



# Giving WOMEN A VOICE

In the male-dominated world of business, Diane Smith-Gander has made significant progress for the representation of women in leadership positions. She is sharing her success with others and helping to stimulate change as president of Chief Executive Women.

Images courtesy of Attila Csaszar WA Business News

When Chief Executive Women (CEW) was formed in 1985, just 3 per cent of women described their occupation as executive or managerial. In 30 years, this has shifted, but not substantially, to around 10 per cent. CEW aims to provide a place for those women who are currently in senior leadership roles to empower their peers and support emerging talent from the corporate, public service, academic, and not-for-profit sectors. Heading the group as president is Diane Smith-Gander—a powerful woman with extensive business acumen.

Diane is currently chairman of Transfield Services, a non-executive director of ASX 10 Wesfarmers Limited, a commissioner of the government agency Tourism WA, and a board member of the think-tank organisation Committee for Perth. In the past, she has served as the deputy chairperson of National

Broadband Network Company (NBN Co), non-executive director of CBH Group, group executive of Westpac, and a partner at McKinsey & Company in the US, to which she is still an adviser.

As a very successful female leader, Diane is an influential player in the movement for workplace gender equality. It is a topic she is passionate about, and through her role with CEW she is able to help make a difference.

“Around 19 per cent of ASX 200 directors today are female, but 17 per cent of ASX 200 companies still do not have a woman on their board,” she says. “One-third of Australian organisations still operate without having a single woman in their leadership team. Less than one-third of all parliamentarians and one-fifth of all ministers across all our governments are female, and there are only two women in Cabinet. Given that Australian women are highly educated—women are now the majority of university

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graduates—this is a situation that beggars belief.

“The latest Intergenerational Report argues that Australia’s future prosperity rests on three things: working for longer, boosting productivity, and attracting more women into the workforce. This is why improving the opportunities for women to lead and succeed is not just about social justice but about economic prosperity.”

“Years of global research finds that gender-diverse boards and leadership teams outperform their competitors. This does not mean that women are inherently more talented than men or that women have skills that men lack. It is simply that diverse leadership teams make better decisions.

“CEW 100 per cent supports these research findings. More female voices around the table, whether that is the top team, the board room, or cabinet, leads to greater diversity of thought. Greater >





Diane Smith-Gander being interviewed by Mark Pownall of WA Business News for the Success and Leadership breakfast series.

diversity delivers an enriched decision-making process. Enriched decision-making drives to better economic growth for our nation.”

Diane believes a few things need to happen in order to increase the number of women in executive roles. With the current poor economic value proposition for career-minded women, she says CEW is addressing four key issues that set the scene for a higher representation of women in the workplace.

The first is selection and promotion bias—recognising that there are different and often higher hurdles for women than for their male counterparts. Next is pay equity where women in Australia earn, on average, nearly 20 per cent less than men and have less than 40 per cent of superannuation balances. Third, childcare and parental leave are making progress with the recent changes; however, there still is a long way to go to ensure that all parents who want to work can. The final issue is the right to have diversity of leadership style.

According to CEW, increasing the representation of women to

improve Australia’s productivity and economic prosperity is vital. The government’s proposed childcare reforms are a start, but Diane says there is a long list of actions which can, and should, be explored. The three ideas at the top of her agenda are: addressing the almost 100 per cent overlap in school and core work hours; finding ways to deliver affordable domestic assistance for working families (for example, many trading partners allow temporary migrant workforces, and this might have potential in Australia); and addressing cultural norms that define what work is appropriate for men and women—both in workplaces and at home—and women still do the lion’s share of work in the home whether they have paid employment or not.

Diane’s focus is also on developing emerging young women leaders, a topic that Alison Watkins, the Group Managing Director of Coca-Cola Amatil, is passionate about as well. Diane says the conversation needs to start earlier than ever before.

“Up until the 1980s, female and male enrolment in computer science courses was equal in the

US,” she notes. “When home computers started to be marketed in 1984, and the advertising almost exclusively targeted boys, then girls computer science enrolment dramatically dropped away. So the conversation does need to start in primary school.

“It is clear the presence of role models has a major impact. If young women look up in organisations and don’t see female role models, they will not have the confidence that they can achieve senior roles. If they don’t see women speaking on important business topics, they won’t think women have a voice. If they don’t see women sitting on the front bench in parliaments, political careers will be low on the priority list. So the best way to develop young female leaders is to remove the systemic discriminations against women in the workforce. This lets girls see the role models, build stretching aspirations, and move freely through their careers.”

