**Chapter 8**

**How women executives survive the isolated echelons of the corporate ladder**

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**Introduction**

Traditions of masculine workplaces continue to prevail, in which women are assessed differently to men and gender still factors into one’s career progression (Tiessen 2007). For instance, Heilman (2012) found that competent women are not able to attain promotions similar to competent men. Koenig, Eagly, Mitchell, and Ristikari (2011) and Agars (2004) found that stereotypes of leaders remain culturally masculine. Bevan and Learmonth (2013) found that the discourses constituting masculinity and femininity tend to reinforce that men are more suitable for high-level positions than women. And a similar notion was reported by (Acker, 2006, p. 451) who identified that white men are assumed to be the ‘normal’ top leaders.

The gendered nature of work in Australia, along with the sparsity of women in executive leadership positions in large-sized organisations in the country, are documented in the literature (Australian Institute of Company Directors [AICD] 2017; Workplace Gender Equality Agency, 2015, 2017). The AICD (2017), reported that women made up 25.4 percent of ASX200 directorships in 2017. A target of 30 percent women directors by 2018 has been set by the AICD, which is considered the tipping point where women have a ‘critical mass’ in a group setting. At the time of writing this chapter, the AICD reported a discerning trend that the number of women appointed to Boards in the March-May quarter of 2017 had fallen, putting at risk the 30 percent target due in seven months’ time. Equal opportunity legislation dictates that Australian workplaces have policies in place to ensure that progression is based on merit. Despite these efforts, it appears that inequality regimes continue to pervade organisational and Board structures.

The limited presence of Australian women in executive roles inspired this chapter’s aim to capture rare insights and advice, particularly for women aspiring to executive leadership roles. In support of this aim, this chapter will unfold to initially argue that status characteristics theory (SCT) offers a basis to pursue a line of enquiry that women face differential treatment in the workplace, particularly when working in task-orientated teams. After outlining the research methodology employed for this project, the ensuing section presents the results of an inductive analysis about the experiences of the participant women executives in which several themes are identified in relation to their gendered experiences. The resultant themes provide a foil for the pre-emptive tone of the final segment that presents advice from these present-day executive women, offered to those who aspire to achieve executive level and Board appointments.

**Status characteristic theory**

The headcount of executive women leaders remains low despite several decades of governmental and organisational policies promoting affirmative action. Status characteristics theory (SCT) might explain why women continue to face challenges in achieving recognition in the workplace. SCT contains a number of interacting elements as identified in Figure 1. To explain, SCT proposes that individuals who come together to work on a task-focused situation will, in the first instance, use *status characteristics* to form expectations about the likely performance of individuals within the group, and then confirm these status ranking expectations through ongoing interactions (Berger, Rosenholtz, & Zelditch Jr, 1980). In general terms, individuals perceived (or known) as having more of a characteristic which is deemed to be more important for the group task will be ranked with higher status, and those perceived with less relevant characteristics, ranked with lower status.

(Insert Figure 1 here)

A characteristic becomes *salient* when it is used as a cue to assess the expectations of an individual’s competence for the group’s task at hand. Berger et al. (1980) suggest that salient status characteristics that cue the *power-prestige order* of the group can be divided into two categories: *specific* and *diffused* characteristics. *Specific* characteristics refer to characteristics that have clear relevance to the group’s task, for instance, creativity for an innovation task. These specific characteristics become salient for status ranking and competence assessment and they are consequently associated with - and reinforced by - successful task completion. Meanwhile, overt characteristics, such as race and gender, are considered *diffused* characteristics in SCT. Other diffused characteristics include race, age, class, ethnicity and physical appearance. Diffused characteristics are inherent, unavoidable and heavily stereotyped. In terms of gender, different and distinct expectations are associated with the population of males and females. Observable characteristics such as gender and race are highly visible, salient characteristics that come packaged with prescribed and biased associations of competence, and therefore an almost automatic *status-ranking* is allocated to individuals within groups who possess such observable characteristics (Berger et al., 1980; Webster & Rashotte, 2010).

