

Transforming Boardroom Cultures in Science, Engineering and Technology

A Good Practice Guide to Inclusive Boardrooms



Foreword

“This is a very thoughtful and timely piece of research from Cranfield and Dr Singh, commissioned by the UKRC.

It provides an important reminder about our behaviour and style as a Chair and as a Board in setting the drumbeat for the organisation and what we expect of it.

I commend it to experienced Directors and to new Directors alike.”

**Sir John Parker,
Chair of National Grid plc**



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Summary of recommendations for inclusive boardroom cultures in science, engineering and technology organisations

This good practice guide identifies a number of boardroom and director development practices that will facilitate a more inclusive and hopefully more effective boardroom culture. Some of these recommendations pertain more to the corporate board and others to the executive board, but these recommendations have relevance for many kinds of boards where an inclusive culture will allow more people to make an effective contribution.

1. In the boardroom

- The chairing of board meetings with courtesy, consideration and control, so that business can be conducted in a courteous atmosphere that allows everyone to make their contribution.
- Attention to the way that new members are treated in the boardroom at the start of their directorships. This should include team building exercises for the whole new team.
- The extension of tailored induction programmes to executive as well as non-executive directors, including executives who are promoted internally to the board.
- The considerate treatment of those coming into the boardroom to make presentations.
- Ensuring that boardrooms are not closed to senior staff, including women.

2. Access to the board – opening the door

- Inclusive and structured succession planning so that board members and candidates have had opportunities to get to know each other.
- Create opportunities for board interactions with women as well as men.

3. Development of directors

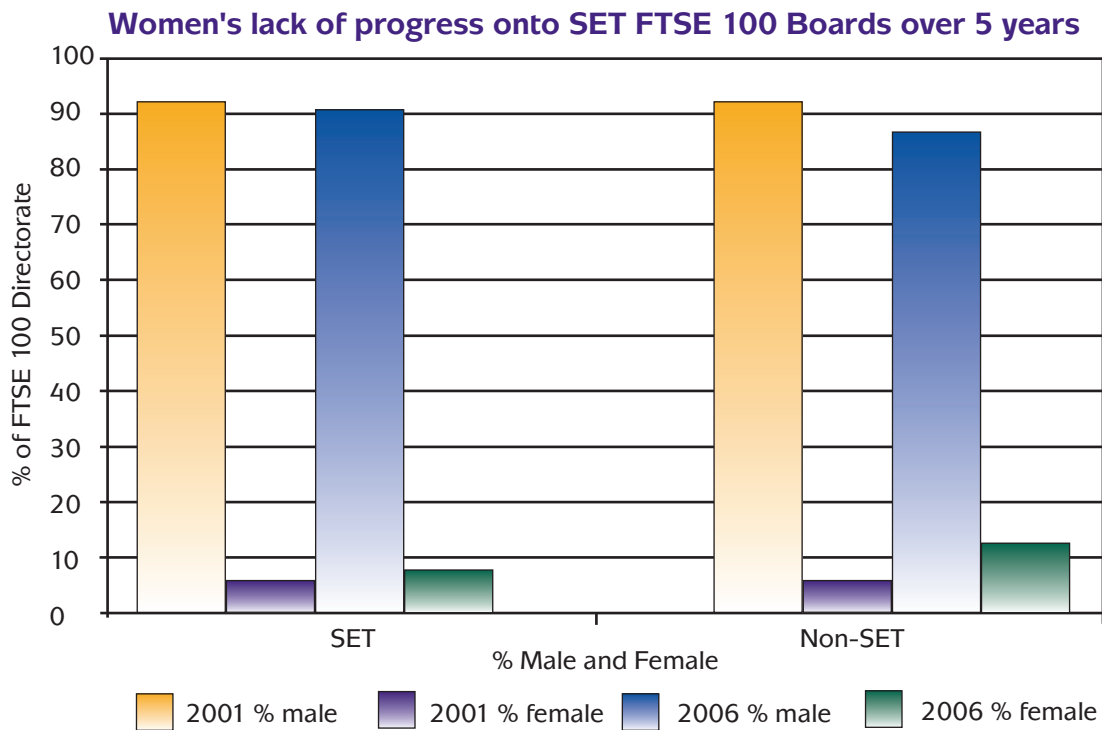
- Development (focusing, stretching, challenging, scaffolding, mentoring, role modelling) of those in the talent pool for senior executive positions.

4. Workplace culture and practice

- The importance of leadership from the chief executive in developing senior talent of both men and women, as indicated in the UKRC CEO Charter.
- Flexible working arrangements to be accessible for senior staff.

Few women on boards of directors

Female directors in science, engineering and technology (SET) boardrooms are scarce, even when compared to the extremely low representation of females on other sector boards. The gender composition of boards in SET companies has barely changed over the last five years as shown in the figure below, taken from the Cranfield Female FTSE studies (Singh & Vinnicombe, 2006). Of the 1130 directors in the FTSE 100 in 2006, 92% of SET firm directors were male, compared to 87.5% in non-SET firms.



