.

“It’s not a project, it’s a part of the organisation’s core business. We report on gender the same way as we report on safety,” says Andy Vesey, CEO AGL.

“The main thing to overcome any potential backlash is to explain the fair and transparent process that was followed, what attributes were thought about, why that leader is the right choice and where you’re trying to take that business,” Cindy Hook, CEO Deloitte.

“In the past I think that we had a culture that either didn’t encourage people to speak up, or, if they did they did speak up they were pushed to the margins. We needed to make it safe that you could come forward because I still believe that we needed to expose and air our weaknesses and challenges before we could really start to improve,” Andrew Colvin, Commissioner Australian Federal Police.

“It is important to create a safe place, a space where people can genuinely respectfully disagree, put differences of view, have them tested and always play the issue, not the man or the woman. As a leader you’ve got to find a way to manage that disagreement,” Martin Parkinson, Secretary Department of the Prime Minister and Cabinet.

“Managing backlash is never easy – it’s about making space for all views, particularly those that are opposed to progressing gender equality. It is only then that leaders can understand how collectively we can achieve change,” Elizabeth Broderick.

Download a copy of the report on the CEW website: <https://cew.org.au/>

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