Status rankings result in status inequalities because the group has quickly, and even unintentionally, ordained a *power-prestige order*. The power-prestige order is a subliminal, status hierarchy reflecting the esteem in which individual members are held within the group (Berger & Conner, 1969). With a power-prestige order established on the basis of the salient status characteristics present in a group, individuals are expected to contribute to task success on the basis of their status rank. Individuals with higher status in the power-prestige order have more opportunities to perform than lower status individuals, reinforcing that higher-status individuals are more highly valued by the group than lower-status individuals (Lucas & Baxter, 2012; Ridgeway, 2014). An opportunity to perform equates to an opportunity to demonstrate competence, and thus a tautological pattern between group member’s status beliefs and performance expectations emerges as higher-status members attract the lion’s share of opportunities to perform at the expense of lower-status members. Status and competency assessments remain stable over time, as individuals move between interactions and projects. Individuals will carry their status beliefs to subsequent encounters with people from other groups and through acting on their beliefs, induce others to take on the status beliefs as well (Ridgeway, 2014) *unless* something occurs to change that assessment (Berger & Conner, 1969; Berger et al., 1980).

A study conducted by Heilman and Haynes (2005) determined that compared to men in the team, women were judged as being less competent, less influential and less likely to have played a leadership role in a team task, unless negative expectations about their competence was challenged with clear evidence to the contrary. Consequently, status assessments formed on diffused characteristics, such as gender, laden the individual possessing that characteristic with the *burden of proof.* This means a person must show to the contrary that his or her diffused characteristic bears no relevance on their competency for the task at hand. Until that burden is discharged, the initial power-prestige order and the status advantages or disadvantages that it provides to certain individuals will continue as a group norm.

SCT speculates though that all is not lost for lower-status individuals. Individuals can improve their rank in the power-prestige order by shortening the *path of relevance*, which is the subliminal gap that exists between an individual’s status and his or her competence to perform the task at hand. The first implication for a woman is that it places on her the onus to disassociate the inherent assessments between her competency to perform and her diffused gender characteristic by discharging the burden of proof in order to erode stereotypical assumptions. Second, she also needs to seek ways to shorten the path of relevance to the *specific* characteristics required for successful task performance.

**The research objective**

Status characteristics theory underpins our contention that the slow progression of women to the executive and Board positions may be caused, if only in part, by systemically applied stereotypes of who are the more competent people (that is, men). The bias felt by women at work can be “dispiriting for their ambitions and detrimental to their advancement” (Heilman, 2012, p. 129). With this point in mind, the aim to collate career advice offered by executive women will have more pertinence if considered within the context of the gendered experiences they have encountered in their careers as executives and Board members.

**Research Method**

Eighteen women were interviewed to collect relevant insights that would be subjected to a thematic analysis based on the research objective. The participants held executive positions in Australian companies with over 200 employees and/or they were executives with significant experience on corporate Boards. The participants were sourced through initial networks known by the principal investigator, as well as advertising for participants via the *Women on Boards* *Association*. A snowballing technique was also employed to identify further participants. The participants represented a range of industries, allowing us to capture a diversity of experiences. A profile of the interview participants appears in Table 1, demonstrating that they were derived from five of the Australian states, sixteen industry categories, and importantly, that they collectively held 323 years of managerial experience and 120 years of experience serving on Boards.

 **Table 1:** *Profile of the eighteen executive women interview participants*

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| --- | --- |
| *Job title:* | CEOs (4); General Managers (Divisional level) (4); Executive Director; Executive Chair; Director Community Relations; Group HR Manager; Senior Marketing Manager; Commercial and Procurement Manager; Governance and Quality Manager; Network Planning Manager; Program Manager; Professional Services Manager. |
| *Industry:* | IT and Security; Telecommunications (2); Defence; Aerospace; Education and Training; Social Services; Mining; Retail; Property Development; Tertiary Education; Insurance and Finance; Local Government; Sport and Recreation (2); Manufacturing; Professional and Business Services (2). |
| *State:* | New South Wales(4); Queensland (6); South Australia (5); Victoria (1); Australian Capital Territory (2). |
| *Management experience:* | 323 years collectively, an average of 17.94 years per participant. |
| *Board experience:* | 120 years collectively, an average of 6.67 years per participant. |
| *Age range:* | 22% (35-44 years); 50% (45-54 years); 28% (55 plus years) |