The good practice laid out in this guide is based on research commissioned by the UKRC for Women in Science, Engineering and Technology (UKRC). The research was carried out by the International Centre for Women Leaders at Cranfield School of Management. We asked chairs, chief executives, directors and senior women in five SET organisations for their views and experiences. Two organisations were FTSE 100 firms, two were listed in the FTSE 250 and one was a public sector scientific organisation. All had male dominated boards, as is the norm. They are to be commended for their openness on this difficult issue. This contrasts with the many organisations invited to take part that declined, including some with a reputation for supporting women in SET, some saying that they did not want to expose their lack of gender diversity in executive ranks or their boardroom culture for women.

We have identified a number of practices that may help improve the boardroom culture for all involved, not just women, and some ideas to develop women (and men) in preparation for board-level appointments.

SET boardroom cultures

The corporate boardroom is seldom accessible to researchers, and there is an air of mystery about it. Certainly corporate boardrooms have a reputation for being old boy's clubs in nature (Kanter, 1977), whilst executive boards are renowned for argument and politicking (Ward et al, 2007). Given the lack of women scientists and engineers, it could be expected that SET boardrooms in particular are highly masculine in nature, as research across many sectors shows that women who reach the top of male-dominated organisations generally report an inhospitable culture which can put off women from aspiring to join the board.

Boardroom culture – the way things are

Every social group, such as a board, constructs a culture over time that drives their behaviour and brings them together through shared learning and understanding. Directors share habits and language, and use rituals and symbols to reinforce meaning. The group has formal philosophies, structures and principles, but importantly, also draws up informal 'rules of the game'. Culture can be observed at different levels, through the artefacts, values, beliefs and shared assumptions of the group. The elements of the culture form a coherent whole, sometimes described as a "cultural web" (Hendry & Hope, 1994).

Interacting with the SET boardroom culture is an unwritten code of gender relations. In the SET professions women are positioned as outsiders on demographic and often on cultural grounds, and gender diversity is scarcely evident in the top ranks of the SET organisation. Furthermore, in the wider society, men and women have socially determined roles and expectations that generally do not yet include women's SET boardroom participation.

The role of the board

The different roles that boards play set a framework within which the culture develops. Corporate boards have legal responsibility for governance, the oversight of the executive management, to provide checks and balances to protect shareholders' interests. Much of their work concerns accountability for the financial management of the firm. In contrast, executive boards are responsible for the direction and management of the organisation, and in larger organisations, the day-to-day management is often devolved to divisional boards. Executive directors sit on both the corporate and executive boards. Other directors may sit on executive or divisional boards but have no legal liabilities. Individuals may often hold director titles without sitting on the executive or divisional boards.

Governance experts (Roberts, McNulty & Stiles, 2005) say that corporate board effectiveness "depends upon the behavioural dynamics of a board and how the web of interpersonal and group relationships between executive and non-executives is developed in a particular company context". Hence, creating a boardroom culture with good relationships between members including female directors is important for effectiveness. The Higgs Review also states that effective boards have a culture of openness and constructive dialogue in an environment of trust and mutual respect. In this good practice guide we highlight some of the cultural dynamics that could be improved in the boardroom, and present suggestions from board chairs, chief executives, male and female directors and women senior executives on possible ways of opening SET boardrooms to female directors.

What is Culture?

- Observed behavioural regularities when people interact, the customs and traditions that evolve, the rituals
- Group norms - implicit standards and values
- Espoused values, Formal philosophy and principles
- Rules of the game
- Embedded skills. Accumulated & Shared Learning
- Habits of thinking, mental models, language, shared meanings
- Symbols
- Artefacts (structures & processes), Values, Beliefs & Shared Assumptions

Structural Stability

Patterning/Integrated to form a Cultural whole

(Ed Schein)

Opening up the SET boardroom culture

We undertook 59 interviews in this study. There were 29 interviews with directors, including three chairs of boards, five chief executives, male and female NEDs, executive directors and divisional directors. We also conducted 30 interviews with senior women (many of whom were directors but did not sit on the corporate or executive board), in addition to focus groups and a survey of 219 senior women in five science, engineering and technology organisations. We identified that the SET boardroom culture of both corporate and executive boards in some ways reflects the gendered structure of society, but there are differences as each boardroom culture is unique. In our society, where men are more likely to be leaders and breadwinners and women are more likely to be followers and homemakers, the mastery of science and technology is associated with masculinity that is a presumed property of men. To identify gendered cultures, it is essential to examine the different constituents of the culture to reveal ways in which some women and men of diverse types may be marginalised and/or disadvantaged by their sex. The business case for more diversity in leadership is increasingly being made by political and business leaders. As women take up their places in the boardroom, the culture is said by both men and women to shift to a more effective and less macho working environment. Several directors talked about the need for diversity: “the breadth of thinking is constrained by the fact that we are all of a type” and the need for “a more collaborative approach”.


