

# Australian Women CEOs Speak

How female leaders rise and how organisations can help.



KORN FERRY  
**Institute**

In collaboration with:

**AUSTRALIAN INSTITUTE  
of COMPANY DIRECTORS**

# Contents

Acknowledgements .....	3
Foreword .....	4
Executive summary .....	6
At a glance: Australian Women CEOs Speak .....	8
Our research .....	10
Drivers .....	12
Traits .....	16
Competencies .....	18
Experiences .....	22
Picking a path .....	24
Setting an intention .....	28
Securing support .....	30
Transcending self-doubt .....	32
Conquering the glass cliff .....	34
Strategising the home front .....	36
Gaining board experience .....	38
Recommendations .....	42
A future that embraces women at the top .....	46
Korn Ferry research team .....	47
Resources .....	48
Contact .....	49

# Acknowledgements

The Korn Ferry Institute would like to acknowledge the generosity of the current and former CEOs who gave their time, mined their memories, and shared their knowledge to assist in the preparation of this report. Their contribution will help to build better pathways to executive roles for women.

Korn Ferry's executive sponsor, Katie Lahey AM, offered guidance, and the benefit of her CEO experience was pivotal to the success of this project. We also want to acknowledge the insights provided by the Australian Institute of Company Directors (AICD) and thank the AICD for its support of this research.

The former CEOs currently have active careers as non-executive directors (NEDs), advisers, and executives. We have noted their CEO roles below and acknowledge their broader contribution.

**Rebecca Dee-Bradbury, GAICD**

Former CEO, Barbeques Galore

**Sharon Cook**

Former Managing Partner,  
Henry Davis York

**Alison Deans, GAICD**

Former CEO, Netus, Hoyts,  
and eCorp

**Michelle Dixon**

Partner and CEO, Maddocks

**Dr. Stephanie Fahey**

CEO, Austrade

**Tracey Fellows, GAICD**

CEO, REA

**Professor Margaret Gardner,  
AO, GAICD**

Vice Chancellor, Monash  
University

**Jane Hemstritch, FAICD**

Former CEO, Accenture

**Jacqueline Hey, GAICD**

Former CEO, Ericsson

**Christine Holgate, MAICD**

CEO, Australia Post

**Gail Kelly**

Former CEO, Westpac

**Sue Kench**

Global CEO, King & Wood  
Mallesons

**Amanda Lacaze, MAICD**

CEO, Lynas Corporation Ltd

**Catherine Livingstone, AO,  
FAICD**

Former CEO, Cochlear

**Susan Lloyd-Hurwitz**

CEO, Mirvac

**Dana Nelson, MAICD**

CEO, Spotless

**Mary Padbury, GAICD**

Former Chair, Ashurst Australia,  
and Vice-Chair Ashurst Globally

**Ann Sherry, AO, FAICD**

Executive Chair, Carnival  
Australia

**Josephine Sukkar, AM, AAICD**

Principal, Buildcorp

**Elizabeth Proust, AO, FAICD**

Former Managing Director,  
Esanda (ANZ)

**Professor Margaret Sheil, AO**

Vice Chancellor, Queensland  
University of Technology

# Foreword

When Korn Ferry and Australian Institute of Company Directors set out to document the pathways women take to the CEO role, we were acutely aware of how few had completed that journey. The significant gender imbalance among CEOs at ASX 200 companies reflects the larger story of women's underrepresentation in executive ranks across Australian business, academia, professional services, and government.

So we started this research collaboration by asking: What can we learn from those who confronted a similar rocky pathway as other women, yet found their way to the destination? What facets of their careers and life trajectories helped them make it to the top job?

The research follows the lead of Korn Ferry in the United States, which in 2017 published *Women CEOs Speak*. The lessons from that report, which was supported by the Rockefeller Foundation, is already informing and reworking development programs to better serve the women who aspire to be leaders, as well as the organisations that support them.

*Australian Women CEOs Speak* similarly aims to illuminate and help remove barriers to executive roles and potential future board roles for women.

Some of our findings were to be expected. For example, most women CEOs had international experience because learning global best

practices often means leaving Australia. Other findings were surprising, such as the news that half the CEOs who were mothers had partners who, for at least part of the time, were the primary caregiver of their children. We were delighted to learn that most of the women worked with supportive boards, but concerned by the high number who showed evidence of self-doubt—generally unwarranted—when describing their early time as a CEO. We were also humbled by the generosity of the women who spoke to our researchers, at times reliving painful memories of their journey to the top. We appreciate their candour.

The dearth of women in executive roles—particularly line-management roles—means the pipeline to CEO and director roles is too narrow. This is the central challenge for boards, especially those looking to address gender diversity. When you consider that the board's most important task is to appoint the CEO, then it is clear that CEO succession is not served by the preponderance of men in C-suite roles.

*Australian Women CEOs Speak* shifts the focus from counting female heads to diving deeply into all the factors that need to come together to enable a successful career. After conducting psychometric assessments and structured interviews with the women who ascended to CEO or equivalent roles in Australia, we can confidently say we know what works and what doesn't, and provide a roadmap for future development.

*Australian Women CEOs Speak* is a resource for executive teams, HR leaders, boards, and most importantly the women who aspire to reach their full potential in their chosen career.



**Katie Lahey AM, MAICD**  
Executive Chairman, Korn Ferry,  
Australasia



**Elizabeth Proust AO, FAICD**  
Chairman, Australian Institute of  
Company Directors



## Executive summary

With just 14 female CEOs in the ASX 200, it's clear that corporate Australia hasn't been an easy environment for women. Those who have made it to top leadership did so by leveraging a particular combination of personality, skills, and approaches that is different in key ways from the global norms.

The Korn Ferry Institute began researching the careers of CEO women in US companies in 2017, and this report is an extension of that work. We conducted structured interviews with 21 Australian women: current and former CEOs, as well as women who had experience heading up professional services firms, government departments, and universities—all CEO-equivalent roles. We asked them about their career objectives, obstacles, motivations, and about their experience with boards.

Sixteen also took an executive assessment, and we compared their results with Korn Ferry's executive database. Although the CEO women were not selected based on any job-performance criteria, we found that their results were similar to our benchmark for best-in-class CEOs on two-thirds of drivers (motivations), more than half of traits (personality and other natural attributes), and 60% of competencies (specific job skills).

The areas of difference, however, were telling. Their interest in leadership rests on a different foundation, and they rebalance their strengths and apply their talents accordingly.

Among the key findings:

### **Nimble and collaborative leadership**

Australia's CEO women show particular strength in how they relate to people, and their effectiveness appears to extend from their candid and trusting work with teams. They are also exceptionally at ease with unsettled situations. They are highly agile, ready and able to adapt, and will try new approaches as needed.

### **Motivation**

They are decidedly not drawn to power or status, and many didn't really want to be CEO. But they were attracted by a sense of purpose—often related to improving the organisation for the sake of the people in it.

### **Confidence and self-doubt**

Despite track records of success, one-third of the women said they had experienced periods of serious self-doubt. On a psychometric assessment, the CEOs also scored themselves below-benchmark levels on Confidence and Assertiveness.

### **Career goals**

Of 16 interviewees who discussed it, 43% said that they never wanted to be CEO at all. About the same number set their sights specifically on becoming a CEO, some as early as in their 20s. The rest fell somewhere in between.

### **Professional path**

Although about half of the CEOs were operating with clear career goals by mid-career, 75% said their professional life had

periods of ‘improvisation.’ Some had almost entirely unplanned careers and moved into new positions, driven by a desire to learn.

### **Little mentoring**

Eleven of the 21 interviewees spoke of mentoring relationships, though some of those were informal interactions that might include a single piece of memorable advice. Only two women mentioned having consistent mentorship throughout their careers.

### **Appointment during a crisis**

Nine of the 21 women we interviewed were given a ‘hospital pass’—handed power when the risk of injury to their personal career was high. For women, this phenomenon is a corollary to the glass ceiling called the ‘glass cliff.’

### **Going global**

Experience in international markets is a key feature of CEO women’s careers in Australia. Of those interviewed, 70% described significant global and multicultural experience.

### **Work and family**

Half the CEO women with children had partners who were the primary family caregiver for some or all of the time the women were building their career.

### **Higher education**

Most of the CEO women held either honours or postgraduate qualifications. Almost half had postgraduate qualifications in a business-related field.

### **Importance of boards**

Experience on boards, both corporate and non-profit, contributed to the women’s breadth and confidence before becoming CEO. After their CEO appointment, far more women described their relationship with their own company’s board as positive and supportive than those who said they had difficulty. In seeking non-executive director roles, most women were very focused—in fact, more so than in pursuing the CEO role.



# At a glance: Australian Women CEOs Speak

“I just love being a CEO. I love it even in the days when it is darkest and most difficult. I love it in a way that I have never loved any other job that I had. No matter what the business, no matter how difficult the situation, I love it.”

## Arriving well prepared

**48%** had postgraduate degrees in business

**70%** had overseas work experience

## Chief executive impulse

**43%** always wanted to be a CEO

**43%** said they never wanted to be CEO

## Improvising up the ladder

**75%** said some part of their career path was improvised

## Support at home and work

**50%** of those with kids had partners who took care of the home and children

**52%** mentioned a mentor

## Boards toss women a ‘hospital pass’

**43%** of the women were appointed CEO when the risk of failure was high

## Strong suits

CEO women score very high on traits related to learning, creating tight-knit teams, and rolling with the punches

**Curiosity** (80th percentile)

**Tolerance of Ambiguity** (87th percentile)

**Trust** (84th percentile)

**Adaptability** (84th percentile)

**Affiliation** (82nd percentile)

## Profile in Courage... but not Confidence

CEO women scored themselves at the

**77th** percentile for Courage

... but just the

**29th** percentile for Confidence

\* Findings based on 21 interviews and 16 executive assessments of Australian women who previously or currently led a listed company, university, law firm, or government department.



