

The 3 Barriers to Women's Progression

And what organisations can do about them

A whitepaper by Shape Talent



“In the future, there will be no female leaders. There will just be leaders.”

Sheryl Sandberg

Forward

Despite significant progress in advancing women's representation in the workplace, The World Economic Forum recently found we are still 108 years from closing the economic gender gap globally. Currently women account for 32 per cent of MPs in the House of Commons in the UK, 21 per cent of FTSE 100 executive team members, and only seven per cent of FTSE 100 CEO roles. Given 46 per cent of FTSE 100 CEOs are promoted from within their company, having a strong pipeline of women is critical to addressing the gender imbalance at the top.

For many women and men, the thought of waiting three or four generations for gender equality to be achieved naturally is unacceptable. How can a situation with such high levels of attention be so slow to change? I believe it can and must change faster, and see you, the reader of this report, as a key to unlocking more rapid progress at a time where I believe the odds are stacked in favour of real change.

The #MeToo and #TimesUp movements have provided an impetus for change that is growing in power. In the UK, mandatory gender pay gap reporting, and some high-profile gender pay scandals have helped provide impetus for change. Increasingly, more and more men are actively engaging on this topic and pushing for positive change. This is sorely needed and providing a welcome stimulus.

For a long time, gender quality has been viewed as a women's issue and the focus has been on how to 'fix' women. And whilst there are undoubtedly actions women can and should take to increase their visibility, resilience and build their own authentic leadership style, as much, if not more effort needs to be expended by organisations in creating an equal playing field. Now more than ever we need men – who hold most of the senior roles in businesses and in government – to work with us to help advance this agenda. After all, gender equality doesn't

just benefit women, it benefits all of society: men, women, children, and the economy. We know from research that men in gender equal relationships are healthier and happier and report greater marital satisfaction, and children growing up in this environment have greater levels of achievement and lower levels of absenteeism. And McKinsey estimate that increasing women's participation in the global workforce is worth \$12trillion, or 11 per cent of annual GDP by 2025.

This whitepaper is aimed at pinpointing the causes of gender imbalance at senior leadership levels, the origins of which can occur years, or even decades earlier. Drawing on robust, high quality research – all of which is referenced should you wish to explore it further – we have identified the three types of barriers preventing women from being represented equally at senior leadership levels and propose how organisations can dismantle these barriers. I feel

optimistic that dramatic improvements are within our reach, with the right energy and focus from individuals, organisations, and government.

I hope you find this whitepaper of practical value and invite you to test out the ideas and suggestions offered.



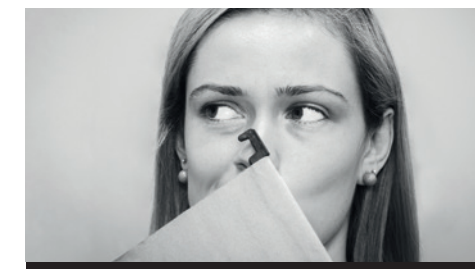
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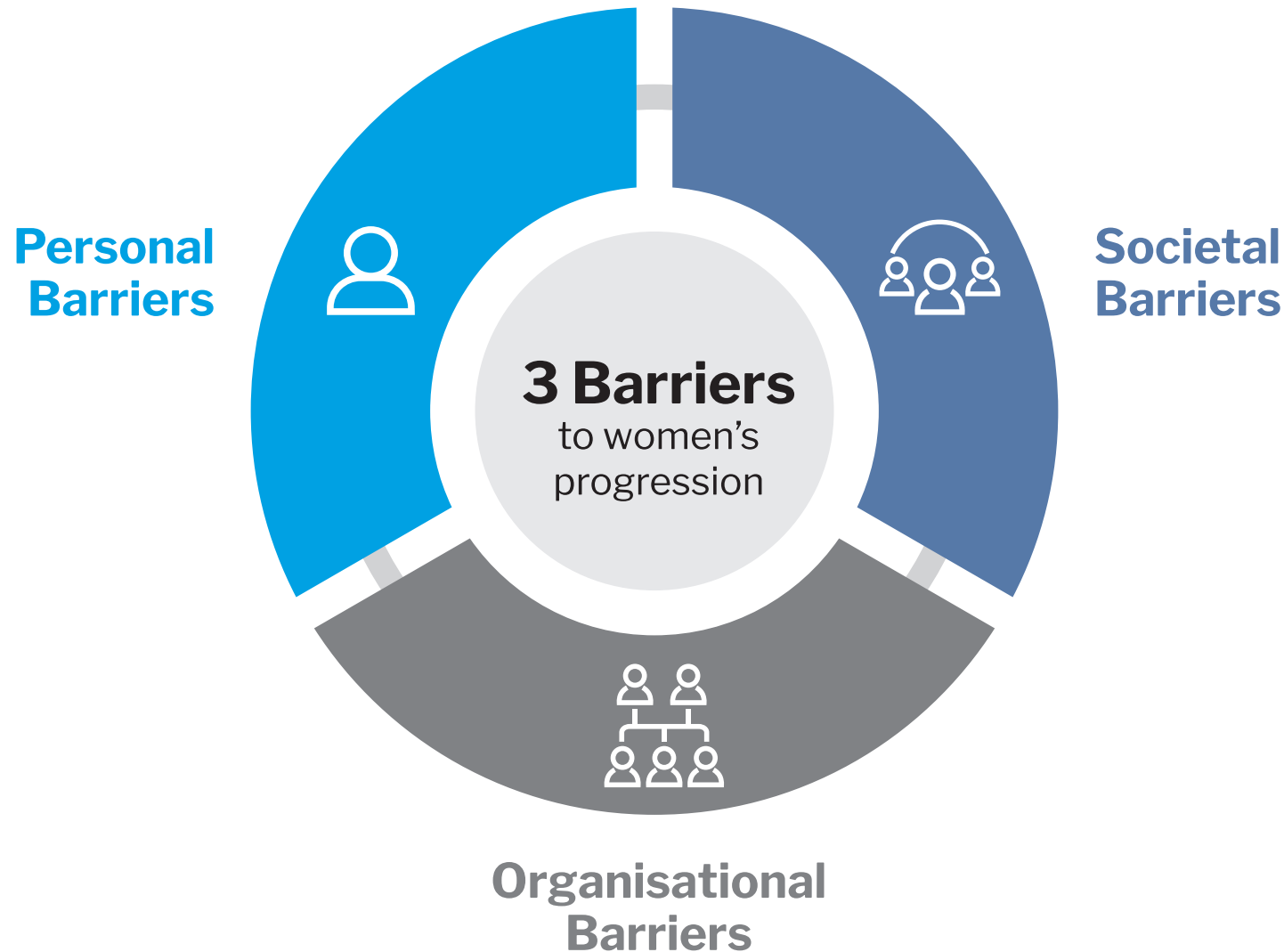
This whitepaper is the product of a detailed analysis of the leading literature and research on gender diversity over several years. The inspiration behind this report was the work of my former colleague, Elizabeth Dixon, whose initial literature review and report in 2013 set the standard for digestible, quality analysis in this area. Indeed, many of her early ideas have been captured, refined and expanded on in this report. I would like to thank Elizabeth for inspiring me to continue this work and for her dedication to achieving gender equality in the workplace.