“I think the problem with all male or all female groups is they don’t understand what they are missing. The problem is that I don’t know what the difference would be. That is the problem and the same is not having people from an ethnic background, you don’t understand why people can’t see it like you – they are all people like me. Guess what – they think more or less like me. We do have quite a diverse group of people from academics to ex-Army and all the rest of it, but in the end they are all white men.”

Male chief executive

An executive director with much experience of gender-mixed boards said that “a male only group can sometimes get carried away with the big agenda and the highlights, and miss a lot of the detail, the practical points. I think some of my female colleagues would be more inclined to consider more of that before they act.” Another male executive director commented: “women are noticeably much better listeners than men, they let people finish what they’re saying, they’re not nearly as confrontational in any response, and I think that helps. Also male behaviour changes when women are present. They start to adjust their behaviour in terms of being more polite.” Several male directors said that men were inclined to very political behaviour that was tempered down when women joined the board. One said “boys want to go and play games, whereas women say, Come on, we’re here to get on with it.” Another contribution from having gender mixed boards was that diversity brought different ways of looking at issues.

“I would say that the female influence on the board is an improvement to your business environment really where there’s a slight more civilised approach to things. A sense of the soft things, not just the hard facts or the hard objectives and tasks that you have to do. So I think that certainly is always helpful and I think there are some examples of that in our board discussions. Probably not enough but there are some. And equally they’re there in their own right with their own experience which is at least relevant as those of the others”

Male executive director



Overall, of the eight male corporate directors who had experience of corporate boards with women members, and who commented on whether gender diversity made a difference to how the board carried out its business, seven said that having a gender mixed corporate board made for a more effective boardroom style, as described above. Hence the majority described the contribution of gender diversity in terms that could be said to be good for governance. One senior male director, who has held chair and chief executive positions as well as other NED posts, made this link explicit.

“And she will slightly alter the behaviour of the board, in a way that makes you sit back a bit and think, and not be quite so macho, and not instinctively put out something with only 30 seconds thought. So actually it is better for governance, better all round, so it will improve the governance.”

Senior male NED

Another strong comment was made by a chair about a female non-executive director who had been on the corporate board for some years. “She’s a very powerful influence on the Board and how it’s administered and how it’s managed and really, with her I’ve managed to build up an extremely good set of governance and disciplines.”

Supporting the corporate directors’ views, a male director in the public sector organisation also commented positively on women’s influence in the boardroom.

“I think women bring, in the same way as the people who aren’t ENTP [a personality type] bring, they bring a different way of working, you know, a different perspective, a different way of resolving issues and conflict and that helps the dynamics greatly.”

Male Director in the public sector

Gendered experiences in SET boardrooms

For women in senior and middle management, the lack of females in the executive boardroom creates a perception of exclusion and of an unequal playing field, a lack of hope that successful careers can be conducted by women in the organisation and a distance between board and the females in the company that leaves women feeling unconnected.

A female divisional director commented that if there had been more support such as mentoring and informal coaching years ago when she was first promoted, she may have developed her confidence levels earlier. She experienced a level of discomfort initially, as the only woman on the board, and with no female role models to emulate. Men do not often have to deal with situations where they are both the most junior person and the sole representative of their gender.

"It would have been the sort of thing that training would have helped me with and I found out by accident. I used to perch myself on the corner and I had a small book which I would have on my knee and it would mean that I would then look insignificant and not that I was a participating board member.

I almost used to sit like a secretary, and then I heard almost by accident someone saying, women should never sit on the corner and the space that you create in a room has an impact. And I also saw a training video which did a speeded up version of men and women behaviour in the office and all the women were walking round like this [neat and quiet, trying to be invisible], and all the men are sitting in chairs doing that [spreading themselves out over the seating, across the table, taking up space, owning that space]. And I thought that is really interesting, so when I go into a board meeting now, I never sit in the same seat because I don't think it is healthy for women to do that either. I never perch on the end and I gave up the small book. I have always got as much paper as anybody else, and I am making sure that I have got my territory."

Women, like men, have a variety of personal characteristics, preferences and management styles. However, men are automatically attributed with masculine characteristics by nature of their sex category (whether they possess them or not) that are recognised as aligned with leadership and the successful manager (the 'Think Manager, Think Male' syndrome, Schein, 2007). In contrast, women are perceived as embodying feminine characteristics that are not associated with traditional leadership styles. Women who might prefer a different style often feel they have to act like masculine-style men in order to succeed, and hence their potentially different approach is likely to be suppressed. Where only certain masculine styles are displayed and rewarded, there is a risk that one definition of rationality becomes so highly valued that men and women will only feel comfortable in displaying their instrumental masculine styles, and not bring other approaches, styles and characteristics into the boardroom, denying the organisation some of the benefits of diversity. Even women who are successful often feel that they have to tread carefully because of their visibility, they don't belong to the informal male networks, they don't know the "rules of the game", and it often takes longer than their male peers for them to settle into their director roles.

"You have to create new ground, you are on your own, and also it means that you have to align your personality to much more masculine traits, so you have to play in their park.... You have to be careful of everything you say so they don't get the wrong impression."