## Our research

Korn Ferry's research tools and methodology

Korn Ferry conducted structured interviews with 21 current and former CEOs who previously or currently led a listed company, university, law firm, or government department. Twelve of the women currently work in CEO-equivalent roles, and nine former CEOs now hold NED, executive, or advisory roles.

While not all these women hold the exact title of CEO, each was in the equivalent role in her organisation, and we will refer to this group as 'CEO women' throughout this report.

In the interviews, we asked about the key events and experiences in each woman's career progression, including: challenges, defining moments, obstacles, setbacks, or factors that enabled success. We also discussed the factors from their personal lives that contributed to their career desires and trajectory. The interviews were coded and analysed to identify themes and determine areas of commonality.

Sixteen of the 21 women also underwent Korn Ferry's executive assessment, Korn Ferry's Four Dimensions of Leadership (KF4D).

The psychometric portion of the assessment measures three areas:

**Traits.** A person's inclinations and aptitudes, such as personality traits and intellectual capacity. Traits also include attributes such as Assertiveness, Risk Taking, Optimism, and Confidence.

**Drivers.** Deeply held values and internal motivators that guide a person's actions and decisions. A desire for Power, Challenge, or Balance are things we categorise as drivers.

**Competencies.** The observable skills essential for management success, such as Resourcefulness, Courage, Cultivates Innovation, and Strategic Vision.

In addition, the fourth dimension of talent is:

**Experiences.** Assignments or roles that prepared a person for future opportunities.

Throughout, we compare the average scores of Australia's CEO women to Korn Ferry's global CEO benchmark.

**The CEO benchmark** is a mathematically generated model of assessment scores.<sup>1</sup> The benchmark represents scores that correlate with being in the 99th percentile of work engagement, which research shows also correlates with superior job performance.

<sup>1</sup>The model-generating equations were derived based on a global sample of more than 27,000 professionals, including 631 CEOs.



## Drivers

CEO women are attracted to collaborative leadership more than power.

CEO jobs are synonymous with power. And yet the most unexpected finding of this study is that the women who became CEO in Australia were decidedly not motivated by power.

In the KF4D assessment, drivers reflect the work-related values, interests, or desires that are a significant factor in an individual's career decisions. In this case, the CEO women's average score for Power was in the 14th percentile, one of the lowest scores of all the characteristics the assessment measures; the benchmark is the 58th percentile.

This gap particularly stood out because the women were generally in line with the benchmark on four other drivers: Balance (exhibiting little need for work-life balance), Collaboration (much preferring to work together rather than individually), Independence (mostly preferring an entrepreneurial approach and freedom from organisational constraints), and Structure (needing less predictability and stability in the workplace).

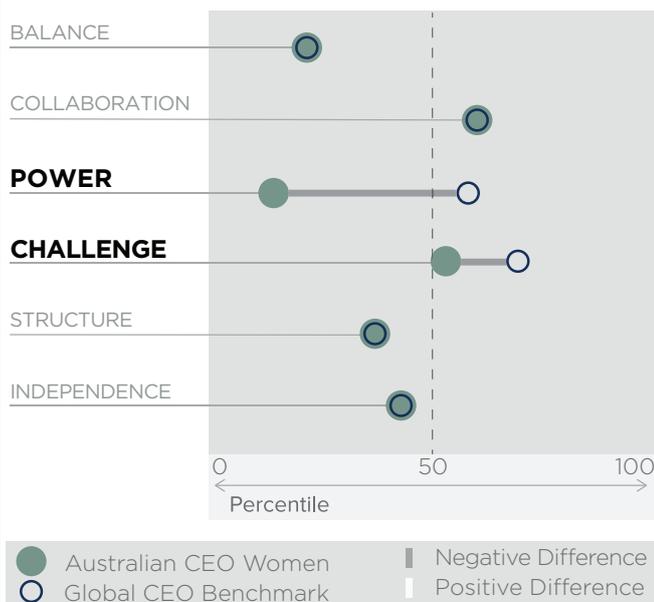


# Drivers of Australian CEO women compared with the global CEO benchmark

The CEO women were much less motivated by power.

## Drivers of Australian CEO women compared with global CEO benchmark

The CEO women were much less motivated by power.



© Korn Ferry 2018. All rights reserved.

The Power driver, in many respects, is a measure of generic, outward ambition—a desire for status, influence, and the ability to have an impact from a high-level job. These CEO women aren't obvious ladder-climbers but instead are driven by intrinsic interest in the work, a sense of purpose, and a desire to lead people in a positive manner.

“I saw a lot of people around me in positions of power who, frankly, were quite damaging to the people they were leading and the communities they were operating in. It came to a point where I needed to put my money where my mouth was in terms of stepping up.”

“Because I really cared about how it was going to be done and not just what was going to be done meant that I kind of had this real belief that I had a responsibility to do the role.”

This low drive for power also means that even though they are demonstrated high-calibre leaders, when it comes to high-visibility roles like CEO, many say they can take it or leave it. This tracks with the reluctance we heard in some interviews.

“I remember very clearly getting the call from an executive recruitment agency. I was standing in a store buying shoes for my kids, and [the recruiter] said, ‘We’ve got a job for an ASX 50 CEO.’ I said, ‘No, thanks.’ I recommended somebody else and carried on buying the shoes.”

Many women hadn’t been in pursuit of the role. Some didn’t necessarily want the job, and at least two had to be asked multiple times to accept it.

The Australian CEO women also had interesting scores on another driver: Challenge. They self-reported being motivated by challenging assignments at the 53rd percentile—above the median, but below the 69th percentile benchmark. Female CEOs in the US scored even higher than that, at the 79th percentile. Why the difference? The American women were highly competitive individuals who seemed to view workplace obstacles and near-impossible assignments as games they would win, one way or another.

The Australians’ mid-range Challenge scores suggest they prefer to find a place to apply their well-honed strengths.

While not statistically different from the benchmark, they did score higher on being driven by Collaboration and, as explored in the next section, on the traits related to getting along with others.

Taken together, this pattern suggests strong feelings shaped these women’s interest in becoming CEO. These women were ready to work very hard as a leader, but only if they could do it on their own terms, which include a lot of collaboration and not dictating orders from the top.

#### TAKEAWAYS FOR ORGANISATIONS

Consider the organisational culture. Is jockeying for promotions a yardstick for ambition? Have women been discounted from the C-suite track because they turned down a promotion at some point in their career?

Encourage women to throw their hats in the ring by presenting opportunities for promotion as a way to apply strengths and encourage collaboration in the organisation.

Position senior roles in terms that are likely to resonate with women—e.g., sense of purpose, the difference the role makes, the ability to chart a new course—not just power.

#### TAKEAWAYS FOR WOMEN

Women may not be driven by the idea of wielding power, but they should appreciate that leadership provides the opportunity to build teams, inspire others, and collaborate to improve the organisation.

Women who turn down a promotion, or even hesitate to accept, need to know that this is often misconstrued by the organisation as lack of interest in senior leadership.

Women should have clarity about what gives them a sense of purpose and find ways to contribute to that through forms of leadership.



## Traits

CEO women are agile and agreeable, but not necessarily confident.

Despite reaching the highest levels of organisational leadership, the CEO women in Australia scored themselves quite low on Confidence. At the same time, they showed high levels of traits related to being agile and getting the best out of others.

Traits are a person's natural inclinations and aptitudes. They can include personality attributes and mindset. While not immutable, traits are generally established early in life and difficult to alter.

To understand some trait scores, it's important to be clear about what they are truly measuring. For instance, people expressing high Confidence believe they are masters of their destiny; those with low Confidence scores think that outside forces shape their future. Low Persistence scores suggest someone who adjusts expectations and changes approaches when confronted with obstacles. The CEO women's Confidence and Persistence scores, in particular, may represent a clear-eyed view of reality for female leaders in Australia.

The CEO women use particular traits to channel their influence. High Affiliation scores suggest they preferred to lead through teams and teamwork. They generally score high on Curiosity, and specifically seem interested in what other people think (Openness to Differences). High Trust scores suggest these women were forthright and that they had faith in those around them.

“If people lose complete confidence in us, in their executive team, they lose faith in their ability to take action. They lose faith and confidence. They had to see what was really good about what they did [during a restructuring] and focus on that.”

The women also had high scores in traits related to Agility. They would take risks, find novel approaches to problems, adapt, and adjust. They were also extremely comfortable with uncertainty or rapidly changing situations—perhaps in part because they knew they had a trusting team behind them.

“I had no subject-matter expertise... My job was to lead this team of people who all knew way more than I did. Things would go wrong regularly that we'd never anticipated, because we were operating in such a foreign environment—and this was the first time it had ever been done in the world.”

“When I look at environments that are changing now through technology, a number of times it flows back to patterns you’ve seen elsewhere. But you also have to be clear about what’s fact and what’s not, and be comfortable with the idea that there are uncertainties.”

**TAKEAWAYS FOR WOMEN**

Women need to be attuned to their sense of confidence. Are they simply being realistic about the challenges a role entails, or is there truly a reason to be insecure about their own abilities?