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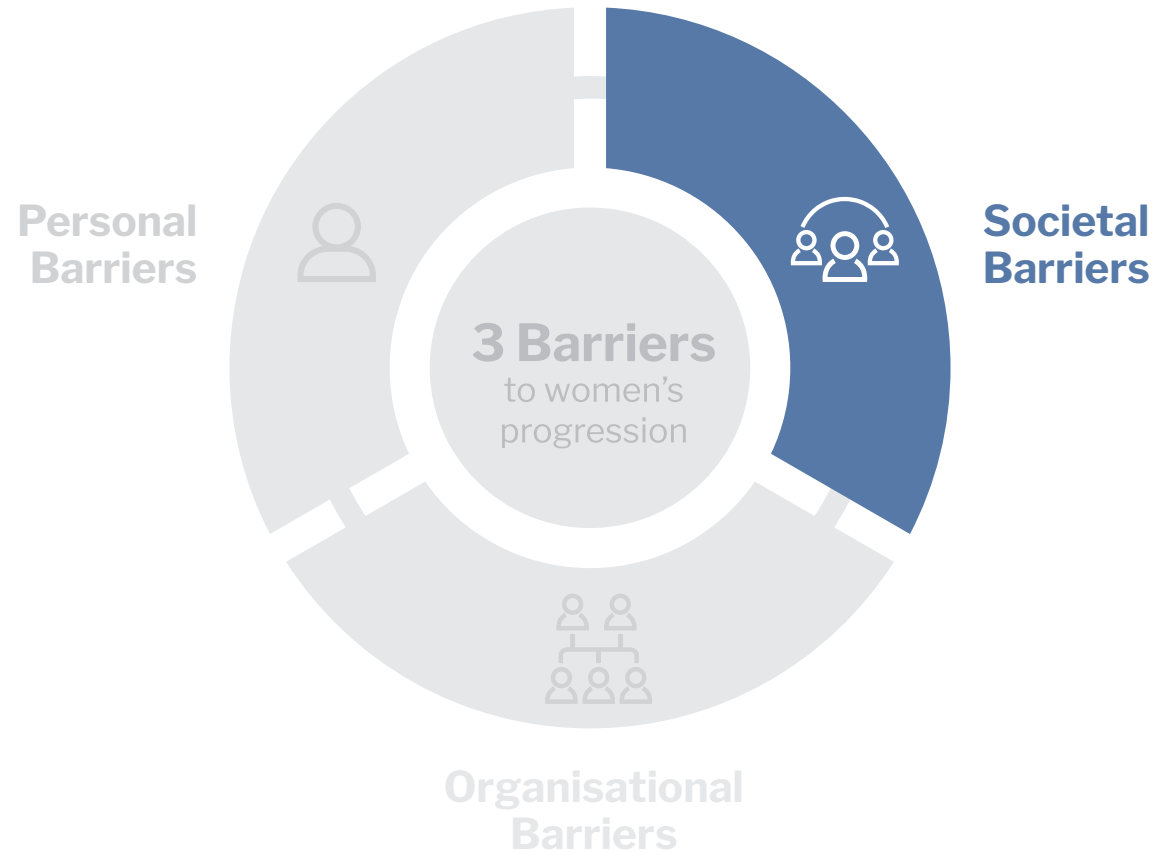


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1. Societal Barriers

The first category of barriers relates to the subtle and often unspoken societal and cultural cues and messages we all receive over our lifetimes which reinforce the ways in which men and women 'ought' to behave. We call these Societal Barriers.





1.1. Gender stereotypes start at a young age

Research has found that gender stereotypes are established at a young age, with children aware of gender by age two. And as early as six years of age, children have been found to associate intelligence with being male, and 'niceness' with being female¹.

Messages around being kind and considerate are reinforced in little girls from a very young age. Whether it be to discourage assertive and domineering behaviour – often seen as a sign of leadership in boys – but which more often gets

labelled as “bossy” in girls. These social cues, which come from all directions – the media, parents, teachers, well-intended family members – gradually build into certain perceptions about what behaviour and choices are expected of girls in adulthood. Is it any surprise that in the UK 98 per cent of nursery teachers are women, and 82 per cent of those in caring professions are women². These findings are significant as research has found lower wellbeing in children whose friendship groups emphasise traditional gender stereotypes, as well as harmful consequences for both men and women in later life¹.

“Mummy, do you
have to be a boy
to be a doctor?”

Alice – age 5

1.2. Women as primary caregivers

Despite the increasing numbers of fathers taking up primary caregiving responsibilities, society somehow has still not shaken off the belief that a woman does that job better. A survey by Bain found that while 80 per cent of women felt that men and women made equally good caregivers, men did not feel the same. Only 56 per cent of men agreed³. Both men and women equally felt that either could be a primary breadwinner, yet more women than men were found to be making career sacrifices for their opposite sex partner, including relocating, turning down attractive job opportunities, and working part-time or flexible hours. This is an important issue for society to address, as research has found women are 21 per cent more likely to progress their careers after having children if their male partner plays an active role in childcare⁴.