"You don't know who to align yourself to. Your internal networks actually matter a lot when you first join the business. If you align yourself with the wrong individuals or the wrong approach or you're seen to be prioritising things in the wrong way, you can really make a lot of damage for yourself and because there is nobody to talk to or to talk through, there's no way you can actually find a path through. If only you could have a coffee with them and just say, look this is where I'm hoping to go, have someone to talk to. Just so you understand the politics, the temperament, the temperature. When you come into an organisation absolutely, you've got to learn it all yourself."

At the focus group event, male directors were surprised at the loneliness expressed by women who had made it to the board.

"I think sometimes it can be a bit lonely. Operating in a man's world, there are lots of things that men do socially to engage – it's the old golf course mentality."

It is difficult for men to understand, as they can just call casually and invite a male colleague to lunch or a drink without considering whether it would be seen as anything more than a casual encounter. Men are likely to share the same interests (male sports such as football, rugby and cricket; fast cars; hi tech gadgets, technology), and all-male groups tend to be sexist in their language and behaviour. Senior women are usually also excluded by their status from women lower down the organization where the culture is hierarchical. However, that was not the case in some of the organizations studied, particularly in the smaller locations.

In several organisations, male directors revealed that the masculine culture felt so normal that they just weren't aware of it, except when (rarely) the statistics were mentioned.

"There is no perception that it is male dominated", commented a male NED

They didn't intend to discriminate, but things are just the way they are and always have been. But some women also find the masculine culture normal. A senior female in the scientific organisation commented that it just felt normal that she was the only female and that things hadn't changed in over a decade,

"I've gone native in a way because I never work with women. Sometimes it's brought home to me that I'll go into a room full of men and think, 'Oh they're people like me' and very rarely do I realise that they don't think like that."

The interviews indicated that the boardroom cultures were often gendered in multiple ways, as well as the demographic imbalance. The male directors share masculine language, describing their board activities as challenging, even penetrating, as well as rational and analytical, hard and not emotional other than the expression of anger and aggression. Whilst male directors are used to confrontational displays and rituals in the boardroom, and indeed, some see them as normal, they also report that they don't expect people to take the criticism personally. Some women don't have a problem with that, and indeed enjoy being members of the board. Other highly qualified women look up at that show of masculinity and feel uncomfortable about going into the boardroom to make presentations, and may choose to opt out of the competition. However, women react very positively when line managers suggest that they should go for it, even if they don't succeed first time round. The affirmation boosts the confidence and the friendly support dissolves some of the concern about how they would manage the interactions with the masculine culture.

The male directors share a power base that determines who is allowed to join them, the characteristics that will be recognised as most worthy of promotion (such as general management experience for corporate positions, or excellent science evidenced by long high quality publication lists in scientific institutions), and how their career paths should look (linear, constant progression, no breaks or slowdowns). Some senior women report that their ambition is not recognised even when they try to make it explicit, and some male directors continue to hold the view that women are not ambitious enough. Indeed, directors report that there is a lot of misperception about the nature of the board, particularly when very few women enter the boardroom or get opportunities to know the directors. One or two negative experiences can easily become myths (with some substance) that create yet another barrier that spreads across the organisation. The research shows that there is a lot of reported goodwill towards the access of women to the board, but a number of senior women felt that there were still patriarchal attitudes towards women in some organisations. For example, some women were not offered developmental positions due to male assumptions about their family commitments and ability to give unlimited time or to travel, without giving women the chance to sort out arrangements if they wished to apply. As younger directors (with working wives and family involvement) took up seats on the board, women felt that such attitudes were changing.

The good news is that many of those issues can be addressed by good chairing of board meetings, tailored induction programmes for promoted executives, more interaction opportunities with the board and top management, more coaching, mentoring and individualised career development. In some organisations with positive and inclusive cultures at the top, these things happen naturally through excellent chairing and transformational leadership.

Some of the chief executives in our research were driving the diversity agenda, connecting their boards and the leadership group. They were consciously role modelling the kind of leadership that they believed was best for the organisation. Those below them found them inspiring and drew on their transformational behaviours to manage their own boards and teams. Such boards should not be difficult for women to enter and make a full contribution.



Guide to transforming the boardroom culture

1. In the boardroom

Chairing Boards with Courtesy, Consideration and Control


It is very clear that the chair of the board sets the culture for the conduct of board business, and that it is a difficult task. To make the boardroom culture more inclusive, we recommend that chairs work at creating a slightly formal, polite atmosphere where board members can make their contribution in a constructive and collegiate manner.

If the chair invites people to speak, and always checks that all have had their say before coming to a decision or closing down the topic, then directors will know that they will get their turn and that should divert the feeling that they need to use aggression to be heard. Chairs should not allow aggressive behaviour to start disrupting the proceedings.