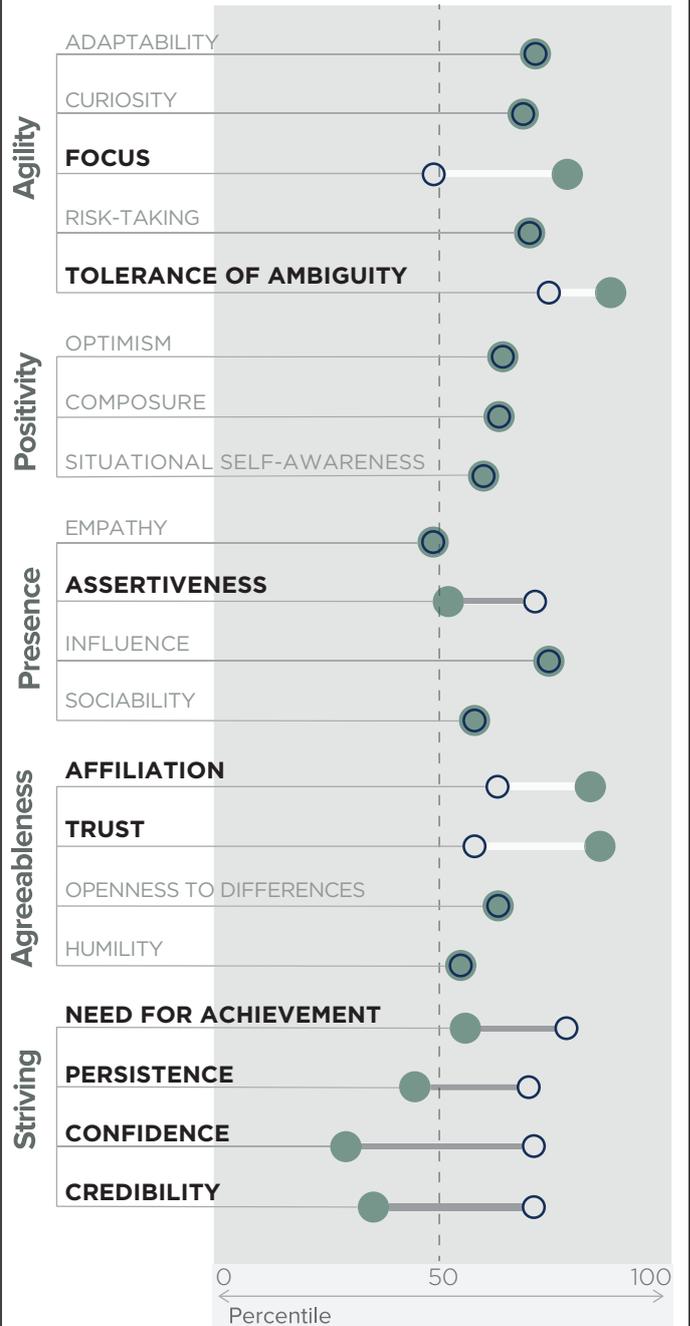
Humility, building trusting relationships, and curiosity about others can help women get ahead if they manage those attributes in the right way.

**TAKEAWAYS FOR ORGANISATIONS**

Don’t discount women who are humble and share credit. They can make superior leaders, especially when they can work in team-oriented environments.

**Traits of Australian CEO women compared with global CEO benchmark.**

Average scores surpassed Korn Ferry’s CEO benchmark in areas related to Agility and Agreeableness.



● Australian CEO Women    ○ Global CEO Benchmark  
 ■ Negative Difference    ▨ Positive Difference

© Korn Ferry 2018. All rights reserved.

# Competencies

Australia's CEO women show a real strength in working with people.

Female CEOs in Australia have a distinct way of applying their leadership skills. They emphasise strong and trusting relationships over telling people what to do and holding their feet to the fire.

The CEOs' competency scores, which measure their use of specific leadership skills, are consistent with what we heard in the interviews, which was a strong focus towards working with teams and setting a positive example of openness and transparency. They also scored highly on measures around being personally flexible and ability to roll with the punches, such as Manages Ambiguity, Nimble Learning, and Situational Adaptability.

The overall pattern revealed here show CEO women emphasising working with teams, but not micromanaging them. For instance, the CEOs score themselves highly on: Builds Networks, Collaborates, Interpersonal Savvy, Manages Conflict, and Persuades. At the same time, they slightly downplay these competencies: Action Oriented, Directs Work, Ensures Accountability, and Optimises Work Processes.

"I think my biggest skill is an ability to work with people. An ability to build relationships with people, and relationships built on trust, relationships built on can-do that are completely open and transparent."

This particular pattern of competencies also may stem, in part, from our sample of CEOs. It included 12 (of 21) who led other-than-corporate organisations. In those settings, including professional services firms, academia, and government agencies, interpersonal skills and the art of persuasion may be the most-needed competencies.

The CEO women see themselves, on average, as less strong on a few 'leaderly' competencies. They scored slightly below the benchmark on Builds Effective Teams, Drives Engagement, and Strategic Mindset. And yet these women have achieved many ambitious goals for their organisations; some have led multiple turnarounds with great success. Thus, lower scores in these areas don't necessarily reflect a lack of mastery. Instead, the CEO women's collaborative approach may mean they are 'sharing credit' for vision and strategy. They may have a higher bar for when they feel competent, as well.

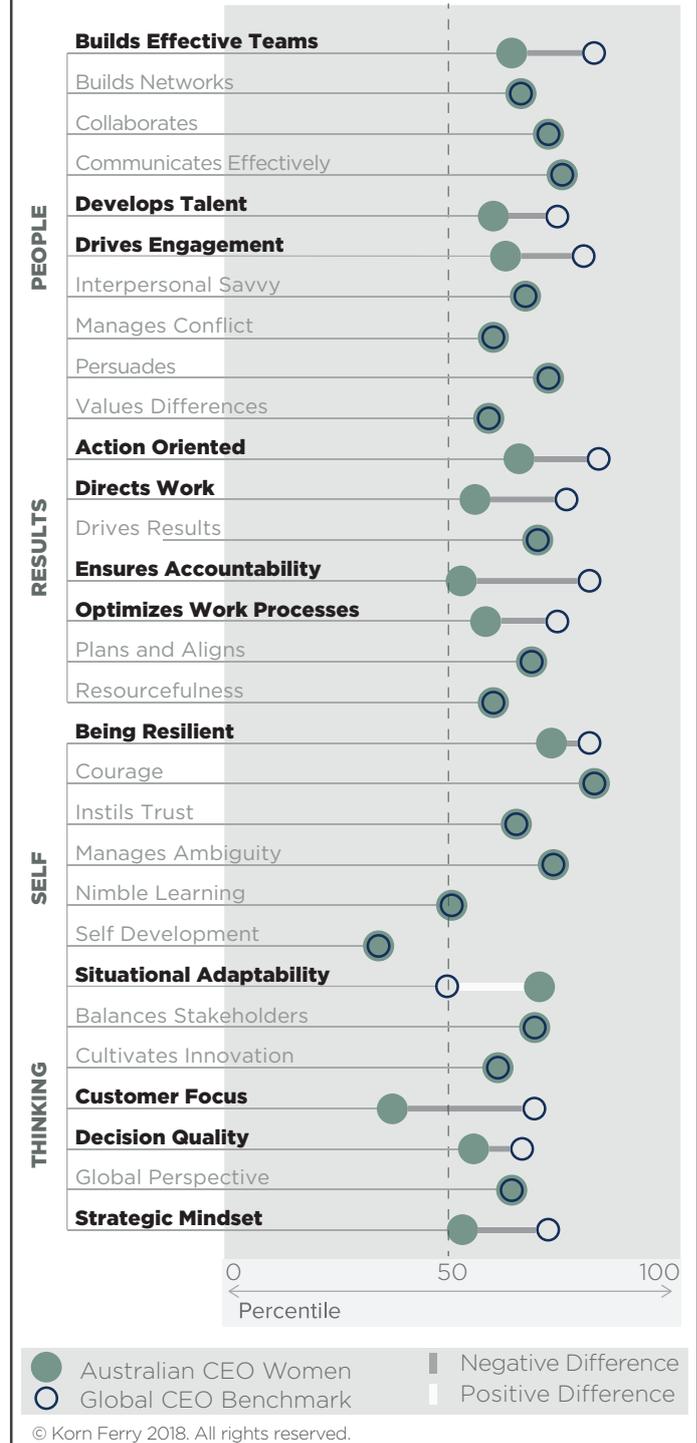
"Coming in to the job—and feeling perhaps more insecure than I should have—I relied on the team. And I learned very quickly that, actually, having an empowered and engaged team is a fantastic way of getting things done."

The CEO women also gauged themselves as being closer to the median on Decision Quality (making good and timely decisions to keep things moving) and Strategic Mindset (seeing future possibilities and developing strategies to get there). These scores also may be related to their more collaborative way of leading.

Finally, despite the great resilience we heard in the interviews, the Australian women scored themselves as lower than the benchmark (though above the median) on the Being Resilient competency. On the other hand, they scored at the benchmark or higher on the Situational Adaptability, Manages Ambiguity, and Cultivates Innovation competencies—all suggesting that they are poised to pivot and find new solutions when necessary.

## Competencies of Australian CEO women compared with global CEO benchmark.

The CEO women scored themselves highly on people- and self-related skills and behaviours.



## What’s needed to put more women in the leadership pipeline

A 2017 analysis of Korn Ferry’s global database of assessment scores, which includes many thousands of people at all levels of management, underscores how important it is for women to develop the right competencies. By analysing data from 1,642 female professionals—including 165 senior executives and 71 CEOs—the Korn Ferry Institute found that women who become CEO are much more likely to score highly on

six specific competencies. These differentiating skills are what women must master as they move from manager to senior executive. It’s worth noting that even though the CEO women in Australia scored themselves below our benchmark on some of these competencies, the average scores were all above the median.

### Differentiating skills for future CEOs

In Korn Ferry’s global assessment database, female CEOs were more than twice as likely to have high scores on these six competencies than middle managers.”

