



## **GENDER AND BOARDROOM CULTURES IN SCIENCE, ENGINEERING AND TECHNOLOGY:**

### **SUMMARY OF FINAL REPORT**

A Study commissioned by the UK Resource Centre for Women in Science,  
Engineering and Technology

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## **1. INTRODUCTION**

The aim of this study was to identify the nature of boardroom cultures in science, engineering and technology (SET) to find out if the cultures were gendered (i.e. are there ways in which different individuals may be marginalised and/or disadvantaged by their sex), and to explore the impact of gendered SET boardroom cultures on women. Many organisations were invited to take part in the project, as case studies, only five agreed. 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 in the SET sector. They are to be commended for their openness on this sensitive issue.

## **2. GENDERED CULTURES**

Boards are social groups that over time construct a culture that drives their behaviour and brings members together through shared learning and understanding. Directors share habits and language, and use rituals and symbols to reinforce meaning. The group has formal structures, processes 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.

Interacting with the SET boardroom culture is an unwritten code of gender relations. Science, engineering and technology are traditionally associated with the masculine, emanating from a history that excluded women, including traditional all-male boards. The interactions at work are often gendered. For example, the demographics mean that women encountered by men are often initially presumed to be in support roles, men frequently test women (especially in engineering) informally before acceptance, and people tend to promote those who resemble themselves. Women are different to the white male norm in the senior ranks of the SET organisation, and they have few female role models, so their work identity development can be challenging.

### **3 METHODOLOGY**

We gained access to five science, engineering and technology organisations that agreed to be case studies. We undertook 59 semi-structured one-hour interviews with their chairs, chief executives, male and female non-executive directors, executive directors, divisional directors and some of the most senior women. Half of the interviews were with senior women, some of whom sat on divisional or other boards. We held a focus group for 20 participants in London, and we also undertook a survey of senior women.

### **4 THE CORPORATE BOARDROOM CULTURE**

The corporate board's legal responsibilities create a framework that sets the agenda, resulting in a fairly formal culture that focuses on governance and finance. The culture is managed by the chair who sets the tone for the conduct of the business of the board, including meetings and new appointments. Three chairs were interviewed, reporting that they had learnt from their earlier experience as executive and non-executive directors that corporate boards function best when meetings are conducted in a somewhat formal style, where members are respectful of each other, and where consideration is given to those coming into the boardroom to make presentations on particular issues. There is an old-fashioned kind of courtesy coupled with a soft glove to ensure that any aggression is tempered, and that all members get a chance to speak their mind.

All the boards were reported by their members to be open and challenging, reflecting their purpose to provide checks and balances of the executive on behalf of the shareholders.

*"It's a respectful environment and there's nothing inherent in that that would be problematic in any way for a senior woman to operate in or be effective in. They tend to be focused on strategic and business performance issues, quite hard tangible issues. They focus much less on some of the soft cultural aspects of the organisation. They tend to think about predominantly a shareholder perspective rather than taking an employee perspective. Not that the organisation in any way is negative. It's just their natural orientation and thinking that takes them in one direction rather than perhaps another."*

The boards were reportedly "well-informed, serious, and respectful, with creditable and honourable members". The need for "creditable" directors highlights an issue for women

candidates who may not have given enough attention to ensuring that they are not just excellent at what they do but are also publicly seen as creditable. The credit attracts respect from other board members who respond in meetings by taking them seriously. The word "honourable" is also interesting, as it is a term usually used to describe men. This rather old-fashioned term fits with comments made by some senior women that the board members, especially the older ones, were sometimes patriarchal. Boards were also described as collegial, a team made up of "independently minded players", but "you don't want them to be too consensual". Comments were made about the need to have wide ranging and probing debates but to present a unified front outside the boardroom.

Three of the corporate boards had female directors, and the fourth has now appointed a female NED. One had two female NEDs and a female company secretary, and one had a female finance director, one had a female NED and the other was all male. The all-male board members reported that they were not normally aware that the group was masculine in its style, as that was the way it had always been. Their board's culture was frequently described by various members as rational and analytical and 'left brain', as was the organisational culture. However, the board recognised that they needed to be more open to diversity, and were making efforts to attract female as well as male candidates for board appointments.

