

FOREWORD

At the time of writing this foreword, Australia has both a female Prime Minister and a female Governor General. Australia's Federal Parliament also has a record number of women in key leadership positions. On the world stage there are now unprecedented numbers of women leading nations.

These events provide indisputable evidence not just of women's talent and capability to lead, but that their contribution is now widely recognised and welcomed in political arenas and societies. While such changes are cause for celebration, they bring for me also a sense of loss. This loss derives from the evidence that the corporate world continues to miss out on much of women's potential leadership contribution. Women remain a tiny proportion of senior managers and leaders in Australian organisations and statistics reveal a plateauing in their numbers over the last decade.

This book, *Unlocking Gender Potential: A leader's handbook*, provides new depth and insight to understanding the continued absence of women from leadership roles in Australian business. In *Trials at the Top*, research undertaken by a group of corporate leaders and academics in the early 1990s, we found that to understand women's absence from corporate leadership, there needed to be a focus on the existing leadership culture. Yet undertaking such research is often difficult. Senior managers of both genders are often guarded about sharing obstacles on their paths to leadership and talking to women provides only a partial picture of the dynamics at work.

Dr Piterman's book answers these gaps in our understanding. It provides rich new information about what it's like for men and women leading and aspiring to lead Australian organisations. Her interviewees speak with honesty, feeling and insight about their work and its impact on their lives. Their experiences reveal that while organisational cultures contain strong expectations on leaders to work hard, their norms often mask deeply conformist behaviours in which anyone who looks or acts differently comes under intense scrutiny. Says one executive "people fight the fight but don't challenge the culture". The book also documents in absorbing, intricate detail how pressures on men and women to conform play out in gender stereotypes and sexual tensions. The results are bad for many women who find fewer, narrower, more hazardous and personally costly paths to the top. And they also have much wider effects, undermining the very potential and quality of business leadership itself.

Yet the research also shows how much of a difference innovative and committed leadership can make. The book provides practical advice on how leaders can create environments where women with talent flourish in leadership.

As an MBA teacher, I come across some truly amazingly talented and dedicated women and men. Watching these students graduate, my fervent hope is that society and business will find ways of growing their capabilities and desire to contribute. I believe this report will be a source of inspiration to all those taking up the challenge of creating innovative and inclusive leadership cultures in which women and men can thrive in new ways.

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