



Women are the Business
Season 1: Episode 7
The Gender Power Gap

Sophie Thomas:

I'm Sophie Thomas and you're listening to Women are the Business. In today's episode, we're talking about power. Despite all the efforts to increase workplace diversity, women remain underrepresented in leadership roles. As we rebuild the economy after the COVID-19 pandemic, removing the road blocks to women in power is going to be more important than ever. To untangle this puzzle we spoke to one of our leadership experts and two of our alum who have been at the Vanguard.

Sophie Thomas:

Jan West finished studying commerce here at the university in 1974, before starting as a graduate at Deloitte, where she became their first female partner and stayed on for 37 years. Among other roles, she is now a non-executive director at Australia Post. When she first started out, Jan says there were a few women she could look to as role models.

Jan West:

When I started at Deloitte I would say there were probably a third were women. We now have coined the phrase, "You cannot be what you cannot see." And of course at that time, there was nobody to see above me, really,

Sophie Thomas:

A memory that sticks with Jan is a trip to Sydney for her first partner's conference.

Jan West:

At that time, I realized that in a room of a hundred men, I was the only woman left in the room. And then it hit home just what a unique position I was now in that here was I the 1% in the Australian firm of what is now Deloitte. And that percentage of course is now climbing towards, I don't know, 30% or so.

Jan West:

Obviously at that time, the ladies' toilets was very lonely experience. I went to a partner's conference not long before I retired, and I walked into the ladies toilet and there was a queue coming out the door. I walked in I said, "This is fabulous. I love a queue in the ladies' toilet," they turned round and looked at me as if I landed from Mars. But of course they didn't know the background, most of them didn't even know who I was.

Sophie Thomas:

Jan's experience mirrors that of our next guest who studied science here at the University of Melbourne and was a teacher before entering the business world.

Sue Morphet:

My name is Sue Morphet. I am a non-executive director across consumer goods and discretionary spend boards in Australia. And I'm also president of Chief Executive Women, which is an organization that works to campaign for more women in leadership.

Sue Morphet:

My parents had their own businesses and I grew up in a household of your own business and I was the oldest child. And so, it was our life. My father died when my second baby was only six weeks old and he left behind a string of businesses. And because I wasn't working, I hopped in and helped my mother with those businesses so that she could manage. And I absolutely loved it. I do need to say that at that time, the vast majority of women did not go back to work at least until all their children were at school. That was how it was. It's quite extraordinary how our world's changed since then.

Sophie Thomas:

But even as things have improved, the number of women in leadership still lags well behind men. Sue's organization, Chief Executive Women, tracks the numbers.

Sue Morphet:

Where still do we have to go? Where are the barriers? Because once it was considered that education was the ticket to women having what men have got, in terms of financial wellbeing, but women are leaving university far more highly qualified in many instances than men. Like 57% of all university graduates are women and their aspirations are equal, and we've done research to show that. And yet, only 5% of all CEOs in the top 200 ASX companies are women, 16% are CFOs. So there are still big social and structural barriers to women succeeding professionally and then, in turn, having a strong financial base for themselves.

Sophie Thomas:

So what is it like for women at the top of the corporate ladder? And what are the barriers to more women joining them? To answer these questions we can turn to research.

Jen Overbeck:

I'm Jen Overbeck. I'm an associate professor of management at Melbourne Business School, and I'm trained as a social psychologist. I started 20 years ago, almost, with interests in power and influence and status and negotiation. I think gender fits in a really fundamental way in the topics of power and status and leadership and negotiation. Men and women, I think, approach power differently, they approach negotiation differently, on average. And people's expectations about how men and women will behave tends to reflect assumptions about their relative power, assumptions about what they will and won't ask for in negotiation contexts, assumptions about how much they should be yielding to others versus asserting themselves.

Sophie Thomas:

Women and men might approach power differently, but that doesn't mean men are innately better leaders. You probably won't be surprised to hear that these differences really come down to gender norms and stereotypes and the different ways boys and girls are raised. We can see this in studies on anger.

Jen Overbeck:

Women have been socialized not to give free reign to that anger. And there's a pretty good reason for it. Anger is associated with status. When we see somebody get angry, we actually conclude that that person has higher status.

Jen Overbeck:

There's a great series of studies by a woman named Lara Tiedens, and she found that you show participants a scenario of two people who are interacting about some kind of a task, like they're going to go make a presentation, and one of the people made an error and the other person gets really angry. Everybody assumes that if the person's getting angry, it must be because they had a lot of status. Like it's high status people who are entitled to get angry. And if they were low status, they'd have to control themselves and not share that anger.