<b>ENGAGES AND INSPIRES</b>	Creating a climate where people are motivated to achieve the company’s objectives.	<b>2.64 X</b>
<b>DEVELOPS TALENT</b>	Developing people to meet both their career goals and the organisation’s goals.	<b>2.62 X</b>
<b>BUILDS EFFECTIVE TEAMS</b>	Assembling and leading teams that employ diverse skills and perspectives to achieve common goals.	<b>2.62 X</b>
<b>DIRECTS WORK</b>	Providing clear direction, delegating, and removing obstacles so work gets done efficiently.	<b>2.41 X</b>
<b>COURAGE</b>	Stepping up to address difficult issues and saying what needs to be said.	<b>2.33 X</b>
<b>MANAGES AMBIGUITY</b>	Operating effectively even when things are uncertain or the way forward is unclear.	<b>2.09 X</b>

MIDDLE MANAGER

The numbers above are odds ratios. They answer the question, “Compared to middle managers, how much more likely is a CEO to score high on the given competency?”

© Korn Ferry 2017. All rights reserved. | Represents a sample of 1,642 female professionals, including 165 senior executives and 71 CEOs.

### TAKEAWAYS FOR WOMEN

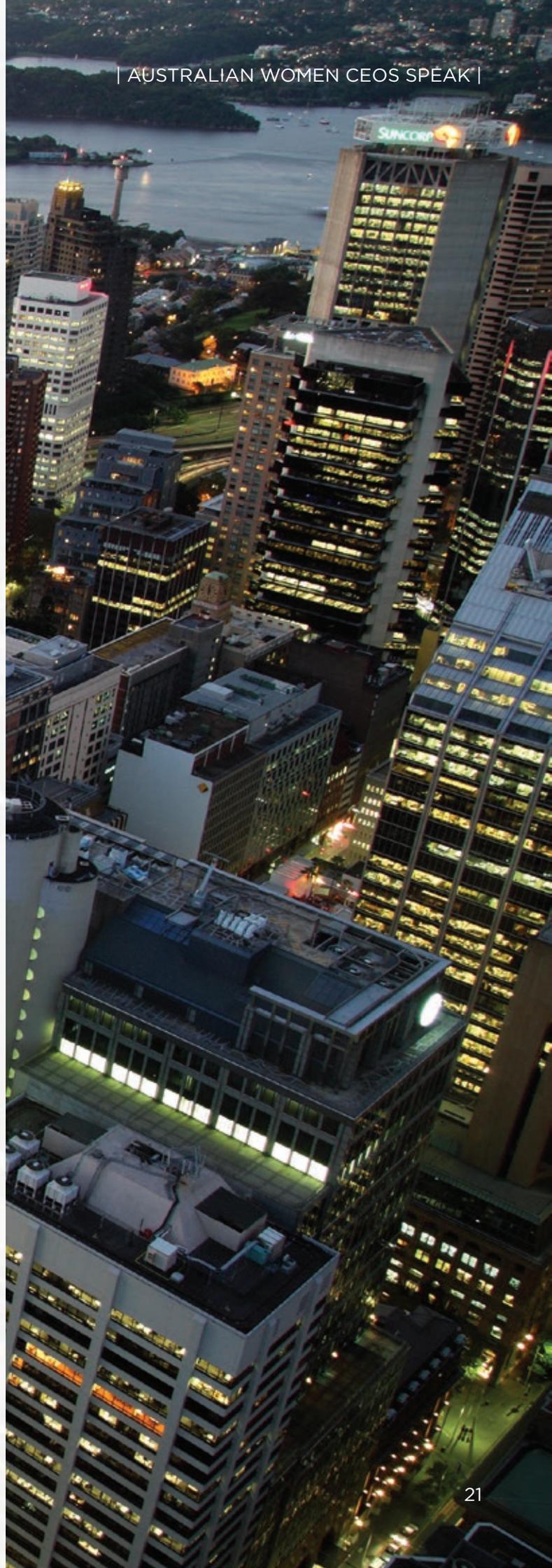
Being a great leader requires essentially two things: managing yourself, then managing others. But even with strong self-development and people skills, women should be sure to sharpen their operations and strategic skills with formal training and mentoring (see ‘Securing support’).

There’s a theme throughout our assessment findings: high levels of courage, nimble learning, and management of ambiguity. More women need to take on tough and unpredictable job assignments to build these characteristics if they want to be CEO.

### TAKEAWAYS FOR ORGANISATIONS

Organisations can send women identified as having high potential to leadership programs and be sure they are building essential skills, particularly developing talent, directing work, and building effective teams. The earlier women start managing teams, the more confidence they’ll have in these areas.

These scores suggest female CEOs felt they could be better equipped on strategic thinking, decision-making, and delegating. These nuts-and-bolts areas should be addressed with coaching and mentorship.



## Experiences

Most Australian CEO women have deep global and multicultural experience

That 70% of the CEO women described significant overseas experience shouldn't surprise anyone working in Australian business.

As an island continent where close to 60% of the population holds a passport<sup>2</sup>, overseas travel is a feature of many Australians' professional and personal life. The opportunity to work in foreign countries can help people gain valuable insight into different business models and—most importantly for multicultural and trade-reliant Australia—different cultures.

Like any major life decision, working abroad comes with sacrifice, highs, lows, and getting used to change.

“I said I wanted to work for a global [company] and see what it was like, and I learnt that there are lots of positives and there are truckloads of negatives as well.”

Despite the setbacks and obstacles associated with working abroad, these experiences ultimately benefited these leaders and their employers. Their perspectives were challenged and broadened. Their workplaces benefited greatly from their increased cross-cultural awareness.

“And a lot of my own perceptions were changed when I was there, and some weren't. But many were, because the world is different when you're looking at it in [another] country through their [citizens'] eyes.”

Five of the 20 interviewees talked about how their global experiences shaped their cross-cultural awareness and led to more effective management styles.

“Showing up is so important when you're in charge of different countries. If you don't try to manage them remotely, if you show up and try and understand how they feel about things and how they run their business and listen a bit... people will come and try and be part of it.”

On a more micro scale, cultural understanding should lead to a change of behaviour in one-on-one interactions. One CEO spoke about learning to match her energy to other individuals—not only according to their culture but to their own personal dispositions. Another modified her dress and mannerisms to avoid giving offense in a particular culture, finding a balance between her style and that culture.

<sup>2</sup> <https://www.passports.gov.au/2017-passport-facts>

One interviewee in particular had a strong drive to produce change for women in another country, hiring more women and providing them with increased opportunities and extended maternity leave.

“When I went in, we had zero women working in operations; today we have more than 50 and this is out of a staff of 600. We had six female managers; today we have 14. We had 52 women in total in the company; today we have 117.”

#### TAKEAWAYS FOR WOMEN

When offered offshore assignments, women should consider the potential of that opportunity for building the knowledge, skills, and experience needed for their long-term careers. Overseas experience can really test and strengthen skills and capabilities.

Women can also volunteer themselves for global assignments early on to prepare for future, higher-stakes global work.

Women can focus on embracing diversity wherever they are in their careers. If women can leverage others' diverse thoughts and expertise, they will be able to overcome many of their own blind spots. This can lead to an ability to adapt to clashing work styles, locally and internationally.

#### TAKEAWAYS FOR ORGANISATIONS

Organisations can send women identified as high-potentials on global assignments early in their careers. This can develop their global perspective at an early age, so that they may be more equipped as a leader working internationally or locally in the future.

Although it may be more convenient to conduct cross-cultural training in the office, the truest form of learning will not occur there but instead in a *real-life* cultural setting.

## Picking a path

Some women steered their careers upward, but many followed their own interests.

The 21 CEO women largely fell into two groups, each with a distinct pattern to their careers. About half (11 of 21) took a planned career path, meaning they had CEO ambitions and made deliberate job choices accordingly.

Although no one had a rigid step-by-step plan, this group actively lobbied for specific assignments, networked to get access to opportunities, and sought out mentors or coaches.

“I do remember sitting there seeing these four people up the front of the room and I was thinking, ‘Why am I here at the back of the room? I want their job.’”

“I rang my counterpart and said, ‘Let’s create a network of senior women because then collectively we can share [knowledge] and we can attempt to influence policy and objectives.’”

This group also expressed less concern for maintaining work-life balance; they were all-in for the job. They had confidence in their vision and their ability to be an exceptional leader, and notably few of them (27%) faced significant obstacles to advancement in the workplace.

The other significant segment of CEO women (eight of 21) had a looser learning orientation to their careers. Thus, their professional lives

were often steered by curiosity. They wanted to absorb as much as they could from each role, but were ready to move on once they had.

“I was asked, ‘How do you explain all the roles you’ve had?’ I said, ‘Probably the boredom factor.’”

Unlike the confident planners above, these women approached being CEO with more humility. A learning orientation, by definition, means acknowledging that you are not the person with all the answers. Becoming CEO wasn’t the end, but another stage of their learning.

“It really made me question what I needed to do, what skills I needed to learn, how I needed to further challenge myself, [and] educate myself around what it actually meant to run an organisation.”

Finally, it’s worth noting that three-quarters of the CEO women described at least some segment of their career as improvised. This fact reveals how adaptable these women were, but also that in some cases, if they hadn’t been presented with an unexpected opportunity or recruited for a role they hadn’t sought out, their organisations might have lost out on great leadership.

## Common obstacles

Regardless of the career path, Australia's CEO women reported many shared experiences. They seized opportunities. They worked exceptionally hard. Adversity—whether personal or professional—just strengthened their resolve. Many women commented that someone along the way 'believed in me more than I believed in myself,' a testament of faith that enabled them to move forward.