**The experience of being an executive - who is also a woman**

One significant theme detected in reviewing the women’s experiences was that they faced a degree of isolation on their journey. To unpack this theme, it is worth considering the role and benefits of workplace friendships. Researchers have found that friendship can moderate the relationship between single-gender team composition and negotiation outcomes so that better outcomes are achieved (Herbst, Dotan, & Stöhr, 2017). It is also suggested that friendship provides a key component of human flourishing in workplace contexts, with a potential to influence organisational cultures and structures (Rumens, 2016). Returning to our women at hand, one clear challenge highlighted by them is that due to the paucity of fellow women executives around them, they lack the numbers to support each other, to nurture friendships and to gather the momentum to influence change. For instance, Yvonne noted that: ‘*you need some critical mass to change things; it’s no good just putting one woman round the Board table - you probably need at least three to start changing things’*. This lack of moral support due to low physical numbers, is further compounded while male executives ‘thrive’ as they draw upon the benefits of their camaraderie and workplace mateship. Spreitzer, Lam, and Fritz (2010) distinguish ‘thriving’ from the concept of work engagement by suggesting that while work engagement may fluctuate from day to day, thriving is forward focused and is evident in one’s career trajectory. Keeping in mind both the concepts of workplace friendships and thriving, the following insight by Connie offers a potential explanation for why women may opt-out at the peak of their careers, while men remain to seize the day: ‘*men don’t opt out at the top because of the camaraderie around them and their mates; they stick around because they are with their mates; women are usually fewer in number and don’t have that camaraderie as an incentive to stick around*.’

Akin to the concept of friendship and the camaraderie it provides, is the ‘boys’ club’ phenomenon which surfaced as the most prevalent theme throughout the participants’ responses. The ongoing presence of boys’ clubs across industries continues to be documented in the academic literature, for example, in the Australian public service (Evans, Edwards, Burmester, & May, 2014); the Australian news media (North, 2016); universities in the UK (Fisher & Kinsey, 2014); and medical training in the US (Bruce, Battista, Plankey, Johnson, & Marshall, 2015). Ten of our women participants, without prompting, initiatedcomments about male colleagues operating in a manner that excluded them. In their experience, these women were left out of social and sporting events, missing the opportunity to network and make key connections. Zena’s statement aptly summarised a general sentiment that: ‘*the benefits of the boys’ club is when up for promotion men are more likely to choose someone they already have familiarity with… real sponsorship comes when there are opportunities to really connect such as golf and drinks and footie* (football)*; not through artificial sponsorship programs’.* Some of the comments delved into the nature of the ‘boys’ club’ behaviour manifesting in offensive language and/or exclusive conversations. For example, Veronica stated that her workplace ‘*was a good old boys’ club’* where she had faced sexist comments *‘like how tight my skirt was*’. Helen’s opinion was that: ‘*It’s* *a brotherhood; they talk differently to each other than they do to women’,* and Gail’s view was that: *‘they have breakfasts, lunches, dinners together; they have meetings and don’t tell anyone else what has happened at those meetings*’. Such messages promulgated from our participants’ experiences lay support for the claim that executive-level women are disadvantaged by exclusionary masculine traditions that continue to permeate the conduct of business.

Within the realm of exclusionary practices, some of the executive women also contended with another phenomenon in their career journey, although this experience is wreaked upon them by other women. This branch of the gender debate suggests that women face ‘hostile sexism’, wherein women place other women in positions with a silent desire to see them fail (Ryan & Haslam, 2007). Thus one might deduce that women will be harsher on other women in their workplaces and evidence of this can be found in Helen’s comment that: ‘*some women get through that glass ceiling then stand on the trapdoor and don't let other women through’*. This comment aligns with the ‘queen-bee’ syndrome which suggests that women who have achieved authority or leadership in male-dominated organisations, based on their own experience of having to work hard to get to their position of power, may subvert or block the progress of other women (Hurst, Leberman, & Edwards, 2016; Sheppard & Aquino, 2013). To this end, Queenie described the case where one of her female colleagues was: ‘*a nightmare, there are dead bodies everywhere, yet she has never been demoted, always promoted and she is competent and made herself indispensable’.*

By contrast, Luthar’s (1996) commentary about women in power positions suggests that they show a tendency to nurture women in lower status roles. Women who break through to positions of leadership are anticipated to possess a ‘feminine’ attribute of nurturing and ensuring women’s advancement (Eveline, 2005). On this basis, women are more likely to be supportive of other women in the workplace, and examples of this occurring was also evident amongst the participants’ responses. For instance, Queenie suggested that: ‘*joining a women’s club for senior women to workshop problems, with confidentiality clauses, gave me lots of confidence and helped me enormously’* and Veronica stated that: *‘networking in informal settings is where everything happens; that’s where you learn everything; the organisational politics; what’s really going on; in a relaxed setting’.* Queenie reflected a keen interest in nurturing her staff, along with an expectation that the organisation likewise considers her well-being: ‘*I want someone to care about me; I care about my staff; I’ve created that culture and value it’.*