1.3. The 'Double Burden'

How much time do you spend a day on domestic responsibilities? Count the time spent cooking, cleaning, preparing children for bath, bed, school, doing school or nursery runs, and attending to domestic administrative tasks and it's probably more than you think. A global study by the International Labour Organization found women perform 76 per cent of the total amount of unpaid care work, 3.2 times more time than men⁵. In the UK, the study found women spend an average of 3 hours 52 mins a day on domestic tasks, and men 2 hours 11 minutes. Now think about the number of hours you spend at work and quickly you can appreciate how for many women there just aren't enough hours in the day to do it all. This leads to the *Double Burden* or *Second Shift* which becomes increasingly unsustainable as work demands grow and leads to many qualified women working beneath their true potential. Gender equality at home is thus a key enabler of gender equality in the workplace.





“I found my career definitely stalled when I went part-time after having my family”

Sharna, upwardly mobile career professional

1.4. Flexible working: the silent career killer

Despite a recent increase in contingent, or ‘gig economy’ employment arrangements, at least 70 per cent of roles in the EU and US are still offered as traditional full-time or part-time roles⁶. A common organisational solution to helping employees juggle home and work responsibilities is through flexible working. Working reduced hours, or from home, or having flexible start and finish times can all help make this juggling exercise that bit easier. However, the Centre for Work-Life Policy reported that flexible work arrangements, no matter how well designed, can become a career killer for women⁷. Typically associated with women, flexible working carries a stigma and perception that such women are less committed to their jobs and their careers. Interestingly, men too suffer this penalty when working part-time. Research from Plymouth University⁸ has identified the ‘fatherhood forfeit’ with men rated lower than women in promotability, hire-ability, competence and commitment, when working part-time. Encouraging flexible working as the norm for all employees will help dismantle these outdated perceptions of flexible working being gendered or the exclusive right of parents.

1.5. Excessive childcare costs

In some parts of the world the cost of childcare is such that the mother’s salary barely covers this expense, leading many parents to question the value of returning to work. As men are disproportionately still the primary breadwinner in most households, it often makes more economic sense for the woman to sacrifice her job or career. The reality is that an absence from the workforce will later result in a ‘motherhood penalty’ from which a woman’s career earnings may not recover. However, the financial pressures of childcare are sometimes too overwhelming to ignore. The UK has the highest childcare costs of any country in the OECD when analysed for a two-parent, average wage-earning family, with childcare making up a third of income. Ireland, the US, Switzerland and Canada also rate in the top 10 countries for most expensive childcare as a proportion of income⁹. Social protection policies and macroeconomic policies are required by governments to help even the playing field and remove some of these structural barriers to women’s participation in the workforce.

2. Organisational Barriers

The second category of barriers relate to hurdles experienced in the workplace. Some of these are 'structural' – such as experiences and networks which are more difficult for women to access – and others relate to organisational cultures and norms which disadvantage women. We call these Organisational Barriers.



Structural Obstacles

2.1. Elusive critical experiences

Structural obstacles interfere with women achieving the most important experiences and skills, and building the most critical relationships and exposure necessary for career success. When women 'off-ramp' from their career, typically between the ages of 28-45 to look after children or sometimes for eldercare, they may miss the important high profile and visible assignments that often accompany this career phase for both men and women¹⁰. This combination of less exposure and visibility serve as key risk factors for women's progression through the pipeline. Studies have found that men achieve more promotions during these years than women¹¹. In addition, off-rampers often face a reduction in responsibilities and job title on their return to the workplace owing to their skills being perceived as out-of-date or the supposed need for them to prove themselves at work once again. Organisations can mitigate these obstacles by ensuring women are offered visibility enhancing experiences and addressing the unconscious biases that often underpin the 'career break penalty'.

2.2. Unequal mentoring and sponsorship

Mentoring programmes are widely used in organisations to support men and women in their career journeys, but findings show that mentoring for men and women is not always equal. A study reported in Harvard Business Review found that more high potential men than women were promoted. It found that women and men received different benefits from mentoring: women's mentors helped them to understand themselves and their preferred ways of operating, as well as how they may need to change and adapt as they progressed to increasingly senior roles. Whereas men described how their mentors helped them take charge of their careers and plan their moves, as well as backing them up in public¹². In essence, the men were receiving greater sponsorship from their mentors than the women were. Without a sponsor's influence to advocate for the 'sponsee' in the most senior executive circles, women are not always equally considered for openings during those closed-door career and succession discussions. Another study found that while men in general are 25 per cent more likely than women to have a sponsor, senior level men are 50 per cent more likely to have a sponsor¹³. Addressing this 'sponsorship gender gap' is an important element of enabling women's career progression.

"I got sick of men talking over me, my ideas not being recognised, and being held to a higher standard than my male colleagues. It's exhausting."

Marian, mid career leader



2.3. Lack of role models

It would seem there is truth to the adage “if you can’t see it, you can’t be it”: studies have found that the availability of role models increases career commitment and satisfaction¹⁴. Having senior level women in the workforce, particularly in traditionally male-dominated areas, helps to show more junior women that there is a path to the top for them too. Unfortunately, not all role models for women are positive. The Queen Bee phenomenon describes women in positions of authority – often in a male-dominated environment – who treat subordinates more critically if they are female. Thankfully, the prevalence of Queen Bees appears to be diminishing, with Catalyst (a global non-profit gender research business) finding women were more than twice as likely as men to develop other women. They also report that being developed matters: a higher percentage of high potentials who had received developmental support were more likely to pay it forward and offer similar support to a protégé¹⁵. Organisations can help by publicly communicating and celebrating female role models and offering mentoring and sponsorship programmes to help develop more junior female talent.

2.4. Not all networks are equal

A powerful network can positively influence our career, by regulating access to sponsors, jobs, information, referrals and by augmenting our reputation and power. This in turn influences the speed and likelihood of promotion¹⁶. By how do our networks vary by gender? Various studies have shown that informal networks are often segregated by gender and race, and as such women are less likely than men to have the strong professional networks, workplace support, insider information, and social ties to elites that are critical to promotion¹⁷. It seems that women are equally as capable as men at forming network ties, however structural barriers mean that women are more often excluded from forming ties with the most powerful individuals. Organisations can help redress this balance by providing formal opportunities for women to interact with high-status executives, across functional, organisational and geographic lines and to formally ‘hand over’ primary client responsibility in a managed and positive way.