Close to half the women discussed experiencing gender discrimination during her career. One was asked to sew on a button. Another was told she was a bad role model because she worked too hard. One received a reduced bonus based on an assumption that her pregnancy must have meant her job performance dropped off, despite evidence to the contrary.

Close to half the CEOs described accepting tough assignments or described themselves as particularly hard workers throughout their careers. They took on challenging roles no one else wanted, or even feared.

“A friend of mine once said to me, ‘You know you get the jobs that other people probably would be too scared to take and then you create the jobs that they all want.’”

“They believed I was mad to step into an industry that was on its knees. But for me, it was about the opportunity to rebuild something, which you hardly ever get.”

These women put in extra effort, stayed in the office for long hours at a time, and took incredible risks. They also didn't second-guess their decisions or dwell on the what-ifs of potentially negative outcomes—a skill that is vitally important for decision-making as a CEO.

Working hard was also an antidote to career setbacks; 'keep your head down and just keep delivering results' seemed to be a common refrain for getting through tough patches.

### TAKEAWAYS FOR WOMEN

Women find their way into leadership at many different points in their career. Even those who don't think they are on the track to CEO can start making deliberate career moves.

Big, messy assignments can be great teachers. Taking jobs that no one else wants is a way to build credibility and gain confidence.

Even detail-oriented career planners should be ready for some improvisation in their careers. Opportunities arise on their own timeline.

An important quality of executive leaders is to avoid second-guessing their decisions. Women on track for the top should give all their effort in the moment with the available information and deal with the consequences as they come.

### TAKEAWAYS FOR ORGANISATIONS

Evidence of directed ambition shouldn't be relied upon as a measure of leadership ability. Many of the most successful women were ready to take on great responsibility but weren't seeking obvious forms of power.

Communicating faith in a woman's leadership abilities can go a long way towards ensuring that the organisation gets the full benefit of her talents.

The many routes to the CEO role, including an improvised pathway, should be recognised. Women should have multiple points where they can enter or re-enter the leadership pipeline.



## Setting an intention

Women were evenly split on whether they had a desire to become CEO.

In interviews, 16 women specifically raised the topic of when becoming CEO emerged as a career goal. Seven of them—or 43%—explicitly wanted to be CEO, but surprisingly, another seven said they never wanted to be CEO. The rest fell somewhere in between.

Of those who didn't want to be CEO, some resisted or hesitated before accepting the role. Five out of these seven also talked about experiencing unwarranted self-doubt, which also may have been a factor.

“I never thought I would be a CEO. I never would have put my hand up for the job. When my boss was leaving, he said, ‘Do you want to do it?’ And I said, ‘No, I can't do it,’ and I told him the three things I couldn't do. He said, ‘Well I think you can, but you've got 24 hours to work it out.’”

“When I got it [the CEO offer] I was intensely surprised and immediately interested—but also, I just thought it was the wrong time.”

By contrast, two women talked about how it was in their nature to become CEO, and there were two who set their sights on becoming CEO when they were in their early 20s. But for most (five of the seven), the turning point came when they gained some level of confidence that they could do the job—or, at least do it better than the current leadership.

“So, there was a moment where I just thought: ‘I can do that.’ And I did.”

Three interviewees said it helped that they were told by others that they had potential to be CEO, but that it wasn't necessarily pivotal.

None of the interviewees seemed to relish the perks or the status that came with being CEO. Those who most enjoyed their role focused either on the type of work it entailed or on the impact they could have on people, including employees, customers, or fellow Australians in the case of government posts.

“The thing that certainly attracted me about the CEO role was the fact that it was stuff I actually enjoy doing, which is more around the strategy, the people piece, the senior client engagement, and driving a plan and a vision for the business.”

### TAKEAWAYS FOR WOMEN

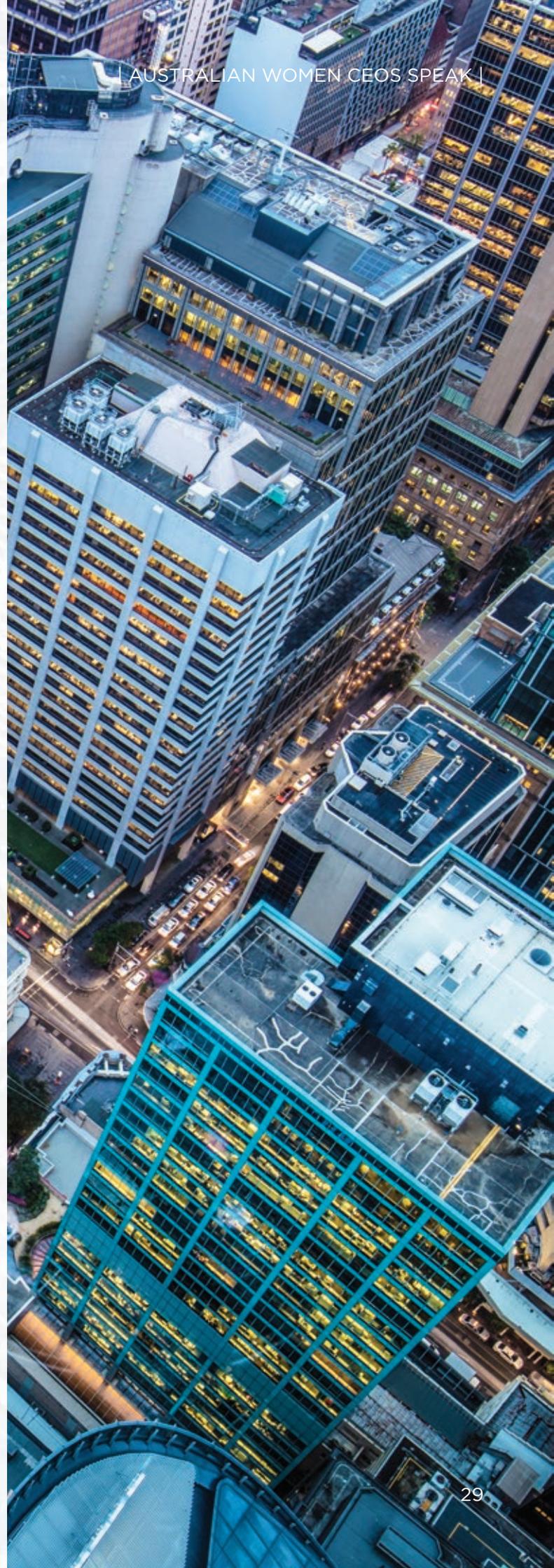
When women doubt themselves regarding leadership positions, they should re-evaluate, recognising that it is not necessary to have 100% of the desired experiences and qualifications.

If other people express confidence in their abilities, women should take those evaluations seriously and own them.

### TAKEAWAYS FOR ORGANISATIONS

Organisations should highlight the success of women who are already in leadership. This conveys to younger women that it is absolutely possible to make it to the top as a woman.

When identifying younger women to potentially rise in the ranks, organisations should look for those with the can-do attitude that helps them succeed as leaders. But organisations should also look for those who are good leaders of people and achieve results, even if those women are not so high in self-confidence. Our findings suggest that half of talented women have a more modest evaluation of themselves than is warranted.



## Securing support

Only about half of the women CEOs had mentors, sponsors, or coaches.

Not only were the CEOs in the study likely to have partially improvised careers and doubts about wanting to be CEO, many also made it to the top with little formal development, mentors, sponsors, or coaches.

Eleven of 21 interviewees brought up mentors, although some of these relationships were very informal and might have included only receiving a single piece of memorable advice. Only two women said they had consistent mentorship throughout their career.

Nine of the CEOs spoke about the value of a sponsor—a person in the organisation who championed them, secured job opportunities for them, and offered advice on navigating the organisation. Most of these sponsors were men, perhaps unsurprisingly given how few women are in top executive positions. One interviewee related controversial advice she has given to up-and-coming female leaders:

Sometimes I say to young women, ‘The best thing you can do is get yourself a male sponsor.’ I know it’s not necessarily fashionable to say that, but you know ... you need to be where the power is and unfortunately that’s still with men.

Mentoring and sponsorship came in mid-career for some of the CEOs. Coaching became the main form of development when they reached the senior level. Still, only six of the women received coaching, most of them after being appointed to CEO. Coaching usually came at the suggestion of the organisation, but one woman took the initiative on her own, recognising her need to learn more about leadership.

“I reached out and got a coach when I was early into my CEO or managing-director roles because I wanted to learn from someone who had been there.”

Only a quarter of the women said they’d received organisational support through participating in leadership-development programs.

In Korn Ferry’s study of female CEOs in the US, the importance of mentoring and sponsorship was significantly more prominent in the interviews: 70% of the US women described having mentors or sponsors in mid- to late career, whereas only 38% of the Australians did so.

### TAKEAWAYS FOR WOMEN

Mid-career is the optimal time to put effort into seeking help from mentors, sponsors, and coaches. This can set women up for success as they take on more senior roles.

No one mentor can provide everything. Women should seek out and invest in several such relationships. Some may offer broad leadership or career guidance, but future CEOs also need direction on the nuts-and-bolts of running the organisation and navigating the personalities of the senior leaders.

### TAKEAWAYS FOR ORGANISATIONS

There is a clear need for more leadership programs and more inclusion of women in them. Ideally, programs would be designed to address women's particular needs.

Leadership-development programs should include a formal mentorship component. Mentoring and sponsorship will be much more effective if the mentors and sponsors themselves are coached on what women need.

Organisations should also specifically encourage senior women to sponsor younger women to bestow on them confidence and credibility.

## Transcending self-doubt

Many CEO women said they had pushed through a crisis of confidence.