The IT company founded by a woman, which over the years had had a female CEO and a female chair, now has only one female NED on its board. Many comments were made by senior women regretting that change of culture as the women directors retired. Over time female directors had been replaced by men.

Some women directors did report sometimes feeling excluded in social interactions, unless they were interested in male sports. However women said they tried to find other areas of common interest, such as the theatre, and to comment on the sport when they knew something about it. One board went shooting together, which the female director did not want to do so she organised a falconry activity instead. Male directors reported that often the social talk was still work-related, about important strategic issues, what is coming up in the news, particularly the *Financial Times*, then catching up on holidays etc. One experienced female director commented:

*"I've never felt excluded from a conversation because of the nature of what was being discussed."*

One female director on a board with two women commented that the boardroom atmosphere is informal and non-adversarial so that women shouldn't feel intimidated there. However, a main board director felt that some executive dinners might be difficult when there was only one woman.

*"There is a sort of tendency as the wine flows for this to become a bit like a sort of boys' club still."*

In one company, where there were two female NEDs and a female company secretary, a male director felt that the evening behaviour would not be a problem.

*“On our main board it’s obviously changed already because we don’t have that risk. We’ve got women in the room. Right, so you’re not going to get sort of the ‘boysie’ behaviour ... everyone getting drunk over there, endless glasses of wine at the bar, talking about sport or motor racing or whatever it may be. That doesn’t really happen very much.”*

The boardrooms varied from grand rooms in old manor houses to the most modern glass walled offices. Directors were not so keen on the very long tables, and there were conflicting views as to the best place for the chair of the board to sit. Sitting at the short end, it is possible to see everyone, but there is a controlling atmosphere and a feeling of hierarchy, whereas if the chair sits in the middle, they are closer to most members but exclude a few. One of the boardrooms in the case studies had an oval table, or “rugby ball shaped”, said jokingly to reflect the sporty interests of the chief executive. Several directors mentioned not wanting to sit directly opposite the chair or CEO at first, and a female director commented on the difficulties of making herself heard in a large modern boardroom. Directors talked about experience on other boards where the executives lined up on one side and the NEDs on the other, which they did not like as it could be confrontational. One director confided that on one such board, the two sides mixed themselves up on one occasion just to stir things up, and he reported experience of boards where named places were used, so that people always had to sit in the same seat, indicating inflexibility in the style.

## **5 THE EXECUTIVE BOARDROOM CULTURE**

Directors reported that the executive boardroom culture was similar in some ways to the corporate board, particularly in the openness of debate, but the slightly formal, polite atmosphere was definitely not present. The executive boards were seen as open and challenging, a place where tempers could rise, but where debate could be held inside in a robust way as long as consensus was reached. Some boards were reported by members and senior women to be young in style, energetic, fresh and innovative, led by visionary chief executives. Women felt that younger directors who had professional partners and families would understand the women’s perspective. As well as the rationality associated with the SET culture, some directors recognised the need for a more emotionally intelligent style as their businesses changed.

Two of the executive boards were relatively newly formed. A director commented that there was “a sense of pulling together, starting to be a team, not competing against each other for the CEOs attention”. An executive board director coming from the consumer industry was surprised to find that people were pulling together so well rather than pushing for themselves.

*“It’s very friendly, not much positioning, and a high degree of just authenticity. Your look, your impact, your impression is very important in a consumer company – I found it quite refreshing coming in around the top table here, you’ve got very bright people but that whole sort of personal impact piece wasn’t as prevalent as I have been used to. It was a bit more down to earth.”*

A male executive on the National Grid board told of the pride that he encountered in the technical heritage of the company. A non-technical person, he found that people wanted to talk to him about the technology.

*“People steeped in what they do, very bright, very good engineers, very proud of their technical heritage, would talk to you for ages about turbines and things – quite new to me.”*

The public sector board was comprised only of male executive directors, who described their culture as collegial and very lively, as well as territorial. The board had a culture where few outsiders were invited into the boardroom, so there were few external reference points.