2.5. The ‘Trailing Spouse’

It is not unusual for global organisations to purposefully develop talent through international assignments. In some organisations, international experience is a pre-requisite for promotion to the most senior roles. Yet a requirement for international experience, or even domestic relocations has a disproportionately negative impact on women. With more men than women being the primary breadwinner, a global study found that women are more likely than men to make a career sacrifice for the sake of their household, with 77 per cent of men confident that their partner would make a career compromise, but only 45 per cent of women equally confident that their spouse would do the same¹⁸. In other words, women are more likely to turn down such an offer for the sake of their household and partner’s career. Companies can mitigate these impacts by re-thinking their requirement for global experience and considering other ways in which global business and cultural understanding can be developed, such as leading global teams virtually, or spending shorter periods in other countries.



Culture and Work Norms

2.6. 'Always available' cultures


McKinsey found the dominant model in the business world equates senior leadership with 24/7 availability, and total geographical mobility at all times. And 77 per cent of respondents in an ILO global survey felt these to be implied requirements of senior leadership careers¹⁹. Being responsive to email or calls at all hours, including during holidays, is often expected, and those who can pick up the family and relocate internationally are typically rewarded with the top jobs. Where the difficulty arises for women is in reconciling these demands with home responsibilities. Various studies have shown that women typically bear significantly more of the domestic load than their male partners, resulting in the *Double Burden* (or *Second Shift*) between home and work. The combination of the *Double Burden* and the expectation of senior leaders being 'on' at all times is difficult to reconcile and has been identified as the main barrier to career advancement and success for women²⁰. Some organisations are starting to break down these cultures by offering email-free periods, typically outside normal business hours.

2.7. Unconscious bias and gender stereotyping

These represent a significant barrier to women's advancement but are often difficult to observe, and thus can be incredibly difficult to influence. A large-scale study by the ILO²¹ found, perhaps unsurprisingly, that organisations with a male CEO and/or Chair were more likely to have male-dominated organisational cultures. But which direction does causality run: do CEOs and chairs influence the culture or does the culture influence the choice of appointee? A study comparing the views of heterosexual married men whose wives were engaged in full-time employment, with those whose wives were not in paid employment, investigated whether a man's domestic situation impacted his views of equality in the workplace. The researchers discovered that men in 'traditional' marriages were likely to view gender equality in the workplace less favourably, and more likely to make decisions that prevented qualified women from advancing²². Whilst the intention behind these findings isn't clear, such attitudes and stereotyping behaviours demonstrate the challenges organisations face in ensuring equality in the workplace and the need to build cultures which respect and value difference.

2.8. Micro-aggressions and everyday sexism

A recent study found that sexual harassment is a common experience for women, with 35 per cent having experienced it at some point in their career, whether that be sexist jokes, inappropriate touch, or other unwanted advances or behaviours. The LeanIn.org study found that women are more likely than men to face everyday discrimination – or ‘micro-aggressions’ – such as having to provide more evidence of their competence, being interrupted or having their comments dismissed, being subjected to demeaning comments, being expected to take notes or make the tea, or being mistaken for someone much more junior. For 64 per cent of women – and 71 per cent of lesbian women – micro-aggressions are a workplace reality²³. Such behaviours can deter women from wishing to advance their careers and can also reduce their belief that career advancement is possible.

A photograph of three people in a professional setting. On the left, a woman with long dark hair, wearing a dark blazer over a white shirt, sits with her hand on her chin, looking towards the center. In the middle, a woman wearing a white hijab and a white button-down shirt is gesturing with her hands while speaking. On the right, a man with short dark hair, wearing a dark suit jacket over a white shirt, is looking towards the woman in the hijab. They are seated around a wooden table with a laptop, papers, and a cup of coffee. The background is a bright, modern office space with blue sticky notes on a whiteboard.

“I raise up my voice – not so I can shout,
but so that those without a voice can be heard...
we cannot succeed when half of us are held back.”

Malala Yousafzai



2.9. Men perceived to be more competent

According to Stanford University, research consistently shows that men are perceived to be slightly more capable at most tasks than women, except for tasks traditionally associated with men – such as mechanical expertise, mathematical ability and leadership – where men are generally perceived to be much more capable²⁴. So, when a woman performs well in a traditional male task, this performance runs counter to what our stereotypical expectations would have led us to expect so we scrutinise

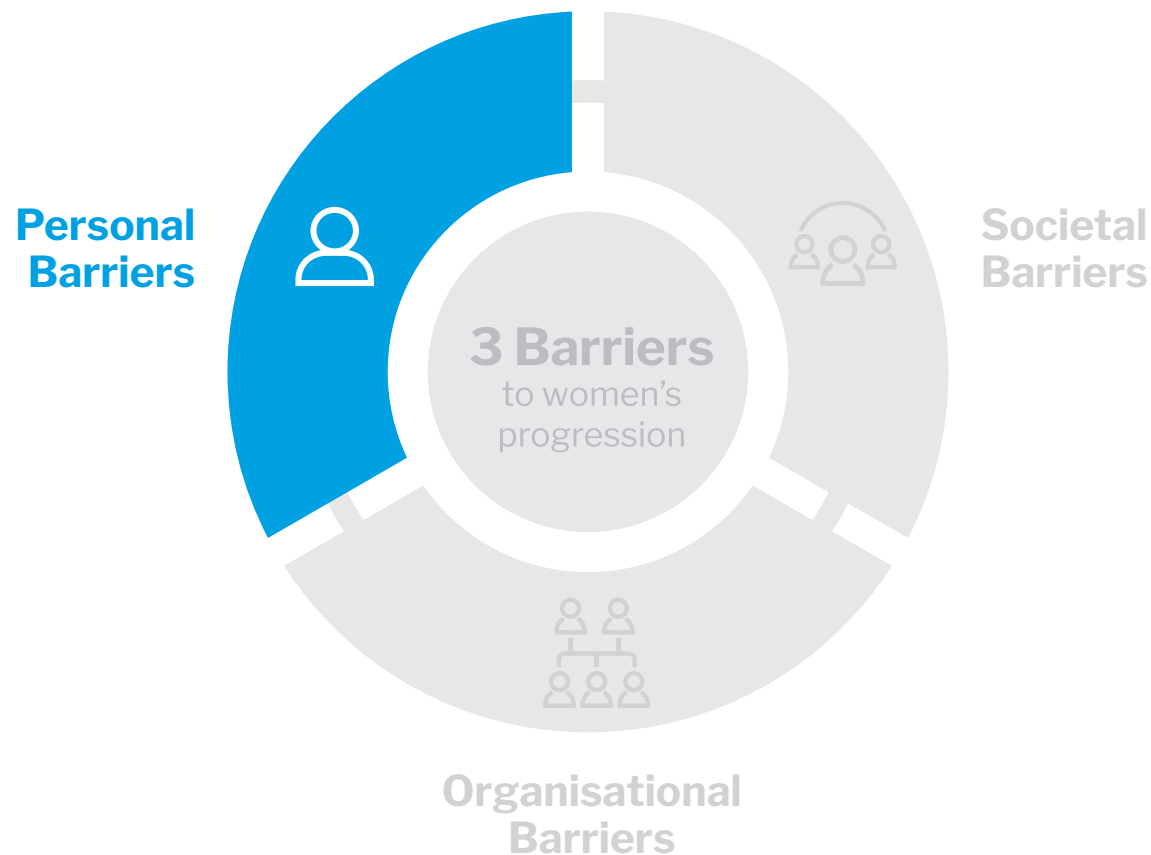
her performance more closely to understand why this was the case. Whereas, when a man performs well this is consistent with what our stereotypes would have led us to expect and we don't examine the reasons for his success as closely. Powerful sociological wiring means that men are judged by a more lenient standard than women which is even more pronounced in traditional, male dominated cultures. In essence, women are working to a higher standard than men. Organisations thus need to recognise and eliminate these underlying biases in appointment and promotion decisions.