If we think about who should be least likely to feel underqualified in the workplace, it is the CEO. Yet our interviews showed that a number of female Australian CEOs experienced unwarranted self-doubt during their career.

Even as they were performing well, they described feeling like a fraud, with one noting that she had suffered from ‘imposter syndrome.’

“I was appointed, and I thought, ‘This is great. This is what I wanted.’ And then I thought, ‘My God, I’m a complete fraud. They are going to realise now that I actually don’t know how to lead a division, and this is just going to be a disaster.’”

More than one-third of the CEO women discussed having periods of painful self-doubt. For some, these types of feelings—being on the cusp of failure or being ‘found out’ as in over their head—have been a recurring motif. For others, confronting this unwarranted self-doubt catalysed a change in how they approached leadership or how they managed a major obstacle.

“I did that ‘girl thing’ where I thought I’m not really very good at this and maybe I should just retire ... and my best friends at work gathered around me and helped me through a really difficult time. So accepting help and being surrounded by people who are prepared to give help enabled me to gradually come out the other end.”

In addition to relying on their own nimbleness and their ability to gather allies, the women also discovered specific strategies for countering any self-doubt.

**Normalise such feelings.** By being authentic and open with others about their periods of self-doubt, women found they could get through them.

**Reflect on achievements.** Taking stock of past successes, moments when they bounced back, and the confidence others placed in them helped women believe in themselves.

**Reject fear.** Interestingly, even though these women had self-doubt, they recognised that they also had tremendous courage. By using that—confronting issues head-on, saying what needed to be said, or taking a big risk—they could get past self-doubt.

**Update one's self-image.** Some women were helped by incorporating the CEO role into their own self-image—or by adjusting their ideas about CEO leadership to include their own more team-centred style.

Of the seven women who'd had self-doubt, five eventually overcame it with these kinds of tools. They ultimately strengthened their resilience, confidence, and performance, leading to an authentic style of leadership that acknowledges—indeed, leverages—vulnerability and reliance on other people.

“Having done many different things now ... the little voice in my own head now says, ‘You know you can do this.’ It just takes time, effort, and work and you'll get there.”

#### TAKEAWAYS FOR WOMEN

Women may be heartened to know that even some of the most accomplished executive leaders in Australia have struggled with self-doubt. They may also be buoyed to learn that self-doubt can be mitigated by exhibiting courage, taking risks, and acknowledging such feelings to others.

One woman talked about the help of her female work colleagues during a low period. Women should be sure to know who they can rely on for support.

A lack of confidence can hold women back, either because they decline challenging roles or they aren't offered them. Women should acknowledge their self-doubt and deal with it head-on.

#### TAKEAWAYS FOR ORGANISATIONS

Senior leaders should be aware of how unwarranted self-doubt may mask women's ambition, and thus undermine efforts to move women upward into leadership. Men who are motivated more by advancement are more willing to step into larger jobs, where qualified women might hesitate.

A system should be created to recognise commendable work to aid women in gaining confidence and being reminded of their accomplishments. Women need regular feedback on their performance.

Senior leaders who understand how crippling self-doubt can be to career advancement can work with younger, future female leaders on how to overcome it.

## Conquering the glass cliff

Women often get handed big opportunities when the risks are high.

One consequence of their pattern of hard work and delivering results is that our CEO women were likely to be offered leadership roles when the risk of failure was high—both for themselves and the organisation.

This phenomenon is referred to as the ‘glass cliff’ or the ‘hospital pass.’ This makes sense: Boards turn to these women with a hard-working reputation when their organisation is in dire straits—and these women have the agility and courage to jump into such risky situations.

We looked for instances of women coming into CEO roles under these especially difficult circumstances and found a clear association: nine of 21 cases. We did not count instances where a crisis arose during the woman’s tenure as CEO, only situations that could have been known to the board when the appointment was made. Most glass-cliff scenarios involved facing more than one type of challenge.

“The first bit was really about cleaning up the legacy, and setting the strategy going forward. It’s working beautifully now. But genuinely, I would not have taken it on. I would have said, ‘No, no, no; someone else can do all that.’ I had no idea [how bad it was].”

Others described in some detail the great difficulties they faced early in their CEO role, and how hard they and their teams had to work to turn the situation around.

“The board really did want to drive cultural change. I think that’s what they saw in me, because the company was in really bad shape. Returns were terrible. Staff engagement was horrible. It had really lost its way...”

Of the CEO women put in glass-cliff situations, 70% had also described themselves as hard workers who deliver results. Only 30% of those who had not experienced glass-cliff events described themselves that way. Likewise, only two women who said they’d experienced periods of self-doubt ended up in glass-cliff situations. It is not clear whether this is because the women declined such challenging roles, or because boards intuited some lack of confidence.

Why are such a high proportion of women selected for the top role in emergency or crisis situations? One NED described a board’s CEO-succession discussion where gender diversity was considered important. The preferred candidates were mostly male until the conversation turned from ‘ready now’ to emergency candidates.

“Ready now? A couple of blokes. Ready in a year? More blokes. Ready in two years? There were a couple of women. Emergency successor? Every one of the candidates was female ... because you can rely on that competent woman in an emergency, but you wouldn’t want to go with her for the permanent role.”

“I hate being classified [as a turnaround expert] because I’m really good at running any business, and I say that without conceit, based on my track record. But I’m a woman so I don’t get offered an ASX top 20 role; I get to clean up someone else’s mess.”

#### TAKEAWAYS FOR WOMEN

There’s a theme throughout our assessment findings: courage, risk-taking, resilience, and managing ambiguity. Women who take on tough and unpredictable job assignments will build these characteristics and be best prepared if thrown a ‘hospital pass.’

#### TAKEAWAYS FOR ORGANISATIONS

When female executives make unpopular or difficult decisions for the good of the company, they should be applauded and their courage recognised.

Turnarounds are vital experiences for developing CEO leadership. But organisations should take care that they aren’t pushing women off the glass cliff and losing potential CEOs if the turnaround has little chance of succeeding.

Recognise the emotional and personal toll that facing into hardship brings. Provide support structures for women who have battled for their careers.

#### TAKEAWAYS FOR BOARDS

CEO selection is a board responsibility. Boards that are willing to entrust the most desperate situations to women should acknowledge that the women are equally capable of leading under normal business conditions.

## Strategising the home front

Many of the CEO women had stay-at-home partners.

Among Australia's CEO women, nine of the 18 who were mothers had partners who took primary responsibility for their home and children during at least part of the woman's career.

Some partners stopped working or worked part-time and others retired. In one way or another, these partners took over primary responsibility for the home front while the women accelerated their careers.

Male CEOs are rarely asked how they juggle such a demanding job with their family life. But working women routinely face this question. This may be unfair, but realistically, an investigation into why women do or do not attain CEO jobs must examine the personal factors that shape careers.

Being a CEO is all-consuming. Accordingly, those drawn to the job have very little need for work-life balance. In their KF4D assessment scores, the CEO women showed a slightly lower drive for balance than even the CEO benchmark, a reflection of their willingness to work demonstrably harder than those around them.

Some found that home life complemented and balanced their work life—both because of the encouragement and support their partners provided, and the opportunity for conversation and reflection. They valued all the forms of support they got from their partners, not just caretaking for children.

“My husband was prepared to do whatever it would take to help us, to help the family, to help me deliver and perform at work. I can tell you, that is a rare thing. Never once in my entire career did [he say], ‘Where were you? Why didn't you ring? We needed you.’ Never ever once.”

“I was blessed by having a partner in the same field and we could talk about organisations, policy, structures, and politics, for we share those interests. It is like having an adult lifetime conversation about the world.”

Ten of the 21 CEOs interviewed were part of a dual-career household, often—but not always—with children. The fact that many professional women have young children in their 30s, just as their career is taking off, can prevent women from seizing opportunities. One CEO dealt with that by finding multiple forms of household help.

“My mentor said, ‘You need to look at yourself as an asset and you need to invest in that asset because right now, in your 30s, is when you’re going to develop your ability to actually realise your potential.’ I’d just given birth to my first child and I was doing a turnaround. So, all through my career I had a full-time nanny, someone who cleaned, and sometimes someone who cooked.”

Three of the 21 were single during all or most of their career (one had recently married). These women had fairly unique home lives. One interviewee mentioned how she didn’t have to make the same kind of compromises but added that being single has other challenges like loneliness. Another woman managed single parenting successfully, while a third CEO raised her nephew for a period, and he and his family live with her in her home.

By their nature, CEO women are decisive problem-solvers. So, each woman found the strategy that worked for her own home life. In some cases, that meant household help. In others, partners stayed home. In some cases, both partners thrived with challenging careers. One interviewee stressed that no one is in a position to judge one approach or the other. Everyone is dealing with different circumstances; her advice to younger women is to do what fits their specific context.

#### TAKEAWAYS FOR WOMEN

Negotiating how a family life will be managed alongside careers is particularly important. Women who aspire to a top executive career should consider whether their partners are flexible and supportive. This can have implications very early on, even in the kind of person one chooses as a partner.

Women should be authentic in how they manage their work and life balance, even when this means going against the status quo.

#### TAKEAWAYS FOR ORGANISATIONS

Many of these women had partners who encouraged them to accept a challenging job or take a risk. The assumption should never be made that women face resistance at home, even if they have young children.

Nearly all the CEO women worked abroad at some point, so organisations should consider how they can support trailing partners in the case of such disruptive moves.

Organisations can provide increased flexibility for employees and executives, especially parents—this can look like extended parental leave, reduced travel, remote work, or lower expectations for extended face-time.

## Gaining board experience

Interactions with boards matters on the way to and from the CEO role.