The National Grid chair, Sir John Parker reported how he managed the corporate board, through careful observation, facilitation of debate, and refusing to allow any bad behaviour to creep in. "I would never allow rough language in the boardroom, so there would never be anything of that nature that would be in the embarrassment category, although I have been a member of a board where some people would be rather uncouth."

Executive directors at National Grid report that the polite, slightly formal but friendly atmosphere and courteous interactions make a very effective culture where women and men are comfortable in the boardroom. The Xansa chair, Bill Alexander also emphasised that courtesy and consideration in the boardroom was good practice. Sir John Parker said that he was actively role modelling to the executive directors the kind of culture, attitudes and responsibilities that he and the chief executive wish to nurture. Many board chairs would say that they do the same, but in this study, board members corroborated his excellent chairmanship, and indeed drew on his style to become better chairs of their own boards. His influence extends way beyond the boardroom in the way that he has engaged the whole board in interacting with the local parts of the organisation, with regional dinners and committees.

As well as maintaining a courteous boardroom culture, chairs of corporate and executive boards can help a new director on the first meeting by inviting them to sit next to him or her, symbolising acceptance and belonging. Introducing the new director with a brief summary of their achievements can help development of the respect from existing members that is needed for the new director to feel and be perceived as legitimate and credible. Chairs of boards can help newcomers by inviting them to give their views when they know they have expertise, and by keeping an eye on signals and body language, as indicated by the Xansa chair and also the Cairn Energy chair, Norman Murray. It can be difficult for the new director to enter into the discussion at first, yet unsettling if getting in is impossible. It is essential for confidence-building for the new member to make an informed point or two in the very first meeting. It is also essential for their credibility with the other directors that they are seen to contribute in that initial board meeting. Most of the male directors commented on feeling like the new boy in short trousers, or inauthentic amongst new peers that were previously seen as the great and the good, but for women, these feelings are often compounded by lack of role models and connection.



Courtesy and consideration can also be extended to those coming into the boardroom to make presentations, as the Xansa chair said he took care to do. People are nervous when invited into the boardroom, especially the first time, when they do not know the procedure, and this can impact their performance. Chairs can help by introducing and welcoming the presenter, explaining expectations, such as when questioning would start, and suggesting a time allocation so that the newcomer has a frame of understanding, which will reduce uncertainty and allow them to concentrate on the important things. Complimenting good performance will yield huge returns in terms of commitment and aspirations to be part of this decision-making body.

Tailored induction for NEDs and also for executive directors

We recommend that more attention is given to the induction of directors. Given that the appointment of new non-executive directors is not a very frequent event, induction programmes should be carefully tailored to the individual needs of the appointee. Even if the newcomer is an experienced NED, it is helpful for them to visit and get to know the company and its executive leadership before they join.

National Grid has an excellent induction programme about the company, how the business really works, in both the US and the UK, with on-site visits, government perspectives, how the committees function etc. The process is personally led by the Chair and CEO for their boards, with a tailored programme for each new director, NED or executive. The Chair and CEO spend a lot of time outside the first meeting making sure the new director understands what is going on. So in the first board meeting, they know how things are done, they know what the ambitions are and the strategy to meet the objectives. They are offered whatever is necessary to fill their information needs, depending on their board role, previous experience and knowledge of the industry.

We recommend that all executive directors and appointees to group executive committees should receive induction into their new roles. In particular, executive directors have a major change of responsibility as they step up to the corporate board, and this should be formally and informally addressed by the chair and chief executive.

As well as induction for new NEDs and new hire executive directors, at National Grid there is also induction for those promoted to the board. Executive directors are inducted so that they recognise their new global responsibilities as directors of the company, which have to sit ahead of their responsibilities as head of their function or division. Executive directors in this study, who had not had the benefit of induction earlier, reported feeling thrown in at the deep end, to sink or swim, and learning on the job. Whilst they obviously did learn on the job, a careful induction could have enabled them to take up their full role earlier. It also could help reduce excessive territorialism that causes much conflict on the board. Women in particular suggested that informal coaching or mentoring would help when appointed to a new level, and we would suggest that a tailored induction for all newly promoted executive directors would enable a more effective and confident take up of the new role at board level.

Team building as new members change culture

As new members join the board, the team dynamics are inevitably changed. We recommend that soon after a new director is appointed to the corporate or executive board, some form of team building exercise is used. This not only helps to bind together the new team with much better mutual understanding, but also allows the newcomer quickly to feel part of the whole, rather than an additional member for several months.

At National Grid, the CEO uses a team building approach with the executive board to encourage diversity, not conformity. Such activities can allow shared understanding to facilitate better working relationships. Drawing on his experience in a previous organisation, the CEO described how board members were asked to map how they felt about the team. The newest member drew a train on a track with the rest of the board pulling away fast, leaving the newcomer feeling that they would never catch up. Once a situation like that is admitted, in an honest and open culture, experiences can be debated and solutions explored, helping the board in its new format to move forward together. It is so easy for experienced board members to forget what it is like in the first few weeks of appointment, and most will not have thought about what it is like being the only female in the team.