Jen Overbeck:

So, that was really interesting. People read that and thought, "Well, I guess that means that if you want a signal that you have status, you should show anger." Like that's one way of saying, "Look, I'm a high status person." So another researcher, Victoria Brescoll, decided to examine that for women, in particular, and what she found was, no, it didn't work for women. It worked for men. So if men want to show that they're high status, they can have a temper tantrum. And everybody says, "Oh, he must be very high status." But if a woman does the exact same thing, then people conclude that she's emotional, she can't handle things, she's not competent. And so it backfires on women.

Jen Overbeck:

And so that socialization is a very rational thing. It may be that there would be something very helpful for women in feeling angry, and what my research shows is, yeah, that feeling of anger might really focus you on the task, but the rest of the research suggests that while you're feeling it, you should try not to show it. You should try not to let that out because that's going to backfire on you. And if you can imagine one person sitting there feeling angry and having to cover it up, whereas another person could sit there feeling angry and have the ability to show it with no problem, there's a lot more cognitive load, there's a lot more kind of pressure on the woman who has to show that control. So it's one of those double binds that we frequently see in gender research.

Sophie Thomas:

Do you think gender has played a role in how you've experienced leadership?

Sue Morphet:

Oh, absolutely it has. Not at all levels, but you can look back on and reflect and say, "Of course, that was because I was a woman." At the time maybe sometimes you don't think about it, but you do look back and reflect. So I'd never thought about it in terms of being a woman, but there were so many times I was the only woman in the room. There was so many times where behaviour meant that I couldn't be in the room. And so you reflect back and think, "I wonder if I've been spoken about differently because I'm a woman than what I would have been spoken about had I been a man." I

think when I went through the drama with closing our factories, I think I was treated by the media somewhat more aggressively because I was a woman.

Sophie Thomas:

Yeah, I find that interesting. I think that often people don't really think about the role of the media when it comes to how women are expected to navigate leadership. There's almost like this pressure on female leaders that they're not just representing themselves or their businesses, but their whole gender. That's a pressure that men don't have.

Sue Morphet:

We want to be praised and criticized fairly. We don't want to be praised because we're a woman. We don't want to be criticized because we're a woman. We want to be praised because we're good at our job, we want to be criticized if we're not. Full stop. The women that have got through to the top, they're really pretty good. Everyone's going to make mistakes. Everyone's going to do stuff that other people don't like. When we've got as many mediocre women as we have mediocre men, we'll be happy. Women are good at their jobs like men are good at their jobs, there's just not as many of them. And until there are more of them, they're going to be the novelty to be spoken about.

Sophie Thomas:

How did those trailblazing female leaders do it?

Jen Overbeck:

The first women who started to infiltrate male workplaces, I think they learned to accommodate themselves. They learned to fit in, either by maybe accentuating their femininity and showing, "Look, I'm not going to be a threat because I'm going to be as feminine as possible in this context," or really assimilating and saying, "Look, I'm going to just act like one of the guys." And we see, even today, there are instances where women who were one of the very few women to go into a male dominated workplace, there are complaints from younger, more junior women, that those women aren't as supportive or that they aren't good mentors. That they're perceived as pulling up the ladder after them.

Jen Overbeck:

But those women were in a really difficult position where to be too gendery, to be too much seen as fighting a gender battle, that meant that they were limiting their own opportunities. So they had to fit in, they had to assimilate and they had to just be one of the guys, and they had to learn to leave gender out of it. Which taught them that it's a bit dangerous to suddenly be seen as, "Well, now she's a mentor and a pathway for all of these other women." That was a risky thing to do.

Jen Overbeck:

So what we find is, and this is true for a lot of societies and groups, anytime that there's a big power differential between groups, individual members of a low power group will be able to ascend and be part of the club, but they can rarely bring other people along with them. It's just much harder to do than we think. And so I just, yeah, it's taken a really long time and I think that part of it is that we haven't developed a pathway to fully make the changes that I think everybody thought would happen naturally.

Sophie Thomas:

Women have had to learn a whole host of other leadership styles that might actually be really useful in the workplace.