2.10. Glass cliffs

The glass cliff is the phenomenon of women being likelier than men to achieve leadership roles in firms that are struggling or in crisis, where the chance of failure is highest. One study of Fortune 500 CEOs found women twice as likely as men to be appointed to these high-risk roles²⁵. In part this was found to reflect women's desire to take higher risks in order to establish their leadership credentials, despite this resulting in much greater performance standards being applied to these women. In the words of one female CEO, *'If you knock it out of the ballpark, you will get noticed'*. At the same time these women also reported reduced power and authority to implement the strategy, resulting in shorter tenures as CEO and higher failure rates. Organisations can mitigate against glass cliff appointments through greater transparency in executive appointment decisions, tackling the unconscious gender stereotypes that underpin decisions, and ensuring genuine support for diversity at the top.

3. Personal Barriers

The third category of barriers relate to how women present in the workplace. Whether that be reticence to put oneself forward for promotion or for visible, high profile assignments, not pushing to be heard during meetings, or trying to replicate 'male' models of leadership. We call these Personal Barriers.



3.1. Scepticism and the ambition gap

Are women less ambitious than men? Ambition is a tricky topic, with many research studies yielding conflicting findings on whether women are less ambitious than men. One study found that only half as many women than men aspire to C-suite roles²⁶, and that as women get older their aspirations for advancement reduce at a greater rate than for men. Catalyst, on the other hand, found no differences between high potential men and women in their aspirations for board positions, across Europe, the US, Asia and Canada. In a UK study, the Centre for Talent Innovation found that women were more ambitious than men: this appeared to be irrespective of whether the women had children or not. BCG have found that men and women have similar levels of ambition at the beginning of their careers, but ambition levels can be diminished by the experiences of women over time. If these experiences are positive, then ambition is nurtured, but if these are negative, then ambition is damaged²⁷. So, one might conclude that women are similarly ambitious, but more sceptical about their opportunities to progress, more so if they have experienced a lack of career support in the past.

3.2. Confidence and meeting 'all the criteria'

Lower levels of confidence are also touted as a factor accounting for fewer women at the top. Various studies have shown that women tend to understate their performance, whilst men more often overstate their performance. The topic of confidence still appears to be viewed through a male lens: relative to men's 'over-confidence', women can appear 'under-confident' and suffer career penalties as a result. A survey of MBA students found that women tend to have a more conservative view of their own abilities than men. The research revealed that 70 per cent of the women rated their own performance as equivalent to that of their co-workers, while 70 per cent of the men felt their performance exceeded that of their co-workers²⁸. Studies in the fields of medicine, STEM (scientific, technical, engineering and mathematics) occupations, and US politics have produced similar results²⁹. In a similar vein, research from HP found that women apply for jobs only if they think they meet 100 percent of the criteria listed, whereas men will apply if they feel they meet 60 percent of the job requirements³⁰. A fascinating subsequent study reported in Harvard Business Review found the reasons for men and women not applying for jobs varied

significantly, with women more reticent than men to put themselves forward if they felt they might fail³¹. This reluctance is perhaps grounded in the reality that women are often held to a higher standard than men. Studies have found men benefit from being rated on potential whereas women were more likely to be assessed on their performance and track record³². Organisations can mitigate against this by reviewing selection criteria for all roles to ensure criteria are fair and only contain what is reasonable. In addition, line leaders can proactively encourage qualified women to apply for promotion opportunities.

“Don’t be intimidated by what you don’t know. That can be your greatest strength and ensure that you do things differently from everyone else.”

Sara Blakely



3.3. Invisible work

It has been suggested that career success comprises three elements: 10 per cent is attributable to performance, 30 per cent is attributable to your personal brand – how you are seen and perceived by others, and 60 per cent is attributable to your exposure – who knows you and the quality of your work³³. Under this model, managing one's network and image become critical success factors for women in advancing their careers. Doing great work becomes 'table stakes' – a minimum requirement for progression, but certainly not the most important requirement. If the model is

true then women are at a distinct disadvantage as research suggests women are less likely to put themselves forward for promotion, thinking that their great job performance will be noticed and rewarded without the need for self-promotion³⁴. The reality is, high visibility experiences are often the building blocks of senior careers³⁵. International assignments, leadership of a high profile project such as a transformation or launch of a revenue-producing product, running a turnaround project or helping to establish a new business venture or product are all typically highly valued in organisations. Yet women aren't always getting these high-

profile opportunities. The research on why is mixed: some research suggests women don't put themselves forwards³⁵ and that this can be a result of wanting to avoid the social 'backlash' that results from women acting out of stereotype, such as when self-promoting. Other research suggests women suffer 'benevolent sexism' in how work is allocated, with less challenging tasks allocated to women³⁶. Organisations can help mitigate against these barriers by deliberately ensuring men and women are equally considered for high profile opportunities – even where women do not necessarily raise their hand for such opportunities.