The Australia-Israel Chamber of Commerce (AICC) recently announced a new collaboration with CEW. The two organisations will be working closely together to encourage female leaders to be more active with high-level networking. Diane says it is incredibly important for more women to participate in forums such as those hosted by the AICC to develop and nurture relationships with other CEOs.

“The PIE model has long been understood in the arena of promotion and selection,” she says. “The model says that P [Performance] has only a 10-per-cent impact on decisions around promotion and selection. More important are perceived I [Influence], a 30-per-cent impact, and E [Exposure], a 60-per-cent impact. It is human nature to gravitate to those we know and perceive to have experiences and ideas similar to our own.

“So women need to be seen at and, importantly, participate in key business forums. This is where the ideas that shape the national

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agenda are debated and take form. Women need to be a part of these debates, forming the relationships that build the E of ‘Exposure.’”

According to Diane, the AICC networking forums are also an opportunity to reach out to peers for guidance and advice when business models experience disruption from technological change and advancement. Diane recently spoke on innovation at an event in Perth with fellow CEW member Erica Smythe, a woman well known for her longstanding career in the resources industry, and says she herself learned a great deal from the nature of the questions that came from the audience.

“The session attracted a diverse cross-section of attendees from academia, business, and not-for-profit organisations, and a ‘speed dating’ networking session was held before we gave our presentations,” she says. “During the question and answer session, there were high-quality contributions from the audience where they had expertise, including real practical advice on managing change.”

Furthermore, Diane acknowledges, there are many things that can be learned from networking across national borders, for example from Israel’s expertise on innovation. “Israel certainly has a track record in creating disruptive innovation—I think that’s better than having to deal with it!” she says. “I spent some time serving companies in Israel when I was working at McKinsey & Company—unfortunately, it was too short, because I learned a great deal every time I went there.

“Given Australia’s geographic isolation, business networking internationally is not the easiest thing to do but it is well worth the effort. My career changed forever when I went to work with McKinsey & Company in the US and served clients from Brazil to Russia and all points in between. Your perspective changes and you build a different sort of resilience



when you are exposed to ideas from other nations.”

Diane, CEW, and the AICC are fervent about inspiring leadership, including the elevation of women in executive roles, and they acknowledge that men must also play a role in sparking change. The Australian Human Rights Commission launched an initiative in 2010 called ‘Male Champions of Change’, which is spearheaded by Sex Discrimination Commissioner and CEW member Elizabeth Broderick. Bringing together some of the country’s most influential and diverse male CEOs and chairpersons, the group uses its individual and collective influence to put gender equality on the national business agenda.

“Commissioner Broderick understands, as do I, that in order to achieve cultural change in Australia on this issue, we need to see and hear men using their individual and collective influence to ensure that women’s representation in leadership is elevated on the national agenda,” Diane says.

“What impresses me about the Male Champions of Change is that, both individually and as a group, they understood at the outset that something needed to change and it had to start with them. They understood how important it was for them to reach out to senior women with the practical experience and professional insights who could fully inform their thinking.

“CEW collaborated with the Male Champions of Change on The

Leadership Shadow and it gave them a solid foundation on which to frame their subsequent discussions. The Leadership Shadow is a simple but effective model which helps leaders to critically assess the leadership shadow they cast across four areas: what I say, how I act, what I prioritise, and how I measure.

“The Male Champions of Change understand that their leadership shadow has tremendous impact individually as well as collectively. By joining together on a regular basis, they are very consciously casting a positive leadership shadow on gender equality. They have and are demonstrating their commitment to gender equality by treating women’s representation in leadership in the same way as any other transformational business priority. Transparency about progress made—and more importantly, not made—towards gender equality is vital.”

As president of CEW, Diane will continue to fight the gender equality battle by offering support and providing initiatives for women in high-level executive and leadership positions. By aligning with the AICC, the council is able to encourage networking opportunities between influential men and women, and give women a greater voice in business. ●

Diane Smith-Gander will be speaking at the Australia-Israel Chamber of Commerce Diversity Lunch in Sydney on 23 November 2015. The panel will also host Alan Joyce, CEO of Qantas, and Henrietta Marrie, Australian Indigenous Rights Activist. Book online at [aicc.org.au](http://aicc.org.au) or call (02) 9326 1700 for more details.