Encourage diversity of approaches

We recommend that boards should be open to a diversity of styles that allow expression of the different characteristics and approaches of both men and women. The corporate culture should also be inclusive of diverse approaches and points of view.

Executive boards should encourage robust and rigorous challenging but also value emotional intelligence, according to National Grid's CEO. He says that much more needs to be done in terms of building a culture which "allows people to express emotions, to have confidence in their feelings, and the legitimacy to express their point of view." His words were echoed by male executives too. The leadership team is welcoming of different perspectives, and wants therefore to develop a culture where diversity is valued, where women and men are not sanctioned for expressing uncertainty. Their uncertainty may be a resource, a deep sensor of an as yet unexpressed concern that others may also be feeling but have not yet recognised. So the culture needs to encourage men and women to express their points of view, to develop their style without having to become like their masculine peers in terms of their visible personae – unless that is the style that they prefer.

2. Access to the board – opening the door

Structured succession planning

All boards should consider succession planning, but we recommend that this is done in a structured way so that all the talent within the organisation can be identified and developed. It is important that the board members responsible for selection have structured opportunities to meet those in the talent pool for the next generation of directors, not just at the interview stage but over time and in different formal and informal environments. Otherwise more of the instrumentally competitive individuals will seek opportunities to meet directors, leaving some excellent talent unrecognised and undeveloped. The opportunities should be monitored to maintain the interactions between board and talent pool.

At National Grid, the chair and CEO work with the company secretary to maintain a matrix of board interactions with the top 70 staff so that regular contacts are made through presentations to the board, invitations to pre-board dinners, to committee meetings, to regional events and to occasional social events. Taking some board meetings in regional locations, as several of these case study organisations did, means that a wider group of talented individuals are visible to the board, and that regionally based management feels connected to the board. When promotions are to be considered, the board knows the people personally and can make better judgements. Those in the talent group are able to interact with the board and perform with much less trepidation when they already know them.

Create opportunities for board interactions with women

Where there are few women at the top, it will help if attention is given to how more women can come into the boardroom. This should not be for women only, but given the present gender imbalance, consideration should be given to find opportunities that will include women. We give several examples of how this can be done, in relation to corporate and executive boards.

Women benefit in terms of confidence and ambition when they have a chance to interact with the corporate board and its members, or the executive board, depending on their position in senior management. It is an affirming process, and seems to happen naturally in some organisations but seldom in others. At lower levels, CEOs and MDs can create opportunities for executive and divisional board presentations by women as well as by men, and other interactions, such as pre-board dinners, reducing the perceived distance. In some companies, the whole corporate board is invited to the annual leadership conference, providing a great opportunity for informal networking, and introductions of talented women and men by the senior most board members to other main board and executive board directors. Some NEDs in this study reported enthusiastically on such interactions. Women report that these interactions can turn the distant awe into a healthy respect for directors because they now know them, their strengths and weaknesses, and can learn from them.


“Here the shiny wrapper does wear off and you have respect for them, but it’s a healthier respect than an admiration for the tag that they bring along with them.”

Senior woman, Cairn Energy

Mentoring and coaching by board members

We found that the senior women value being mentored, and see it as an affirming relationship, as we have found in our other studies. However, women often find it more difficult to find senior male mentors, perhaps because of lack of access to the informal senior networks. We recommend that board members engage in mentoring and coaching of the senior women in the talent pool. It would be beneficial for women to be mentored by both male and female directors.

In National Grid, Cairn Energy and Atkins, the chief executives were personally engaged in senior executive and potential director development and mentoring, as were non-executive and executive directors. Some of these behaviours were emulated by divisional MDs, who mentored several



executives. A useful practice is that new appointees to senior posts in National Grid are asked to present their views to the board after a couple of months about their job and the company. Heads of divisional boards where there may be several women in the pipeline can use informal coaching, to brief women before important meetings, and debrief afterwards about how they felt, what they contributed and what could have been done better by themselves, and by the chair. This builds confidence and women are likely to use this style themselves. Of course this can also be used for development of men too. Board members may be surprised to find how lonely it can be for women appointed to levels where there are no other women, and can take steps to integrate the women into their own informal working networks. The public sector science organisation also had an excellent new mentoring scheme for both men and women.

Small table dinners between directors and top tier

We recommend that informal interactions between board members and senior women are arranged occasionally to reduce the perceived distance between board and the women in senior management.

At Atkins, small table dinners are held so that non-executive directors can interact with different executives, building trust and allowing for conversations away from the chief executive. This is good for governance, but it can be extended as a mechanism for board members to meet the best men and women in the talent pool. Small tables of six allow deeper conversation than long tables where only immediate neighbours are accessible. Women will benefit from knowing the board, both at selection panels and if they are successful in seeking a directorship, during the induction period on board.

Culture of ownership

We recommend that opportunities are created for the more junior or younger members of the talent pool to make presentations to the board and committees as appropriate, rather than the senior person always making the important presentations. As there are more women in middle management, this should create opportunities for increased visibility of talented young women as well as men.