3.4. The negotiation penalty

Research into negotiation outcomes of men and women have suggested that women are less likely than men to instigate negotiations³⁷ and that they negotiate less well³⁸. Behaviours that appear to violate gender norms, such as a woman negotiating on her own behalf, can result in a social penalty for the woman with both men and women responding unfavourably. Consequently, women need to weigh up the benefits of negotiation against the potential social backlash³⁹. Interestingly, the less 'masculine' the topic of negotiation – such as negotiating machinery for jewellery versus negotiating new motorcycle parts, the examples used in the study – the better women fared in negotiations.

It seems that women can negotiate just as successfully, or more so, than men when negotiating on behalf of a colleague or their company, as this demonstration of advocacy is not perceived to violate gender norms⁴⁰. Negotiation strategies which have been proven successful for women are: clarifying the acceptable standards of behaviour in the negotiation; raising awareness of gender stereotypes; demonstrating the legitimacy of the negotiation (such as “my negotiation skills are an asset which benefit the team and the organisation”); and, demonstrating concern for organisational relationships⁴¹.

3.5. Political savvy

Political savvy is the ability to effectively understand others at work, and to use this knowledge to influence and act in ways that enhance the achievement of organisational objectives⁴². Research has found that women with high levels of political skill are more likely to achieve career progression in male-dominated organisations⁴³. Other studies have found that high levels of political skill are associated with more positive supervisor perceptions and greater promotability, but only where women act in gender congruent ways⁴⁴. In other words, where women are perceived to act in accordance with female stereotypes, they are more likely to be positively regarded, and in turn more likely to be promoted. In this study, the higher a woman's level of assertiveness – a trait traditionally associated with men – the lower the supervisor's rating of the woman. Once again women find that subtle social cues reward conformity with stereotypical behaviour and penalise non-conformity. Increasing women's awareness of appropriate influence tactics can therefore have a positive impact on career prospects.

“It took me quite a long time to develop a voice, and now that I have it, I am not going to be silent.”

Madeleine Albright





3.6. Leadership and the likeability penalty

Another area that is often fraught for women concerns leadership style. Girls are dissuaded from a young age from assertive and domineering behaviours. Subtle cues over a woman's lifetime reinforce behaviours that are collaborative, caring and win-win in nature: not the approach often associated with the typical masculine leadership often seen in senior roles. The ability to be decisive and make tough decisions is sometimes seen to be at odds with a more feminine approach to leadership. It is a double bind for women as research shows that men's likeability is positively correlated with success, whereas for women it is hard to be seen as both competent and likeable at the same time⁴⁵. In short, women suffer a 'likeability penalty' in roles traditionally associated with men. Women need to find their own, authentic leadership voice and it is important that organisations support this and don't inadvertently penalise deviation from more traditional, masculine styles of leadership.

3.7. Glass walls: occupational choice

In most industries, women are over-represented in support functions, and men in strategic functions and areas with profit and loss responsibility. At a managerial level, more women find themselves in human resources, finance and administration or marketing roles, with men more concentrated in operations, research and development and profit and loss leadership roles⁴⁶. This is a problem because line roles in many organisations are often seen as a precursor to the top jobs – general manager, managing director, and CEO roles. The gender segregation caused by these 'glass walls' occurs through a combination of unconscious biases in career and recruitment processes, benevolent sexism where well intended men can inadvertently 'kill careers with kindness', and socialised masculine behaviours which dissuade women from certain occupational choices⁴⁷. Indeed, some of these choices occur at school and university, well before individuals reach the workplace, with the career-limiting implications only becoming apparent much later in a woman's career. Organisations can help by de-biasing career processes, sponsoring female school and university students, and deliberately creating opportunities and career paths for women in more traditionally male-dominated functions.

4. What should organisations do

4.1. Guiding principles

There are several foundational actions organisations should take to create an inclusive business culture which values diversity, and ensure a focused and effective inclusion and diversity programme

Make inclusion part of a cultural change programme with frontline leaders at the centre

Best-in-class companies actively support and nurture inclusive cultures, beginning with a compelling change story that helps to foster understanding and conviction in what is being asked. Engaging frontline leaders in this change programme is essential as this is where programmes often succeed or fail. Building their skills and behaviours around inclusivity will help them to be successful. Role modelling of these behaviours at all levels of leadership sends a clear message to the organisation as to what is required. Leaders also need to intervene swiftly when they see microaggressions or other unacceptable behaviours. And finally, reinforcing diversity and inclusion efforts through corresponding changes to structures (such as diversity task forces and dedicated Inclusion and

Diversity officers) and processes and systems (such as recruitment, promotion, pay and appraisal) will further support the change effort.

Link inclusion and diversity activity to the business strategy

Inclusion and diversity efforts are most impactful when viewed as an enabler of business strategy. Solid diagnosis of the current barriers to diversity and inclusion are an important starting point. Additionally, data and analytics can help pinpoint the elements of inclusion and diversity that enable productivity, customer retention, time to market, risk management and other key business performance measures. By understanding how inclusion and diversity contributes to innovation, customer insights, quality of decision making and more, companies can align their inclusion efforts with the business strategy.

Prioritise inclusion and diversity interventions

Interventions need to be prioritised based on their expected impact as well as their contribution to business strategy. Not all interventions are equally effective, and a crisp prioritisation of effort is more likely to be successful than a scattergun approach with numerous tactical interventions. Opportunities to enhance talent practices, particularly around recruitment, promotion, pay, appraisal, development, sponsorship and so forth need to be evaluated. Such interventions have the greatest impact when run in conjunction with a change programme to help shift the culture to one where inclusivity is the norm.