Jen Overbeck:

I do a lot of executive education. I end up working with a lot of groups of senior leadership teams and CEOs working in companies also in government, non-profit. And I would say in these groups, they're at least 75% male, generally more than that. The curriculum that I developed around this was really focused on how when you're using power, it's really good to have power, it's something that you need, but you don't want to lead with power. You don't want to be coercing people all the time or threatening, and you don't even want to be bribing people with potential rewards. It's much better to use influence to bring people on board, to get them to voluntarily buy in. So you rely on expertise, and information, and charisma, negotiation skills. You rely on those things instead of power, per se.

Jen Overbeck:

And so that was a really effective approach to doing these masterclasses, for example. And then I did a program for women in leadership. So Melbourne Business School has this week long women in leadership program for senior women leaders. And I went in with that message. And from the very first discussion we had I realized, "Wait, I'm going to have to recalibrate this because the women get this," like they're across this point already and they're kind of looking at me like, "Okay, what else you got?" So I didn't need to radically overhaul the way they think about power by emphasizing a more relational consensus building approach, because they would never have gotten to the roles that they were in without having mastered that approach.

Jen Overbeck:

What was interesting was what they needed to hear, and this became really clear, they needed to hear that that's not enough either. You still have to make sure you have some power. There's a lot of advice, Sheryl Sandberg's advice to women to lean in and take your seat at the table, and that's great. Women should lean in and they should take their seat at the table. But at some point, if you don't think about having power, you'll get your seat at the table and people will say no to you. And there's nothing you can do about it. And so what I realized was that the women need to hear a bit more about building a power base. Men need to hear a bit more about, "Okay, you've got that power base now, park it and work on building consensus."

Sophie Thomas:

A workplace without gender stereotypes might be better for all of us.

Jen Overbeck:

I don't think that women should be thinking they should act like a man. And I also don't think that men should be hearing a message that they should act like a woman. I think what everybody should be hearing is we have a range of behaviours that we are given permission that we're fully entitled to enact in ourselves, and that we should look at the situation and what that situation demands, and we should match our behaviour while maintaining our own integrity and authenticity.

Jen Overbeck:

I think that gives permission to women to behave in different ways. And that that should be welcomed. I also think it gives permission to men to behave in different ways. A lot of times, interestingly, and this is more true in the United States where I'm originally from than I think it is in Australia, but I think it's true in Australia too, the definition of masculinity is in many ways much tighter than the definition of femininity. And so the range of behaviours that it's acceptable for men to show is much more restricted. And the stigma attached to men who violate that range of behaviours can be much stronger.

Jen Overbeck:

And so, I think giving people permission to behave according to the situation, it's fantastic for women and will make much more female friendly workplaces, at the same time that I think it will make men's lives a lot better too.

Sophie Thomas:

So how do we get more women into leadership roles? One thing we can't rely on is the concept of merit.

Sue Morphet:

We've done a lot of research at chief executive women that shows that even though people do say they're employing on merit, that it actually is merit in their own likeness. Therefore, it's self-perpetuating. You employ people who look like, feel like, behave like, you. Versus having a look to say, "What is right for our organization? What type of leadership style is required? And what talents do we need to be able to take us to the next level?" Because the leaders of tomorrow will need to be very different from the leaders of yesterday. Their behaviours need to be very inclusive, they need to be adaptable to change, they need to be able to think on their feet, they need to be fast learning because the world's changing so quickly.

Sue Morphet:

So judging on merit is a problem if merit is assumed to be just like me. If merit is the capabilities and qualities that we need in a person to take us to the next stage, let's have a really good look at what those qualities are, now let's look for people who have got them. Then that's a different story. And you will find that if they did that, that there would be far many more women walk through those doors.

Sophie Thomas:

One thing I should ask you about, I'm sure you get asked about this all the time, do you think there's value in quotas?

Sue Morphet:

I think there is greater value in people understanding the value of diversity because there is serious benefit in diversity and there's serious benefit in gender balanced teams, no matter where they are or what they're doing. Gender balance and diversity works.

Sue Morphet:

What upsets me most is when people don't know that or choose not to believe it. I think that quotas have got us to places in some areas. I would like to think we didn't need them because people don't want to feel that they've been given a position because they are male or female. Everyone wants to believe they've been given a job because they are the best person for the job, or the right person for the job. I do think though, sometimes you need to seed some people into an area. For example, if you have got no women leaders in an organization, then I think it is important that if you have got two candidates, and they're pretty equal, I would put the woman in just because I need a woman on the team. Because once you get one woman on the team, it gives other women confidence to believe that they can aspire to have a job, a spot on that team as well. And men understand that the women on the team are okay. They're not going to come with two heads and bite your head off, they're strong contributors.