*“It became collegial. It certainly wasn’t to start with, it was barons, you know holding onto our bit. Yes, when it came to the allocations, we fought like anything. Of course, being largely academic, it’s very lively and that is actually off-putting for people who are quiet in disposition. I mean it would not have been easy to have been in there if you were a very quiet person.”*

*“I think that it is true that the Board sits in isolation and, and doesn’t tend to invite the expert or the person with the problem to come along and present.”*

## 6 THE DIVISIONAL BOARDROOM CULTURE

Divisional boards have a culture reflecting the operational nature of their work, and some main board directors felt that it is more difficult for women to be comfortable in this more macho environment. Several managing directors of divisions reported that they took the lead from their chief executives on how to run their boards, drawing on them as role models. They were aware of how nervous they had felt earlier in their career when presenting to the board for the first time, and when they were appointed to the senior board, and they tried to facilitate the situation for newcomers and presenters on their own boards. Some mentored several women. In turn, senior women reported drawing on these managing directors as role models for managing their own teams.

## 7 JOINING THE BOARD

Joining the board is an important experience of the culture, and both men and women reported feeling nervous, apprehensive about the new role and responsibilities, and the way to behave.

*“I certainly remember the first time I came onto a board at that level, and yes, I was very much in short trousers at the time. (Laughter) That is what it felt like.” .... “We just felt like the youngsters, not just the new boys.”(male director)*

*“If you’re a new boy onto the board, well, you observe others, and you’re a little bit careful and reserved about what you say. You only say things that you think are adding value.” (male director)*

Stepping up into this elite group can be uncomfortable in that the new director now has to challenge the ‘great and the good’ who previously were “up there”, but now are colleagues. This can be difficult in cultures where the cut and thrust of the debate is enjoyed by members who understand the politics and the posturing that goes on in the boardroom. Indeed in one organisation, the executive directors reported that they did have very challenging and critical

discussions, but they did not expect people to take criticism personally. The size of the board also has an impact on how it is initially experienced.

*“That was slightly more stressful because it was large. It was thirteen, fourteen people. There were a lot of directors. You’re also not up to speed on the jargon because in any working environment, there are three letter and four letter acronyms and jargon and so forth flying around and it takes a few months just to get up to speed and so, to some extent, you’re keeping quiet some of the time because you don’t understand.”*

*“Anyone joining the board would feel intimidated just as I did when I joined the board, because you don’t know where you stand, you don’t know how it’s all going to work, you don’t know if there is a pecking order.” (male director)*

*“The old boys were very experienced and ready to challenge the leader in a comfortable way. They knew how to get what they wanted from a board meeting, whereas for me it was all a new experience.” (male director)*

However, for women without role models and mentors, it is all too easy to make the wrong impression, as one female divisional director reported on her very first board meeting years ago.

*“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’s 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, and I have always got as much paper as anybody else, and I am making sure that I have got my territory.”*

Being connected to the leader of the board, whether the corporate or a divisional board, seems to lead to a comfort factor for new directors, but that seems to happen more readily for men who are more inclined to network upwards. This is why it is so helpful for women in the talent pool to get to know board members in the preparation period for directorships.

*“Because I knew him and had worked with him in the previous board, I was probably more comfortable with him than everybody else was, so it felt like we were all a bit feeling our way, except that I was on the inside.” (male director)*

*“Networking helps ease the experience of going into boardroom – it’s hard work, and doesn’t always come intuitively but it certainly is a good foundation stone in supporting you.” (female director)*

Most of the male directors reported settling down comfortably very soon, whereas the female directors took much longer to settle into the new role.

## **8 SENIOR WOMEN’S EXPERIENCES AND ASPIRATIONS**

### **8.1 Women’s Experiences as Directors**

A female executive director reported her early experience on the executive board. She knew the board members, but found the step up to the new culture quite a challenge at first, as indicated below. She also found that male peers became embarrassed when they swore unexpectedly, apologising profusely, uncertain as to how she would react. Of course she had heard it all before in her industry.

*"I felt, and again, this isn't a gender-specific, this is an introvert/extrovert thing, that the way the meetings were conducted was a lot of opening their mouths and belly-rumbling. And it's taken a while to understand that that's just an extrovert's way of thinking things through. I have a different way, and it's not better or worse. But that did feel quite, I think it probably took me a good 18 months to settle down in that role."*

One female NED had some advice drawing on her own experience of getting a non-executive directorship before seeking a position on the main board.