Avoid the one-size-fits-all approach

Whilst it is important that there is consistency in the direction of the inclusion and diversity strategy, particularly in global organisations, different geographical, regulatory, social and cultural contexts will necessitate adjustments at a local level. Not all interventions will have the same resonance in different parts of the business and may need to be tailored to individual markets. Ensuring local accountability, with support from the centre helps to achieve this.





Engaging men

Gender equality in the workplace cannot be achieved without the active support of men. In 2014, the United Nations launched its #HeForShe campaign, which has engaged over a billion people in discussion on this topic globally. Even seemingly small actions can have disproportionately positive consequences, such as calling out sexist or derogatory language, speaking up to ensure women get credit for their ideas, and sharing the office admin load so that men too do their share of note taking in meetings or making the tea. Women need to support men in this cause and recognise and celebrate their contributions to building gender balance at home and in the workplace.

Build the pipeline

A greater proportion of women in the most senior roles requires a pipeline of qualified female candidates from which to draw from. Whilst some industries are able to attract an equal number of men and women into entry level roles, other industries struggle to achieve this. In the west, traditionally male-dominated industries such as construction, automotive services, manufacturing, engineering, mining, as well as the tech sector have between 4 per cent and 30 per cent female representation⁴⁸, often struggle to attract a balanced intake of men and women into entry level roles, and thus have fewer women to select from during promotion rounds. Breaking the cycle of occupational segregation is vital to enabling more balanced workforces across all sectors. Whilst this undoubtedly requires a nuanced, multi-dimensional approach, a focus on early careers, and enabling opportunities for women to advance, is important. And in some sectors, supporting a number of initiatives as early as primary and secondary school through to tertiary levels is an important way to counter gender stereotypes and help attract women into traditionally male-dominated jobs and industries.

4.2. The specific interventions

Shape Talent have found the following interventions to be the most important for companies in breaking down the barriers to gender equality in the workplace and achieving their gender diversity goals

1. Visible senior leadership commitment and measurement

Visible and vocal leadership from the CEO and executive committee is essential for diversity and inclusion efforts to succeed. If the top team show their commitment to inclusion efforts, through visible means such as targets and active monitoring of key metrics, it sends a very clear message to the rest of the organisation this this needs to be taken seriously.

2. Women's development programmes

Whilst there has been much debate on the merits of development programmes targeted specifically at women, the evidence suggests that creating a safe setting which allows women to develop their own authentic leadership style and identity is crucial⁴⁹. Focused development programmes for women allow just that, and may comprise various elements, such as:

- leadership development programmes
- women's networks
- coaching
- mentoring
- sponsorship, and
- acceleration programmes.



3. Moving beyond the 'one and done' approach

Minority groups need to be represented in critical mass in order to avoid tokenism and to enable meaningful change. The 'one and done' tick box approach to appointing individuals from minority groups to visible roles, in order to supposedly satisfy external scrutiny, can be harmful to the individuals appointed if they are not supported. Individuals who are the only one of their particular minority, whether that be women, or a particular race, culture or other demographic, can feel isolated and under pressure and can feel like a token appointment⁵⁰. Social scientists suggest a tipping point of around 30 per cent representation, at which point a minority group begins to have meaningful influence. A powerful study by MIT found that the presence of female leaders increases the likelihood of women speaking up by 25 per cent⁵¹. Ensuring there are multiple minority role models and that these individuals are suitably visible, is important. As the adage goes, "if you can't see it, you can't be it".



“If you can't see it, you can't be it.”

4. Making flexibility the norm

A flexible approach to work, which enables all employees to manage the demands of career and family responsibilities in a way which suits them, has been shown to be particularly helpful in promoting gender diversity⁵². Encouraging flexibility as a normal way of working for both men and women helps to de-stigmatise flexible working and stop it being seen as a 'women's issue' and a potential career derail. Practices such as declaring that all jobs can be done flexibly unless stated otherwise send a powerful message to employees that organisations are adapting to a workforce which highly values flexibility. Other benefits, such as extended maternity and paternity leave, equalising parental leave and allowing fathers the opportunity to either share the caregiving for their new baby, or be primary caregiver for a period, also help to shake up gender norms and equalise the playing field. With work life balance remaining in the top three attraction drivers for candidates, such flexible practices help bolster the employee value proposition and attract and retain a wide range of talented employees.

5. De-biasing the system

As a minimum, HR practices need to be scrutinised from top to bottom to ensure they don't inadvertently undermine diversity and inclusion efforts. Recruitment, promotion, appraisal and reward practices should be carefully reviewed to ensure no in-built bias. Stripping out gendered language from job descriptions and ads, removing identifying information from CVs – such as race and gender, ensuring balanced interview and promotion panels, and analysing appraisal and salary data for different minority groups to ensure no inadvertent unfair treatment, are all powerful ways of removing bias from the employee lifecycle. Ultimately, organisations should aspire to inclusion and diversity efforts being fully embedded into all practices – whether that be in how project teams are constructed, how team meetings are run, who gets invited to important company events, through to ensuring no adverse impacts of major change programmes.



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About Shape Talent

At Shape Talent, we believe that not only do organisations benefit from having a better balance of men and women at the top, but families and societies do too.

All too often we see, and hear about, interventions which focus on 'fixing women' but ignore the broader ecosystem within which these barriers exist. That's why our approach is different. We look at the whole system to ensure that our work has the biggest impact on the greatest number of people. At Shape Talent we don't just want to make an incremental impact. We want to be part of a fundamental shift towards gender balanced organisations and societies, where both men and women thrive, and where organisations reap the benefits of this.

Our mission is to enable more women to move into senior leadership roles in business. We achieve this in partnership with our clients, through organisational consulting, and coaching of women. Without a clear understanding of the exact – rather than the high level – pain points, it is easy for organisations to expend wasted time and energy on solving the 'wrong' problems. Our approach begins with a clear understanding of the key barriers unique to your organisation and we identify the priority areas which will have the greatest positive impact on your gender balance. We then design targeted interventions that will address these priority areas. We deliver against this roadmap and support you to evaluate the results of the programme and ensure you achieve your intended objectives.

Founded in 2017, Shape Talent is led by Sharon Peake, and is supported by a network of highly experienced coaches, psychologists, facilitators and consultants, all of whom share our vision and passion.