Atkins has a “culture of ownership”, according to one senior woman, where the younger people who have done the work are the ones to present it to the boards at various levels. This can be instigated right through the organisation, and will be particularly helpful for women, to improve motivation, gain valuable exposure to senior people, and develop confidence and legitimacy as full citizens of the organisation.

3. Developing the Director Talent Pool

Focus People on their Strengths

We recommend that those in the talent pool, particularly those who appear to be less confident, should be encouraged to focus on their strengths and not their weaknesses.

In preparing people for directorships, it may help to get them to consider how they can bring their own strengths to the table, rather than how well they fit with the strengths of the previous incumbent.

“You’ve got to focus people on their strengths, not let them compare themselves with the strengths they see of somebody else. They’ve got to develop their own style, because everybody has their specific abilities, their specific strengths.”

CEO, Cairn Energy

Otherwise some talented but less confident people will measure up and find themselves lacking on the strengths of their predecessor, and not put themselves forward, ignoring the fact that they can bring new dimensions to the role.

The practice of ‘scaffolding’

We recommend “scaffolding” as good practice for the development of executive directors and senior executives. Scaffolding is like parenting, mentoring and coaching rolled into something much bigger, and is a method of adult development drawing on child development and parenting psychology. The scaffolding support is both psychological and experiential, and is based on trust coupled with risk. We found evidence of the use of “scaffolding” by senior directors in the development of women and men directors in several cases. Female directors in several case studies reported that this was enormously helpful.

The first step is to build good relationships and trust between the senior person and the potential director. The second step is to encourage and stretch the candidate, promoting striving and mastery of the situation. The CEO of Cairn Energy does this by asking the people below the board to represent the company in contexts where he would normally do so. “In order to develop my senior team of say six or eight people, rather than the Chief Executive go down with the Finance Director to see the fund managers and analysts, I’ll take a team of four, or two teams of four and make sure they get exposure to the fund managers, which is slightly unusual, because normally, the Chief Exec likes to be the top boy and make sure he does it himself.” He liked to put them into these situations, to test them out and make them take ownership of their achievements and of the activity. “You go with them to the City. You find that they now take ownership for what the plan is, because we’ve all been there, not just the chief executive.”

When people are told by the chief executive that he or she believes they can do it, they are inspired, enthused and get over the lack of confidence. “It’s a question of them knowing that if you’ve given them your confidence, then they’ll step up to the plate. It is an affirmation thing.” Similarly in National Grid, a senior woman described how her chief executive had played a significant role in her development.

“This is going to be a big step up for you, and it’s going to be lots of growing, but I really believe you can do it, and you know, I want you to have that chance and not let me down.’ Those words carried me through quite a lot of anxious times when I thought, am I really up to it, am I a proper director.”

Creating a culture where risk is encouraged means that there are inevitably some failures, but these should be seen as opportunities for learning and moving forward. The “scaffolding” support should be gradually dismantled as the individual gains confidence in their abilities, but the leader should retain friendly interest to maintain trust.

The positive experience should hopefully encourage the learner to draw on the leader as a role model as they in turn develop others. Another example of this approach was reported by a female NED. She commented that earlier in her career in the oil industry, the deputy CEO took a chance on her, affirming her value, when she had not yet full confidence in herself. She was exposed to a portfolio of business challenges that really tested her skills, and gave her crucial operational experience.

“Having somebody like that, it’s almost like a parent who gives you unconditional love, who when you fall down doesn’t tell you what an idiot you are but tells you it’s okay, you’re going to learn from that, get back up and do it again. I think you need people in your life like that, and I certainly had the great, great gift of having somebody who made that difference for me.”

Female NED

4. Workplace culture and practice

CEO to be first champion for diversity

It is difficult to sustain the momentum on diversity initiatives, and they need to be embedded within the culture as well as in structures and processes. We recommend that messages on diversity are initially directly championed by the chief executives, and that later diversity champions are visibly supported by the chief executives to sustain progress.

In Atkins and National Grid, the chief executives are championing diversity right from the top. They have influence, vision and engagement in changing the boardroom culture and driving diversity, challenging sexism and role modelling positive behaviours. As they pass the champion role over to others, the message is clear, that this will continue to have their full support. The chief executive of the scientific organisation was also the diversity champion.

The UKRC has recently instigated a CEO Charter. The aim of the Charter is to increase the participation at all levels of women in SET, to develop and communicate the business case for gender equality and to promote change within major companies and networks. Chief executives sign up to the Charter, committing themselves and their senior managements to actively support this aim.

Flexible working for senior staff

We recommend that organisations examine whether the lack of flexibility for senior executives and stereotypical negative attitudes of line managers towards flexible workers are holding back talented women and men from progressing further.