Returning to the SCT presented earlier in this chapter, several women provided insights that suggest they have encountered inherent assessments that devalue their competency. For example, Louise expressed a sense that women need to prove their competency by going above and beyond in the performance of their work, an obligation not imposed on male counterparts, through her statement that: ‘*women have to outperform and outstrip everything to reach the glass ceiling, men just have to be [men]’*. For Louise, her sense that she must work extra hard could be viewed as an attempt to discharge ‘the burden of proof’ that her gender does not impede her competence and ability to deliver. Gail commented that: *‘it’s difficult for even assertive women to have the same treatment as men in meetings’* and Shona stated, ‘*women are shadow voices; they give an idea which is ignored; then men give it later and it is their idea’.* Using the principles of SCT we can relate both of these comments to the presence of the power-prestige order of the group. Their comments reflect their challenge to be ‘heard’, indicating that these women are being positioned lower in the subliminal group hierarchy.

According to SCT, a person who is loaded with an inherent lower-status assessment, is the one who must demonstrate he or she is fit-for-purpose by shortening the ‘path of relevance’ to a ‘specific’ competency that is required for the task at hand. The forthcoming advice in this chapter can be seen as practices that the women executives have employed to shorten the path of relevance and demonstrate their competency. In doing so, Christie observed that the ‘*scrutiny of women’s performance is excruciating; women make mistakes and they are pillarised’.* This observation implies that the group hierarchy is perhaps more overt than its subliminal presence suggested by SCT, with low status assessments remaining unchanged until proven otherwise.

Whilst corporate governance structures are put in place to overcome discriminatory practices, we also identified, that women need to contend with the informal practices that still exist regardless of formal policies and rules. While women work to simultaneously distance themselves from their gender (that is, discharge the burden of proof) and prove their competency (that is, shorten the path of relevance), some of the participants’ responses suggest that this process may not be as linear as SCT purports. It was noticed that an intervening process occurs that requires the women to determine the ‘game rules’ to enable them to garner the opportunity to demonstrate their competence. For example, Zena suggested that relationships were more influential than competency itself, when she stated that women must ‘*use your connections and networks to your advantage; make use of them; do not be fooled that everything is merit based, it isn’t’.* Ursula referred to the treacherous politics that may need to be negotiated, in her statement: ‘*your immediate boss sometimes can be your biggest blockage so ensure you are aware of the internal politics and play the game’.* Along a similar vein was Angela’s comment that*: ‘companies don’t take performance review and goal setting seriously so [there is] nothing to hang your hat on when you don’t get promoted’.* Part of mastering the game rules is realising that formal organisational rules and policies may have limited significance in the actual functioning of the organisation. Connie stated that: ‘*I’ve never met a senior who abides by workplace policies; they break them more than anybody else; in fact I am not even sure they know them’.* In essence, a number of the women had identified that formal policies and practices designed to reward performance and promote equality and diversity are being ignored or subverted, and as such they learned to operate cognisant of the fact that informal organisational processes and mastering the internal politics bore significant influence on their opportunity to demonstrate their competence.

SCT suggests how stereotypical bias can subconsciously pervade group settings and assessments of competence. Yet, in addition to subconscious bias, the final theme identified was reference to overt discriminatory experiences incurred by the women participants. Veronica pointed out that: *‘it’s the hairstyle and the outfits you wear if you are CEO or Chair - the public will scrutinise you in regards to these things whereas they won’t a male, so women have to decide do they want to put up with that or not; it is part of being a high profile woman whether we like it or not’.* Norah had witnessed an occasion when: ‘*the Board dismissed the idea of having a female on the panel and of having a female candidate when recruiting for the CEO post’.* These experiences exemplify blatant discrimination within societal standards and failed organisational policy.

**From woman to woman: advice for those who wish to progress to executive roles**

The participants’ advice presented in this section, reminds us that women working in the upper echelons of organisational structures requires them to remain cognisant of their femininity as a factor that will influence their treatment. We acknowledge that the women’s responses were shaped by their experiences in various contexts and corporate cultures and it is with such a preface, that this advice is presented. In the previous section, evidence was presented indicating that the dynamics of SCT was at play in the participant’s experiences. Consequently, the advice provided to aspiring executives has also been aligned with the elements of SCT, to illustrate how these women have confronted these dynamics.