Our solutions

Shape Talent offers a range of solutions to address the barriers to women's progression, depending on the needs of your organisation. These include:

- Inclusion and diversity strategies and plans
- Workshops, seminars, masterclasses, webinars, and retreats
- Individual and group coaching: including maternity and parental coaching and job transition coaching
- Psychometric and 360° assessments
- Targeted acceleration programmes
- Establishment of women's networks and resource groups
- Networking events and skills building
- Mentoring programmes and building leaders' mentoring skills
- Sponsorship programmes

See the following pages for details of some of our flagship programmes.

Strategic career accelerator workshop

Our 2-day workshop addresses how female leaders can strategically progress their careers in the context of the 'unwritten' organisational rules for success and any assumptions which may be holding them back.

2 days, run a month apart | 8-12 participants

WHAT IT COVERS:

- The 3 key barriers that can prevent women from fulfilling their potential
- Successfully navigating organisational power, politics and conflict
- Crafting the right image, visibility and impact
- Strategic relationship building, networking and gaining sponsorship
- Confidence and tackling limiting beliefs

WHO IT'S FOR:

Ambitious mid-career female leaders looking to take the step up to Director or VP level.

LED BY:

Sharon Peake

Career coach, occupational psychologist, gender diversity specialist, and founder of Shape Talent



Joss Sargent

Career, conflict and change coach, culture and comms specialist and founder of Capitalise Performance.



“I'm now inspired and energised to set off designing and planning the next phase of my career. Thank you Sharon, for your thoughtful interpretations which have helped me get to this point.”

“Joss has an outstanding ability to unlock the nascent potential in others, for which she is highly-trained but which appears to come entirely naturally to her.”

**Need your
female leaders
to successfully
navigate complex
career dilemmas?**

Need to reach more female leaders with coaching?

Women in leadership group coaching

Our group coaching programme comes with the benefits of traditional executive coaching but is able to reach a wider number of women in your organisation than traditional executive coaching allows for. This maximises the impact and your ROI.

6 group coaching sessions, plus one 1-to-1 coaching session | 4-6 participants

WHAT IT COVERS:

The content is adjusted according to the needs of the group, though common topics include:

- Navigating the politics of promotion
- Strategically growing and using your network
- Maintaining balance between home and work
- Dealing with imposter syndrome
- Managing your image and personal brand
- Raising your profile
- Having courageous conversations

LED BY:

Sharon Peake

Career coach, occupational psychologist, gender diversity specialist, and founder of Shape Talent



Clare Withycombe

Career and leadership coach and founder of CW Coaching



WHO IT'S FOR:

Ambitious mid-career female leaders looking to take the step up to Director or VP level.

“ Since I went through Sharon’s programme, the difference is already very marked. I have learnt how to sell myself better, with more opportunities coming my way. I am so much better prepared and more confident. I cannot recommend Sharon enough. ”

“ I’ve now got a promotion, and had 3 job offers. The one unexpected benefit from Clare’s coaching was to increase my confidence at work and speaking up, this has made a huge difference. ”

Parental transition coaching

Our individual and group coaching programmes help those returning from extended maternity and paternity leave to get back up to speed quickly and confidently.

Up to 6 coaching sessions, plus webinars | Individuals or small groups

WHAT IT COVERS:

Working closely with the HR team, we design a programme to suit your business needs, with several options:

1-to-1 coaching for senior leaders

- A standard 6-session programme covers pre-maternity / paternity leave through to successful return to work and further career planning
- A shorter version of this is also available, covering the first three sessions

Group coaching for graduate to manager level employees

Two group coaching sessions of 1.5 hours are scheduled – before and after maternity leave, with a 1-to-1 online coaching session during maternity leave.

Webinars for managers

For managers who have responsibility for a pregnant employee, two webinars are offered, covering best practices in supporting the maternity leaver and ensuring a successful return to work – the first prior to maternity leave, and the second upon the individual's return to work.

WHO IT'S FOR:

Women and men about to embark on a period of maternity leave or extended paternity leave.

LED BY:


Sharon Peake

Career coach, occupational psychologist, gender diversity specialist, and founder of Shape Talent



“ Sharon’s wealth of experience shines through her coaching and was very evident as she helped me identify the changes I needed to make to move forward. Her insightful questions helped me clarify my thoughts and have helped me to have a clearer picture of positive changes I can make, and she manages all this whilst being a supportive and encouraging partner on the journey. ”

Need your parental leave returners to hit the ground running?



Need a smooth transition for a newly promoted leader?

Job transition (first 100 days) coaching

Our first 100 days coaching programme ensures a seamless transition for senior leaders transitioning to a new role.

6 coaching sessions over 3 months, with a follow up session 6 months into role

WHAT IT COVERS:

- Over 7 coaching sessions we help the individual to plan and successfully achieve key milestones in the first 100 days, as well as planning further ahead with a 6-month career check-in
- The line leader joins one of the early coaching sessions to help define success
- We cover the 6 principles of effective transitions: defining the learning gaps, defining a vision, establishing the key priorities, building the team, securing quick wins, and creating supporting alliances.

WHO IT'S FOR:

Leaders recently appointed to the next level of leadership – either managing managers, managing functions, or managing businesses.

LED BY:

Sharon Peake

Career coach, occupational psychologist, gender diversity specialist, and founder of Shape Talent



“Sharon is a world class executive, with highly unusual acuity and insight into executive potential and performance. I can recommend her unreservedly.”

Authentic leadership and brand Me workshop

Our 2-day workshop helps female leaders to discover and own their individual, authentic leadership style.

2 days, run a month apart | 8-12 participants

WHAT IT COVERS:

- A plan to help leaders unfold their personal, authentic leadership style
- Practical strategies to improve communication and negotiation skills, including how to manage any backlash to the leader's style
- Peer advice and access to a group of other, high impact, successful women

WHO IT'S FOR:

Ambitious mid-career female leaders looking to take the step up to Director or VP level.

LED BY:

Sharon Peake

Career coach, occupational psychologist, gender diversity specialist, and founder of Shape Talent



“ Sharon is an inspiring individual and I would highly recommend working with her – I have benefited hugely from this well-structured and insightful programme! ”

**Need your
female leaders
to step into
their authentic
leadership
style?**

Working with you to create a gender balanced organisation.



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