It is clear that exposure to boards is key to developing women in the pipeline for executive and CEO roles. Our interviews revealed that half the women described significant experience with boards before becoming CEO. This experience helped them gain a holistic view of their organisation's performance and insight into a future NED career.

AICD has called for boards to ensure 30% of their directors are female and has encouraged the ASX 200 to achieve this target by the end of 2018. It is pleasing to see that 85 boards have done so in 2018, but clearly more needs to be done for listed boards to increase their gender diversity.

For this report, we asked the current CEO women if they are considering or planning a future non-executive career. And we asked former CEO women who are now serving as NEDs to compare and contrast their executive career with their NED career. Almost all the women we interviewed reported positive experiences at all of their stages of involvement with boards.

### Before becoming CEO

Almost half the CEO women served on boards of other organisations—primarily government or non-profit—before becoming CEO. Half the women had extensive exposure to their own boards when in a C-suite role. Three of them specifically cited their reputation among directors for 'not playing politics' as helpful to their candidature for the CEO role.

Just two women said boards played little or no role in their career prior to becoming CEO. The nexus between board and executive experience serves to strengthen both roles. For female executives, early board experience can broaden their perspective, build confidence, and increase understanding of the perspective of directors. For women in the C-suite who are in the pipeline for the CEO role, board exposure provides a 'whole of company' view that forms the foundation of the top job.

“What I learnt [on the board] was a lot about the business, so when I moved into the CEO role, I knew where the hotspots were, what was working well, what wasn't, and where we had issues that needed to be addressed quickly.”

## The skills boards are looking for in future CEOs

When considering the skills profile for a CEO, boards prioritize these competencies, shown here by average ratings ranked in order from most critical to least critical.



© Korn Ferry 2017. All rights reserved. | Represents a sample of 1,485 CEOs and 6,866 other executives.

## While serving as CEO

Most described their interaction with their own board while serving as CEO in very positive terms. They appreciated supportive and positive relationships—including coaching from the chair—along with open and constructive discussions. When they were challenged by their board, they felt it was at appropriate times.

“When you do have a really strong relationship with a strong board, it is amazing how difficult times become unifying times.”

The high number of women who described significant experience with boards before they became CEOs in our interviews is testament to the important role boards play in furthering women’s careers. Board quality and CEO succession improves when boards look two or three renewal cycles ahead by ensuring their organisations are developing the careers of the next generation of female executives.

## Becoming a NED

We asked women to contrast their approach to becoming CEO to their appointment as a NED. Some women took a deliberate approach to their executive career, seeking out specific roles, but others simply focused on excelling in whatever roles they were in and accepted opportunities when others recognised their abilities.

The approach for becoming a NED was not different. Some women deliberately sought NED roles, using their network to put out the word that they were interested, or approaching people who might be helpful in connecting them to a board. Others were drafted into NED roles.

“I had decided before I left my executive career that I didn’t want to retire cold, that I wanted to do something else and also be in a position to give back. I thought that being a non-executive director would suit me well, and I started to work the network to find the first role, which worked brilliantly.”

“After [I had] some experience on non-profit and public-service boards, [a mentor] put me on my first public-company board. He saw in me things I didn’t.”

## Serving as a NED

Most of the women interviewed were contemplating or currently in NED roles.

One woman echoed the researched observation<sup>3</sup> that companies don’t truly get the benefit of women on boards until they have at least two, preferably three, female NEDs. Others noted that it is important to be discerning about which, and how many, NED roles to take on.

Other women found NED work resonated with their sense of purpose and provided an opportunity to increase the pipeline of female leaders and board members.

While responsibility for increasing the number of women in the executive ranks should not rest solely with women, female NEDs have unique insight into the barriers that executive women confront and are in a position to drive change in the organisations they serve.

Chief executive experience is not a prerequisite to joining a board, but women who wish to explore a NED career are closing off an avenue of access by not moving through the executive ranks. CEO experience is highly prized, and women who have worked in CEO or equivalent roles that offer a whole-of-enterprise perspective are highly sought for boards.

<sup>2</sup> [https://www.kornferry.com/media/sidebar\\_downloads/Korn-Ferry\\_Beyond-if-not-why-not.pdf](https://www.kornferry.com/media/sidebar_downloads/Korn-Ferry_Beyond-if-not-why-not.pdf)

**TAKEAWAYS FOR WOMEN**

It's important for women to understand what boards look for in future NEDs so they can take on assignments that help them build those characteristics.

Opportunities to develop executive and board skills concurrently should be identified and leveraged.

Identifying NED opportunities, in government or non-profit boards, can provide an excellent springboard to executive-career progression.

Women should seek out roles they are interested in while being open to those that fall in their lap.

**TAKEAWAYS FOR BOARDS**

Boards should consciously find opportunities for female executives to present direct to the board.

Existing NEDs can mentor high-potential women and expand their business network and exposure.

**TAKEAWAYS FOR ORGANISATIONS**

Board contact should be included in development programs for women to give them valuable exposure to an enterprise-wide view of the organisation.

Helping C-suite women gain confidence working with their own boards will make them viable CEO or future NED candidates.



# Recommendations

The Korn Ferry Institute studied 21 women who had ascended to the role of CEO in Australia. The research gives us deep insight into the experiences and attributes that supported—and inhibited—their pathways to the top.

We know there is good work being done by enlightened organisations to clear roadblocks to women’s advancement. We also know that such work needs to be structural to have long-lasting effect. Implementing talent-management best practices, including focusing on removing diversity-related obstacles, is a baseline for all organisations. We offer the following recommendations as a lever to either start or continue this work and, in particular, to help women who are in—or will one day be in—the pipeline for the CEO role as they navigate their careers.

## Organisations

**Recalibrate talent identification.** The CEO interviews showed that ambition is not always as overt as seeking a promotion. Organisations need to grasp that there are multiple starting points for leaders, and that what motivates women may differ from a traditional profile. If women aren’t on the talent radar, it’s the radar that needs to be updated.

**Reframe executive leadership and the CEO role to appeal to more women.** What drove these CEOs was a desire to make an impact and build a positive culture for people. By describing the jobs that prepare future CEOs in those terms—rather than as a list of qualifications,

responsibilities, and scope of authority—fewer women will opt out at the senior-executive level. It’s also important to instil the knowledge that although these jobs are challenging, they also can offer more independence and flexibility in how work gets done.

**Be clear about identifying potential leaders.**

Organisations need to let all those identified as high-potential, but especially women, know that they are on a track to senior leadership. It also helps to be transparent about what skills, attitudes, and experiences are needed to get (and stay) on that track.

**Mitigate mobility issues.** With global experience a feature of the pathway to the top for 70% of the Australian women CEOs, understanding the impact on families is core to the offer of an overseas role. Companies need to be particularly attuned to how job transfers affect working partners and proactively accommodate their professional needs. This is good for everyone but would remove a hurdle that seems to trip up women especially.

**Focus on the CEO feeder pool.** Women are underrepresented in line-management roles in Australia, and these are the positions that most often lead to CEO. A clearly beneficial step, then, is to attract more women into profit-and-loss roles earlier to ensure they get that crucial experience and positioning. Organisations need to scrutinise gender ratios specifically in line management. How many women have profit-and-loss roles, are on the CEO succession chart, or are candidates in external searches? An organisation can set its own standards for selection or promotion, for instance, insisting half of interviewees must be women at job levels

where the number of women drop off. Many leading organisations in Australia are doing this and others are encouraged to follow their lead.

## Current senior leaders

Organisational support is essential in developing women in the pipeline for the CEO role. Executives and NEDs can produce a near-immediate impact by focusing on some talent-development shortfalls.

### Executive mentors (early career)

Very few of the Australian women CEOs had formal mentoring or access to coaching. Both men and women in a position to mentor up-and-coming women can make a profound difference to early-career women. Organisational support for coaching can help build strength and confidence to pursue career goals.

Don't hesitate to affirm someone's talent to them as you give them guidance on the skills and experiences they need to move up. Silence is the enemy of women's advancement.

Share what difficulties are 'normal' when taking on bigger leadership roles. Keep women from getting discouraged or swamped by self-doubt.

Recognise that women might be ambitious, even if they aren't self-promoting. Coach them on how to market their talents. Mentors can provide visibility and introductions to senior executives and important outside contacts.

### Sponsors and mentors (late career)

We make a distinction between mentors and sponsors; sponsors specifically advocate for and aid a person's promotion within a company. Often this is a CEO, a board member, or another top executive who helps make specific role assignments.

Actively promote upcoming women—several, not just one—and speak up about them often in front of peers and board members.

Help women see and understand the networks that they may be outside of, then figure out how to interact with each.

Provide ample opportunities to work with boards, media, shareholders, and other investors.

When moving women into new roles, discuss explicitly what you expect them to get out of the assignment.

Tell women what you see in them; also give them honest feedback when they trip up.

Share how the women are perceived by critical stakeholders and help them build the strong personal brand they need to have influence and impact.

Discuss promotions and target roles in terms that appeal to the women's ambitions and values, which likely include having a larger purpose and impact on people's lives, growing talent, and building a positive culture.

## Women close to CEO level

If you are already a general manager, business-unit leader, or in the C-suite and you know you would be a good CEO for your company, your path will necessarily be adapted to your specific situation. Still, there is some good general advice.

**State your interest.** Let the people who matter know about your goals. You don't have to be repetitive, but do be clear. Leave less to chance by stating your interest.

**Network strategically.** Build relationships with board directors, external stakeholders, the current CEO, peer executives, or whomever else is important in your company. Your first aim is to better understand the company and these individuals' roles in it—and later to have allies and supporters once you are CEO.