*"I think one of the ways, and this does apply to men as well but actually it's probably more useful for women, is when they reach a point in their personal careers ...they actually should try and get some non-executive experience, which is less onerous, particularly if they start off doing it in smaller, less high-profile companies, because it doesn't really matter, as long as they get their feet under the table ... And then they understand, it's less frightening and they sort of see that actually they're not all gorillas and that they can cope with it, and then they can move out to bigger things"*

Women interviewees who did not sit on the board but had director titles felt that promotion to director was a big step.

*"I did then feel you've got several thousand people looking at you with this director title, albeit the title's not quite real, and I did feel this stepping up. I can't come in the morning and get in the lift and look at my shoes as I might like. I have to look up and around, and see faces and smile and say good morning and play the part. When I stand in a coffee queue, I ought to talk to whoever is next to me although I don't know them – they probably recognise me and I don't want to be seen as miserable and grumpy."*

Another woman director said that she was really inspired by her chief executive, who put her onto the Developing Leaders programme. She felt very privileged to be selected, and got to know the other directors quite well. She comments that moving up to the director position was "quite scary", and she was offered a coach to guide her through the transition, again reflecting the careful development of talented women. She enjoys being part of the central team and having contact with the chief executive and other directors.

*"Actually being part of that decision-making body and having your feet at that table is tremendously fulfilling".*

## **8.2 Senior Women's Views of Board Culture**

There were very mixed views from the senior women about the board culture, even within the same organisation. Several corporate boards were seen as quite formal in interaction with those coming in to make presentations, with structured meetings that were very business focused. Some senior women said they did not know enough about the corporate board to comment on its culture. The senior women recognised that the chair set the tone, "running a very disciplined board, a very positive kind of meeting".

In one company, although all the interviewees described the board as formal, one senior female saw the chair and chief executive in a very different light when they visited the call centre for which she was responsible. She commented that both the chair and the chief executive had managed to retain their common touch, and straightaway sat down at the desk and started chatting to the call agents in a very natural way. "That was fantastic!" However, some of the other directors were still quite formal on the visit.

More comments were made about the executive boards, as there was more interaction between those members and the senior women. Comments about two of the executive boards were very positive.

*“Absolutely fantastic. They are very, very dynamic, very, very blue sky thinking people, they’re quite a young group. We’ve got a group of six or seven people, of which the bulk of them are new people appointed to that board within the last two years, three years. A completely different approach to Atkins than anything previous which had been very much more the traditional biggest engineering company in the world; grey suits, ties and very, very traditional.” (Senior female)*

*“Now a much more supportive culture, an organization you want to be part of. It seems more exciting, creative, slightly more willing to take risks, and wanting to be out there.” (senior female)*

However, senior women also commented on one board being too remote and too much of an “old boys’ club”, whilst another was described as “too macho”. Several senior women in the organisation whose board was perceived as remote and elitist felt that not enough attention was given to the transformational kind of leadership that the women themselves chose to enact.

*“The biggest problem at the moment is that we have no idea about the Executive Board. They are very distant, they’re not communicating, you don’t know how decisions are made, who’s making what decisions, these kinds of things. And, I think that for example for me it was also a thing that it’s very male - the little club up there.” (Senior female)*

*“I wouldn’t hesitate to say that the board and the exec board has gone too far now ... you know, they rut. It’s a macho thing isn’t it, whereas I think women just get the job done and there’s no need to say who’s more powerful, all of those things.” (Senior female)*

*“I don’t see a lot of transformational leadership in the men and I see it more in the women ... Yes, bring them all along, look after their welfare and give a bit of TLC and, also, give constructive feedback; give the negative feedback in a constructive way, in a positive way that encourages. I see the women doing that much more than the men.” (Senior female)*

One very senior female commented on the culture of the subsidiary board of which she was a member. She was very positive about her experience.

*“It feels like a team and I have worked for many other companies and this is the company with the least politics that I have ever worked in. There are politics of course. I think they’re very driven. They’re very success oriented, which is great. They are, I think, more willing than I’ve seen other groups of people to actually share that success, whether that’s through praise or through remuneration, so I see that happening more in this organisation. That might be a feature of the size to be fair because some of the other organisations I’ve worked in are much bigger and quite often you wouldn’t get as much access to the Board as somebody like I do in this organisation, so that’s helpful ... I personally haven’t felt it at all [to be gendered]. It’s not restricted anything that I’ve wanted to do personally.” (Senior female)*

### **8.3 Women’s Experiences of Presenting to the Board**

Interacting with the board can be daunting, especially early in one’s career, and two female directors described their experience.