In the first instance, we consider the following ‘words-for-the-wise’ which were extended by the participants. This first set of advice supports the suggestion in SCT that assessments of competency are unconsciously influenced by gender, thus assigning women lower status in the power-prestige order. The cautionary advice provided reflects an awareness by the participants that they have indeed faced unconscious bias. To begin, the women cautioned that one must be aware that boys’ clubs exist and that the presence of these groups extensively influence how decisions are made. They also wanted others to know about the inequity that men are typically promoted on potential, whereas women are promoted once they have achieved; and to be aware that the scrutiny of women’s performance will be excessive compared to her male counterparts. One can anticipate that her ideas may well be dismissed at meetings, only to be picked up when suggested by another, and to be prepared to work with such incongruity. Advice was given that one should be aware that a career break may take at least three years to recover, with the possibility that one’s career will never be the same when taking a break for family or parenting. Insight about the enigmatic nature of organisational policies was also provided, with suggestions one needs to be aware that formal policies are often ignored and that policies are not always realities. Anticipate ethical and fairness struggles while others around you appear entirely comfortable to push for an outcome with little concern for the risks and (or) harm that might be caused in achieving such an outcome.

SCT would also suggest that a woman needs to discharge the *burden of proof* to show that her gender is not a relevant factor in her level of competency. We notice that the following ‘do’s and don’ts’ suggested by the participants align with this aspect of SCT as they reflect behaviours that these women are engaging in to forefront their competency and downplay their femininity. In terms of downplaying female physicality – the most salient aspect of their femininity - on the basis that women’s physical appearance is constantly being assessed, they advised to dress well, with trousers being a good option, not to wear too much makeup, avoid wearing stiletto heels and/or short skirts to work. Advice was also given not to engage in gossip, not to drink at work functions and not to ‘clown around’ as work is for work. Having established a no-nonsense presence, the advice was to be consistent in how one behaves, dresses, performs and engages at work.

SCT also proposes that one can improve their status in the group by shortening the ‘*path of relevance*’ to a specific competency required for the group task. In this regard, the women advised that essential personal qualities that support one’s ability to be competent when working at the executive level were resilience, toughness, determination, confidence and self-insight. More proactively, the women suggested a number of behaviours that they adopt – behaviours that in effect shorten the path of relevance - to demonstrate that they are skilled and competent, executive-level performers. First, the women suggested one should deliver frank and fearless advice, but also to master how to deliver feedback carefully and to allow people to maintain face. In return, also be prepared to listen to feedback and remain open-minded. An imperative to be honest exists along with inner strength and inner knowledge of one’s personal values and limits. Another imperative was to hold to one’s morals and ethical principles and to set high standards. At the same time, the act that is colloquially referred to as ‘wearing your heart on your sleeve,’ should be avoided and to remain mindful about how much one reveals of one’s true feelings. They advised to make sure one prioritises any work for the boss but at the same time, not to upstage one’s boss. The need to ‘grease the wheels’ was also suggested, meaning it is essential to show an interest in and build rapport with colleagues.

As a final point, the women offered advice that relates to career development. The importance of networking could not be over-emphasised by the participants. This networking should occur both in relation to organisational and industry networks, but also networks beyond these boundaries. The value of finding mentors and sponsors was also commonly mentioned by the women. Although it was suggested that mentors (people who offer guidance and advice) and sponsors (people who advocate for and promote you to people of influence) must be engaged strategically as they may be the link to being offered a Board position in the future. For such a reason, some women suggested being cautious about revealing weaknesses to them. On this point, seeking a coach - a person who can work through one’s weaknesses and problems - was another recommendation. At the same time, the women advised setting up personal support networks that offer positive reinforcement, particularly at home. Finally, advice was provided to pursue post-graduate qualifications as a career development essential.

**Conclusion**

Despite legislative, industry and organisational efforts to address issues of discrimination and stereotypical treatment, gender remains a constraint in the work life of women at the executive echelons of organisations. The patently lower number of women at the executive and Board levels inhibits their ability to leverage cooperative action, and these issues will remain unresolved until a critical mass of women in such roles is attained. We found that external support networks are providing a measure of corporate survival camaraderie that women tap into, while they persevere in relative solitude back in their workplaces. Conventional organisational policies and structures are not adequately managing the challenges faced by woman. In response, organisations need to revisit their values, culture and HRM policies so that these organisational elements facilitate the active institutionalisation of women into executive and Board roles.



**Figure 1.** *Status characteristics theory and the influence of gender on the power-prestige order and opportunity to perform in task-orientated groups.*

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