The need for more flexibility was mentioned by many senior women. People need flexibility at certain periods of their lives, but at present, it seems that this is damaging to their longer term careers. It may be that the SET environment is one where it is particularly difficult for women to re-establish themselves after a break, and lack of flexibility may deprive the sector of some of its best talent. The public sector research organisation is leading in this regard, as they had managed to create a culture where senior women could have several children and still maintain their career progression almost to board level. Women may need additional development if they have had long breaks, but that should not mean that they are lacking commitment and potential. Women who work flexibly often want to progress, recognising it may take longer to get there if they work flexibly. Their ambition is a resource.

They are confident that they can get further with support, but they need help to develop their full potential. Managers' attitudes need to change at line management level. The public sector science research organisation in particular was praised by women for good practice on flexible working and progress of women returners, and the IT company, Xansa, was also commended for its flexible working policies and flexible reward packages.

A learning organisation on diversity

Many SET organisations are recognising that more needs to be done to encourage and support the progress of women to the boardroom, but do not know clearly how to proceed. We recommend that they share experiences and learn from others.

Acknowledging that progress is not being made is difficult, but sharing experiences and learning from others can be very helpful. Atkins wanted to get the diversity strategy right for sustained change. Its HR directors and managers are networking with top companies to ascertain best diversity practice from those with the highest reputation for success.

Conclusions

This Guide has provided some background to the difficulties for women in the SET boardroom. Drawing on the experiences of SET board chairs, chief executives, directors and senior women, it has suggested some practices that can help address those issues. In particular, attention needs to be given to the following:

1. In the boardroom

- The chairing of board meetings with courtesy, consideration and control, so that business can be conducted in a courteous atmosphere that allows everyone to make their contribution.
- Attention to the way that new members are treated in the boardroom at the start of their directorships. This should include team building exercises for the whole new team.
- The extension of tailored induction programmes to executive as well as non-executive directors, including executives who are promoted internally to the board.
- The considerate treatment of those coming into the boardroom to make presentations.
- Ensuring that boardrooms are not closed to senior staff, including women.

2. Access to the board – opening the door

- Inclusive and structured succession planning so that board members and candidates have had opportunities to get to know each other.
- Create opportunities for board interactions with women as well as men.

3. Development of directors

- Development (focusing, stretching, challenging, scaffolding, mentoring, role modelling) of those in the talent pool for senior executive positions.

4. Workplace culture and practice

- The importance of leadership from the chief executive in developing senior talent of both men and women, as indicated in the UKRC CEO Charter.
- Flexible working arrangements to be accessible for senior staff.

We hope that these practices will be helpful for the integration and development of female board members, but also of new male directors, particularly those who do not fit the usual mould. We think they will be helpful in breaking down barriers for women, who often see the boardroom as competitive and political when they have had little contact with its members.

Whilst boardroom practice inevitably comes under strain in times of turbulence, if the norm is a better culture, then it will be easier to regain the composed, less aggressive and more productive culture as things settle down. These case study organisations are making progress. Hopefully these practices will allow for better integration of women into SET decision-making bodies, and a better and more effective boardroom culture based on inclusion, consideration and respect.

We thank the chairs and chief executives of these organisations who have allowed access for the research team, and given their time and their thoughts on what could be done better. We also thank the directors who have so openly discussed their experiences of joining and being on boards, and the senior women who have revealed their aspirations and experiences as women in these male dominated cultures. One senior female said: "It's now a much more supportive culture, an organisation you want to be part of." We hope that more SET organisations will be places where women want to be, and that some of these talented women will make it to the boards of these and other organisations.



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About the UK Resource Centre for Women in Science, Engineering and Technology

Established in 2004 to support the Government's ten-year strategy for Science and Innovation, the UKRC works to improve the participation and position of women in SET across industry, academia and public services in the UK. Funded by the DIUS, it provides advice and consultancy on gender equality to employers in industry and academia, professional institutes, education and Research Councils. The UKRC also helps women entering into and progressing within SET careers, through advice and support at all career stages, training, mentoring and networking opportunities.

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About the Cranfield International Centre for Women Leaders

We are committed to helping organisations to develop the next generation of leaders from the widest possible pool of talent. We are unique in focusing our research, management development and writing on gender diversity at leadership level. Our Female FTSE work started in 1999 is endorsed at the highest level of government. Our award-winning 'Women as Leaders' course has run for many years. Research projects within the Centre fall into a number of themes which have been developed in collaboration with industrial and public sector partners:

- Women Directors/Leaders and Corporate Governance
- Role models
- Women and organisational politics
- Managing diversity
- Career management, including impression management
- Flexible working and work life balance
- Gendered cultures
- Women and management education
- Ethnicity in the boardroom
- Women's corporate networks
- The Benefits of Informal Mentoring

Through research, consultancy and management development activities, the Cranfield International Centre for Women Leaders is committed to helping organisations and women managers world-wide to take positive steps towards redressing the current gender imbalance at senior executive levels. The Centre's director is Professor Susan Vinnicombe OBE, and Dr Val Singh is deputy director. Visiting Fellow Dr Dale Nelson has been the other researcher on this Boardroom Cultures project. The Centre has two other visiting fellows, eight current doctoral students, and six recently completed doctorates as well as a number of masters students also undertaking research projects.

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