*“First time I felt a mixture of excitement, incredibly nervous that I hadn’t prepared the right sort of thing. The self doubt creeps in, doesn’t it, and then I guess just really pleased and delighted that I’d actually got the opportunity to do it, because it’s a big thing your first time. So a whole mixture of things but overall very positive. Felt excited because I was relatively junior, not often that people at that level really did have access to the boardroom. Previously, those who did the work would sit in whilst their senior manager presented. But this company board likes to hear from the people who understand the intricacies.”*

*“I really had to pick and choose very carefully to try and get my point in. And that for me was quite difficult, because a lot of them were men talking over each other.”*

In the scientific organisation, few women had any experience of presenting to the board. One senior female said she felt devastated afterwards.

*"I absolutely hated it ... I mean, it was fairly formal but, generally speaking, they're a nice bunch of guys. I don't have a problem with them individually. I hate it because they're a group that works together regularly and you feel sort of going into a situation which you're not familiar with. You're not entirely sure of the protocol ... you have to be very good here. There really isn't any room for people with weak argument. They love argument because that's what they do. [I would fear that] I wouldn't be able to put my points across lucidly enough."*

This experience might have been avoided with preparation from her boss and debriefing afterwards, but in the "we'll throw you in at the deep end and you will swim" culture, that did not happen, and this senior woman's experience contributes to the aura about the board being aggressive, which can alienate women's sense of belonging. Since then, Professor John Wood, the CCLRC chief executive had instigated a mentoring scheme and other support for women that have been much appreciated.

#### **8.4 Senior Women's Aspirations**

Quite a number of senior women wanted eventually to get board appointments. Some were proactively seeking promotion in the near future by building up their portfolios, getting senior mentors and taking senior roles in their professional communities. A few women indicated that they would like to have non-executive positions in the longer term. Some were nonetheless cautious about being ready. Like so many women in the study, one non-board director said that she will only seek further advancement when she feels totally comfortable that she can enact the role, but commented that *"guys will say, yes I am going to be the next CEO"*. Nonetheless she wants a directorship eventually, although she dislikes the politics that may go with it.

Several of the women scientists wanted to progress to board level after their parenting responsibilities had reduced.

*"Yes, I would say that for many years while my children were very small, I wouldn't say I'd actually hibernated, but career development was not my main priority, my main priority was just getting the job done... and being shattered was the normal state of affairs. But, as they get older well you start to look around again and see what's going on."*

*"Yes ... I do ... Every time I've gone up a level, it takes a year or two just to kind of adjust and then you see the next level up close too and realise what those people are doing, and gradually you begin to think, "Actually, I could do that." ... I think it's also partly the stage in my life that the [children] don't really need much care ... So I'm thinking actually, yeah, if I went for something that did need more travel and longer hours, I could now do that."*

#### **8.5 Impact of Presence of Women Directors on other Women**

We undertook a survey of 219 senior and middle level women in the SET case study organisations. When there are women directors on the board:

- 66% of women feel very optimistic about their careers
- 69% feel more optimistic if women executives are on top team
- 80% strongly support the view that senior female role models make them feel optimistic

- 70% strongly agree that a lack of women at the top who have combined family and career indicates that it is difficult to do this in their company/organisation

A few women interviewees said they wanted to be the first female executive director, and one said that if there were no female directors, it would only spur her on towards that ambition.

*"The only effect it has on me is to make me want to do it more ... When I went for [a job] recently, the reason I wanted it most of all was because I wanted to be the first woman on the board. That would have given me such a buzz ... It's a driving force, not the opposite."*

Another woman said that having women on the board as female role models did not matter, because she just thought of herself as one of the men.

*"No, I don't actually ... Maybe it is because I was the sole woman and, actually, when I was looking around all I saw was men. So, actually, if you don't see yourself you begin to actually think that you're one of them."*

Other senior women were considerably less optimistic.