**Fill gaps in experience and knowledge.** Make sure you have profit-and-loss experience and understand the strategic challenges the business is likely to face in the years ahead. If you lack experience in important parts of the business, you won't be considered for the CEO role.

**Think like a CEO.** How will you grow the business or address current strategic challenges? What are the core purpose and values of the organisation that you will sustain and enhance? What changes will you make in the culture? Board directors will want to hear these answers in interviews, if not before. In such conversations, detail what you want the company to achieve and help them believe in your leadership capability and impact.

**Stay above dirty politics.** In some companies, contenders for the CEO role start trying to undermine one another. Don't get caught in this game; it damages the company and your reputation, as well as the trust you will need as CEO.

**Persist.** The women CEOs showed high levels of resilience and a capacity for hard work. If you do not get the role the first time, work hard, show resilience, and work through any roadblocks that are preventing your progress.

## Women in the pipeline

The guidance below is for women who are at the midpoint of their career now.

**Seek early roles with measurable results.** Look for roles where you can learn the skills that lead to the C-suite, particularly roles that will give you exposure to profit and loss. Sales and finance can be good starting points.

**Objectively size up your organisation.** Is it a place where women succeed? One that treats people well in general? Does it hold managers accountable for grooming talent? If not, move on. Don't invest years in a department or organisation waiting for it to change.

**Clarify your vision, values, and core purpose.** Think about success not only as driving business results but accomplishing something that matters to you. This connection to your core is where you get the juice to tough it out, to persevere, to be resilient. For example, competing for a big role with more power gives you a chance to positively impact others, improve the culture, and make a real difference.

**Volunteer before you feel ready.** Recognise that the qualifications attached to a job opening are, to some extent, wish lists. You don't have to be a master at everything in order to apply. At the same time, don't assume your results will speak for themselves. You have to invest some time in self-promotion.

**Network for impact.** An effective network extends outside your comfort zone of peers and other women. This takes courage and a certain amount of calculation. Consider what your goals are, and with whom you may need to have strong professional relationships. Be certain to become visible to key decision makers in the business lines. Reach outside the company, too. Get involved in external industry groups or forums. Go for projects that involve regulators, investors, mergers, or partnerships—anything that introduces you to people whom you can help and who can help you.

**Pay attention to the whole organisation.** Make sure you know the strategic drivers of your organisation, including how it makes money. Understand the competitive landscape; read media reports about your company and industry. Listen to colleagues from other functions, business units, or geographies. Ask questions to understand the implications of changes or requests. Understand enough about finance to read and interpret your annual report, or the equivalent, fluently.

**Make strategic career decisions.** Many of the women CEOs had a high level of improvisation in their career pathways. Try to combine improvisation and planning, as together this is a powerful approach to your career. Take the type of challenging jobs or assignments that build the muscles needed in the CEO role whenever they arise (including turnarounds, starting new businesses, and international assignments). High-visibility assignments early in your career are especially valuable. You may add broadening experiences such as a stint in communications or HR, but spend the bulk of your time in the core of the business. Few people become CEO without lots of proven profit-and-loss responsibility.

**Choose your partner well.** One key to a successful career is a supportive partner. About half of the women CEOs in this study had partners who were encouraging and supportive and also had their own substantive careers. The two-career marriages involved complex logistics, negotiations, turn-taking, and weighing of career decisions and moves. Half of the women CEOs who are mothers had partners who took on primary responsibility for the home front and the children. In these cases, the couple made a clear and conscious decision to prioritise the woman's career. As you choose your partner in life, consider both of your career aspirations and make sure that you have compatible philosophies that will support and fulfil both partners' ambitions.

# A future that embraces women at the top

The business case for diversity at executive and board level has been clearly made. However, despite the wealth of evidence that shows organisations with diverse teams perform better, action on diversity in executive and board ranks remains fragile. The gendered commentary that often frames discussion about women's performance in leadership and board roles is unedifying and, in many cases, unhelpful to good governance. We must move on to providing a sturdier structure for women's advancement in business that allows men and women to succeed and to fail.

The McKinsey & Co. report *Delivering through Diversity* (2018) clearly shows a 'statistically significant correlation between a more diverse leadership team and financial outperformance.'<sup>4</sup> A plethora of studies support this view. But despite the lack of a business case that supports male-dominated leadership, the status quo remains.

Women's success is unique and differentiated by leaders with high levels of agility and resilience who collaborate to gain influence. These women are motivated by the opportunity to make a difference, rather than power for its own sake. We need to value these skills as a profound contribution to C-suite strength.

Our research clearly shows that the women who hold the top job in our organisations and institutions are worthy of the CEO title. It provides a foundation for deeper discussion on women's pathways to the senior-executive ranks and can be used to inform and shape leadership programs for women. This work is underway in the United States, where, following *Women CEOs Speak*, Korn Ferry is launching a new approach to developing women leaders that incorporates the career levers that have made women successful.

The Chief Executive Women census<sup>5</sup> of the ASX 200 sends a warning for the future. The overall percentage of women in the C-suite is not only low, but the lack of women in line-management roles will deeply impact the talent pool for CEO and board roles for year to come. We must do better.

<sup>4</sup> <https://www.mckinsey.com/business-functions/organization/our-insights/delivering-through-diversity>

<sup>5</sup> <https://cew.org.au>

# Korn Ferry research team

## **Interviewers**

Nick Avery  
Rebecca Bose  
Graeme Bricknell  
Therese Doupe  
Jacqueline Gillespie  
Alexandra Goodfellow  
Tim Flay  
Katie Lahey  
Heidi Mason  
Tim Nelson  
Lynne Nixon  
Tony Rossano  
Juliet Warne  
Robert Webster  
Anita Wingrove

## **Project leader**

Kerry Little

## **Research, analysis and project management**

Heather Barnfield  
Viet Bui  
Jacqueline Gillespie  
James Lewis  
Krista Michalski  
Signe Spencer

## **Writer**

Robin Rauzi

# Resources

## Korn Ferry Institute

**Women CEOs Speak: Strategies for the next generation of female executives and how companies can pave the road** (2017)

<https://engage.kornferry.com/womenceospeak/about-the-report-735Y4-26367F.html>

**The C-suite: Moving up and moving in** (2017)

<https://www.kornferry.com/institute/the-c-suite-moving-up-and-moving-in>

**The tone from the top: Taking responsibility for corporate culture** (2016)

<https://www.kornferry.com/institute/the-tone-from-the-top-taking-responsibility-for-corporate-culture>

**Develop and select the best CEOs** (2016)

<https://www.kornferry.com/institute/predicting-ceo-performance>

**The risky business of CEO succession** (2015)

<https://www.kornferry.com/institute/risky-business-ceo-succession>

**Beyond 'if not, why not': The pathway to boards for women in leadership** (2014)

[https://www.kornferry.com/media/sidebar\\_downloads/Korn-Ferry\\_Beyond-if-not-why-not.pdf](https://www.kornferry.com/media/sidebar_downloads/Korn-Ferry_Beyond-if-not-why-not.pdf)

## Australian Institute of Company Directors

**30% by 2018: Gender diversity progress report**

<http://aicd.companydirectors.com.au/advocacy/board-diversity/asx-100-reaches-30-per-cent-target-but-board-appointments-slow>

**Boards for balance: Your leadership shadow**

<http://aicd.companydirectors.com.au/advocacy/board-diversity/boards-for-balance-your-leadership-shadow>

**Board diversity statistics**

<http://aicd.companydirectors.com.au/advocacy/board-diversity/statistics>

# Contact

## Korn Ferry, Australia

### **Brisbane**

Level 12, 410 Queen Street, Brisbane QLD 4000 Tel: +61 7 3015 3700

### **Melbourne**

Level 20, 120 Collins Street, Melbourne, VIC 3000 Tel: +61 3 9631 0300

### **Sydney**

Level 18, Aurora Place, 88 Phillip Street, Sydney NSW 2000 Tel: +61 2 9006 3400

### **Perth**

Level 1, 5 Mill St, Perth WA 6000 Tel +61 8 9217 3900

## Korn Ferry, New Zealand

### **Auckland**

Level 11, 34 Shortland Street, Auckland New Zealand 1010 Tel: +64 9 309 4900

### **Wellington**

Level 1, Free Ambulance Building, 5 Cable Street, Wellington 6011 Tel: +64 4 460 4900

**AUSTRALIAN INSTITUTE**  
*of* **COMPANY DIRECTORS**

### **National Office**

Level 30, 20 Bond Street, Sydney NSW 2000.  
Tel: 1300 739 119, Email: [diversity@aicd.com.au](mailto:diversity@aicd.com.au)

## ABOUT KORN FERRY

Korn Ferry is a global organisational consulting firm. We help clients synchronise strategy and talent to drive superior performance. We work with organisations to design their structures, roles, and responsibilities. We help them hire the right people to bring their strategy to life. And we advise them on how to reward, develop, and motivate their people.

## ABOUT THE KORN FERRY INSTITUTE

The Korn Ferry Institute, our research and analytics arm, was established to share intelligence and expert points of view on talent and leadership. Through studies, books, and a quarterly magazine, *Briefings*, we aim to increase understanding of how strategic talent decisions contribute to competitive advantage, growth, and success.

Visit [kornferry.com](http://kornferry.com) for more information on Korn Ferry, and [kornferry.com/institute](http://kornferry.com/institute) for articles, research, and insights.

## ABOUT THE AUSTRALIAN INSTITUTE OF COMPANY DIRECTORS

The Australian Institute of Company Directors is committed to excellence in governance. We make a positive impact on society and the economy through governance education, director development and advocacy. Our membership of more than 40,000 includes directors and senior leaders from business, government and the not-for-profit sectors.

<http://aicd.companydirectors.com.au/>