

Leadership Diversity Through Relational Intersectionality in Australia

Research Summary

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Is Australia failing at leadership diversity?

Despite being a diverse country with 30% of its population born overseas¹, and policies and regulations in place for gender equity, Australia lacks significant progress around leadership diversity:

- Among senior leaders and executives, 76% are from Anglo-Celtic and 19% from European backgrounds.²
- 20% of senior leaders and executives and 30% in key management personnel positions are women.³

What is wrong with diversity management?

When it comes to diversity and inclusion, organisations are more concerned with business outcomes than with equality as a basic human right:

- Diversity and inclusion management can entrench inequality by inadvertently reinforcing the White male status quo and focusing on judging people of all types by a White man standard.
- Differences become compartmentalised and stereotyped and intersectionality is generally not taken into consideration.
- Relational leadership can lead to solidarity across difference, but it is frequently negative by generating in-group loyalty and exclusion.
- Intersectional relations are complex and inherently political, and leaders who are not White and male face entrenched barriers doing their jobs and bringing about change.

What did the research involve?

The project investigated how leadership is practised at the intersection of cultural and gender differences in Australian organisations known for their best practice in diversity and inclusion.

The method was informed by an understanding that:

- *Leadership is relational*: it is not a trait or style of a single person but a relationship between people in social interaction and dialogue.
- *Relationships are intersectional*: they are characterised by interactions between people, each of whom may identify with multiple forms of difference.

The research involved three small to medium public and private organisations:

- The state branch of a recreation and entertainment company.
- A national technology sales company.
- A state government agency promoting and supporting diversity.
- 69 key participants.
- 4-9 months immersive ethnographic case studies.
- Interviews, observation, and organisational documentation reviews.

¹ ABS (2021). Migration, Australia, 2019-20 financial year. Australian Bureau of Statistics.

² Soutphommasane, T., Whitwell, G., Jordan, K., & Ivanov, P. (2018). Leading for Change: A blueprint for cultural diversity and inclusive leadership revisited. Australian Human Rights Commission.

³ WGEA (2020). Gendered impact of COVID-19. Workplace Gender Equality Agency, Commonwealth Government of Australia.

AICD, Heidrick & Struggles (2018). Beyond 200: A study of gender diversity in ASX 201-500 companies. Australian Institute of Company Directors.

Findings: Diversity management can be the problem rather than the solution

Effective diversity management needs to focus on radical equality:

- Leadership diversity through relational intersectionality means embracing leadership as a messy and complex process worked through everyday lived experiences between people at work.
- Unless equality is the primary goal of diversity and inclusion programs, it will end up being diluted and disempowered from driving systemic change.
- Systemic change means addressing deeply entrenched structural barriers to inequality – this starts with leaders accepting how their own actions can inadvertently reinforce those structures.

Differences become compartmentalised and stereotyped:

- Dominant categories of difference at work are gender, culture, ability and sexuality, with class often omitted.
- Not all differences are equal, with gender difference, in particular, being most recognized, privileged and acted on.
- Understanding 'intersectionality' in people and relationships can help understand the complexity of diversity and inclusion programs and practices.

Intersectional relations are complex:

- The categories and hierarchies of diversity developed to manage 'difference' at work are important to understand diversity in practice.
- Professional, historical and personal contexts are vital in making sense of intersectional diversity and of the expectations about how leadership is acting to build diversity.
- Leaders who are seen as diverse face extra challenges in trying to bring about change.

Diversity and inclusion practices can entrench inequality:

- Existing diversity and inclusion management practices can be counter productive.
- These practices, and how they are led, can produce a 'repressive equality regime', where diversity and inclusion management prevents systemic change.
- This occurs by mainstreaming of diversity and inclusion practices, so they lose their radical potential for change.
 - Placing 'diverse' staff into positions of representation that lack power and resources to enact change.
 - Coercion of 'diversity' staff into performing 'equity' that is burdensome and exhausting.
 - Promotion of leadership practices that are seen as increasing equal opportunities, but ultimately reinforce dominant hierarchical and unequal structures and cultures.

Relational leadership can be positive and negative:

- Diversity and inclusion management practices can have positive (assumed to be for the greater collective/public good) and negative (assumed to be self-interest or cronyism) aspects of relationality.
- Relationships between different groups of people are not equal.
- 'Mateship', or loyalty to the 'in-group', often takes precedence over ensuring equity of opportunities and outcomes.
- Individuals who carry the burden of championing diversity and inclusion causes, translating policies into action and monitoring practices, are often at risk of burnout, being made redundant or resigning.
- Leadership is often part of the problem rather than part of the solution.

Moving forward: Concrete actions can be taken to progress equality in Australian leadership practice

What can leaders do?

- Take responsibility and be accountable for change, starting with change in themselves.
- Champion the moral case for diversity and inclusion programs alongside, if not ahead, of the business and legal cases.
- Avoid claiming to be successful in diversity and inclusion – it is an ongoing process that requires long-term vigilance and personal commitment.
- Understand how their own intersectionality and identity impacts their relationship with others.
- Become advocates, seek advice and/or collaborate with diversity and community organisations.
- Use both formal surveys and everyday interactions to allow staff to identify greater forms of intersectional difference and to map their organisation's diversity.
- Listen and be responsive to what staff have to say to demonstrate a culture of safety, encourage staff to interact with leaders, and support their emotional investment in the organisation.
- Question their own and other leaders' assumptions and consider the full consequences of actions, and the systems that support them, beyond those who seek to benefit from them.

What can Diversity and Human Resource Management professionals do?

- Frame diversity and inclusion strategies and practices as actionable, measurable, and evidence-based human rights opportunities and outcomes for both staff and the organisation.
- Replace strategies of inclusion that focus solely on identification with categories of difference, by providing opportunities for meaningful work that values intersectional difference.
- Replace merit-based assessments for recruitment and promotion with assessments based on capacity and experience relative to opportunities.
- Capture the organisation's range of and changes in diversity, and how it is understood and valued. Use this data to tailor diversity and inclusion strategies
- Change the ways that the recruitment and promotion systems and procedures may benefit some people over others and fix the disadvantage these structures support.
 - Demonstrate how social responsibility strategies are related to diversity strategies to address gaps in representation across organisational roles and hierarchies.
 - Combine raising awareness about differences and celebrating diverse lived experiences with identifying and changing unfair or unequal practices and procedures.

What can business and management school educators do?

- Embed content and activities across the curriculum to help future leaders understand how social and historical factors still support intersectional discrimination and exclusion.
- Given the Australian context, become knowledgeable, seek expertise and link to First Nations history and ongoing challenges.
- Introduce greater complexity to discussions about culture and critique of diversity categories and their intersection.
- Facilitate student engagement with an understanding of leadership as a relational and collective practice that develops according to the who, what, when and where of any given situation.
- Discuss the moral case for diversity as a core element of the curriculum.
- Introduce assessment tasks that encourage students to seriously explore how leadership work in complex situations of intersectional difference.