*"I actually wonder sometimes whether this is the end of the road for me... I do wonder that. But, I'm not going to be... I'm not going to stop trying, because every other occasion where I've tried I've eventually succeeded."*

*"Well, you basically know that your career potential is limited, it's very difficult to get any higher."*

*"No women on board? Well, I think actually it shows that it's going to be a long time in coming, it won't happen in my career time here."*

As we were interviewing, a female director was appointed to the corporate board of one company. Senior women found that very inspiring.

*"She joined us last week. So that is a huge milestone. ... I think it's needed actually because I do think you need that dynamic. I think women do bring something different to the workplace because they operate in a very different way."*

## 9 PROMOTING GENDER DIVERSITY

There was a general view amongst women interviewees that the championing of gender diversity was best done by the chief executive to start with, and then passed over to a very senior male director, so that the signal that gender diversity in leadership matters was maintained. Should female directors fulfil the other women's expectations that they will champion the women's 'cause'?

*"I think they should, but it needs to be subtle, otherwise it's seen as very negative, Oh here she comes with her blooming drama. So you can be the conscience, without pushing too hard." (female director)*

*"In some ways you actually shy away from that because there is danger." (senior female)*

Whilst some women were keen on women's networks, other women warned against them.

However, the latter women did stand up as speakers for the women's networks when asked.

*"I don't think it's helpful to have women's groups per se because I think it just stands you apart and I just feel it's like putting a blue flashing light on your head saying "I'm a woman, I need special support". So that's my personal view, but I recognise there are a lot of people who perhaps don't have the strength and vision." (Female director)*

All the female interviewees were against preferential treatment for women, but many of them felt that there was an uneven playing field. Male directors from one organisation stressed the importance of always appointing the best person for the job, and were concerned that

diversity should not be put above meritocracy. Senior women scientists felt that technical expertise was valued above management skills even at senior levels.

*"I think, they lead through being recognised experts in their field. Their leadership is based on, again, their track record as scientists or engineers. They recruit in their own image, so they're always looking to recruit someone who has a very good academic pedigree, incredibly well developed arguing sort of ability and high intellect; and that's what they recruit." (Senior female)*

One senior female felt very strongly that, whilst the company was making efforts to attract more women, more could be done to support the few women who had already chosen technical careers in her company.

*"People say Oh there are no women engineers. Well, I know plenty of women engineers, and they've all had to move onto something different. It's because it was just getting too hard and too frustrating, banging your head against that glass ceiling and seeing other people sailing through it, who from a meritocracy point of view, pale to insignificance compared with your own track record."*

## 10 IDENTIFICATION OF GOOD PRACTICE

(See the UKRC Good Practice Guide, Transforming Boardroom Cultures: A Good Practice Guide to Inclusive Boardrooms)

### 10.1 Best practice in the boardroom

- Chair of the board to ensure a culture which is courteous as well as challenging.
- Consideration for newcomers and for those coming in to make presentations to the board.
- Coaching by those chairing boards of newcomers before and after first board meetings.
- Induction for executives promoted to the board as well as personally tailored induction for NEDs.
- Team-building exercises repeated soon after new members join, to create inclusive new team.

### 10.2 Best Practice outside the Boardroom

- Structured succession planning by the chair of the corporate board and chief executive with help of company secretary to ensure that top tier of management are invited to meet/present/socialise with main board directors so that talent is exposed and choices made based on longer term knowledge of candidates.
- Creating of opportunities for women as well as men to meet the board members in formal and informal settings. This can be achieved by:
  - inviting board presentations by women heading functions or special initiatives. Such opportunities can be enhanced if their line manager prepares them and gives feedback afterwards.
  - inviting women (and male peers) to small table dinners with board members, to facilitate deeper conversation without the need to raise voices across a large table.
  - inviting board members to meet informally with the women in the leadership tier.

## SET Boardroom Cultures Summary Report (Singh, 2007)

- encouraging informal mentoring by directors for talented women to gain a wider perspective.
- inviting all board members to the annual leadership conference and senior women's conference if there is one.
- Valuing diverse styles and approaches so that benefits of diversity are not lost.
- Development of potential directors by stretching assignments and "scaffolding" support that is gradually withdrawn.

### **10.3 Workplace Culture and Practice**

- Championing of diversity from the chief executive downwards.
- Accepting that senior people also need flexibility.
- Ensuring that women returning from maternity leave are not treated as if their career progression is over.