Sue Morphet:

I do think it's important that we actively build diverse organizations and gender balanced organizations. I'm not so sure I'm a strong believer in quotas, but I'm a strong believer in balance.

Jen Overbeck:

I think quotas are politically very, again, contentious and controversial. But what we find over and over is that when organizations or governments do implement quotas it is one of the few things that actually works because there's an issue of critical mass. That until you have a critical mass of women in those positions, and this is not just for gender it's for any underrepresented group, but until the numbers are there, the dynamics don't change. The key thing that will make things change in terms of gender balance is simply having more gender balance. Behaviours, norms, dynamics, will change when the numbers change. And so a lot of times quotas are the only way to get there. And people are very nervous about having quotas.

Jen Overbeck:

In particular, there's a big argument that there's just not a pipeline, but what we find is companies that are committed to correcting that imbalance, they find ways to remedy the pipeline problem. They get more creative in their recruitment policies. They get much better at selection procedures. So typical recruitment, typical interviewing techniques, tend to draw out information that leads to continued tilts in representation toward men.

Jen Overbeck:

But if you go, for example, if you analyse what it takes to do a good job and you develop a structured interview frame so that what you're asking people about is solely the things that have to do with doing a good job. If you do blind resume review with no gendered information or names on the resume, if you use, maybe, pre-screening by a computer algorithm that, again, matches up characteristics of the job with characteristics of the resume, all of those things tend to reduce, or even eliminate, the gap in representation by men and women in the candidate pool. So there are ways that we can get across the pipeline problem before we chuck the idea of quotas because we think there aren't enough good women out there.

Sophie Thomas:

Another key mechanism is mentorship. Jan West got this help when she was starting out.

Jan West:

I became ambitious to become a manager, and I was the first female audit manager in, I think, Australia. Having achieved that, then the partnership track presented itself. I wasn't particularly ambitious to achieve that because, again, you cannot be what you cannot see. And I had a partner who took me aside and said, "Do you realize if you actually put your head down and worked at this you could become a partner?" And it was a realization that somebody mentoring you and giving you that encouragement does make a big difference. And with his encouragement, I then became ambitious to achieve that.

Sophie Thomas:

So you hadn't really realised that that could be an option for you until one of your mentors sat down and said that to you?

Jan West:

Absolutely, yeah. On two counts. One, there weren't any. And second counts, "I'm not good enough" view of the world, "everyone else is better" type perception. I don't think it matters whether you've

got a female mentor or a male mentor, but you do need a variety of people who you can go to, who you trust implicitly, and they entrust you implicitly too, because you're sharing quite personal and confidential matters, depending on what the topic is, you can go and talk to, to resolve whatever the dilemma might be.

Sophie Thomas:

As we rebuild the economy after the COVID-19 pandemic, it's more important than ever that we remove the roadblocks to power that women face.

Sue Morphet:

It is time for us to be looking and saying, "Why aren't women getting through to the big line roles and making decisions?" It is time for us to consider why we don't have more men in childcare and health caring sectors. It is really important that we understand that school teachers hold a vital role in our community and why aren't they being paid more? We cannot hope that these changes happen, we have to make sure they happen. And that's why we've got CEW, that's why we've got government, that's why we've got advisors, that's why we've got bureaucrats, that's why we've got think tanks, that's why we've got community leaders. Is to get this stuff done, so it's better for everybody.

Sophie Thomas:

It's clear it's going to take a long time before we have equal numbers of men and women in positions of power. Whether as CEOs or political leaders. But perhaps we can learn something from those pioneering women who first got to the top.

Sophie Thomas:

Thanks to our guests Jan West, Sue Morphet, and associate professor Jen Overbeck.

Sophie Thomas:

For more insights on how women work and live, head to our website, fbe.unimelb.edu.au/womenarethebusiness. Subscribe to the show for new episodes. Women are the Business is recorded on Wurundjeri land.

Sophie Thomas:

The podcast is produced by Seth Robinson, James Whitmore, and me, Sophie Thomas. It's recorded by Chris Hatzis, edited and mixed by Audiocraft's Camilla Hannan. The theme music comes from Epidemic Sounds.

Sophie Thomas:

Stay well and we'll see you next time on Women are the Business.