## APPENDIX I: Boardroom Culture Case Studies

### CASE STUDY 1: THE W S ATKINS BOARDROOM CULTURE

The Atkins boardroom culture was described by its members as open and challenging, well-informed and respectful, with serious, credible and honourable members. Directors reported that the board was intelligently

chaired by Ed Wallis. Male directors felt that women would not find it difficult to make a contribution there, but some senior

*"Diversity has never figured in my time, very largely because there is no perception that it is so male dominated. Well, male dominated is the wrong term, it is statistically male." (Male NED, W.S. Atkins)*

females forecast that women would not enter the boardroom in their career lifetime. However the company recently appointed women to both corporate and executive boards. Senior women commented that board members were somewhat remote, political and sometimes patriarchal in their attitudes to women, "a bit of an old boys club". Whilst all male boards were seen by many directors as a limitation in terms of perspective and decision-making, they explained that the board composition was a result of what they described as the "left brain" culture, and the normality of maleness. Another director said that they were not even aware that they were appointing in their own image.

*"There is a great act of willingness to create some great female engineers who can go all the way straight to the board." (Male Director, W S Atkins)*

The executive board was seen by its members and by senior women as open and challenging,

with often hot-headed debate, a younger and informal style, a board still in its formative period. Women commented that the style had lightened up recently, and that more feminine values were coming into play. Attitudes towards women in the company were becoming more positive but there was much more to do. The energetic, friendly and visionary chief executive, Keith Clarke was seen to be the key to the positive changes, alongside the influential HR director Alun Griffiths, and divisional managing directors were emulating this more modern style. However, senior women felt that the company was insufficiently flexible about women returners who wanted to resume ambitious career paths, and hence lost or did not develop a lot of its talent.

## CASE STUDY 2: THE NATIONAL GRID BOARDROOM CULTURE

The corporate board, led by its very experienced chair, Sir John Parker, was not just open and challenging, according to other directors, but also reportedly “courteous” and considerate

*“The board sets the drum beat for the organisation in terms of delegation, empowerment of directors. You hold them accountable but you give them responsibility, you give them authority, and you define that authority and responsibility down the line and you expect them to follow through. If it’s a well balanced board, it will really help reinforce the values into the organisation.” (Sir John Parker, Chair, National Grid)*

in its conduct, despite being rigorous and robust in its style. Directors commented that the chair did not allow any impoliteness in the boardroom; it was disciplined, and debate on difficult decisions was carefully managed by the chair and chief executive to allow for consultation and achieve consensus.

The new chief executive, Steve Holliday, brought enormous inspiration, energy and passion to the company, according to both men and women interviewees. The executive board culture was still forming, but reportedly had a dynamic positive energy, a willingness to take risks and

*An important aspect of the culture of this company’s board is that it is connected to the executive and senior management. The chief executive said: “We take the board out of the ivory tower”. (Steve Holliday, CEO, National Grid)*

a young informal style that was striving to be emotionally intelligent as well as performing well. The chair and chief executive had set up tailored induction courses for non-executive and executive directors

that were praised by a number of interviewees. They also had a rigorous succession planning system that connected board members to the developing talent pool of men and women. These two key figures had very different and complementary working styles, and both were personally engaged in actively shaping the board and executive board culture.

National Grid has two women on the corporate board, as well as a female company secretary, but no females on the executive board. From women non-board directors, there was a sense that women were progressing, they were being recognised publicly as role models and they were involved in leadership. A very high proportion (75%) of women surveyed felt that their top women engaged frequently with women lower down. The big issue according to the women was how to get the generalist experience that led to executive board positions. But women also wanted more flexibility and better career support for women returners.

## CASE STUDY 3: THE CAIRN ENERGY BOARDROOM CULTURE

This oil & gas exploration company had a female finance director who sat on the corporate board and the executive board. The chief executive, Sir Bill Gammell, was the founder of the firm, and he played a strong role in setting the culture of the whole organisation based in Edinburgh but operating in South Asia.

*"Nothing mysterious about the board, it is a very collegiate and consensus-driven style, with a lot of the business done at the pre-board dinner, which is an opportunity to air and discuss things without minute takers." (Female Executive Director, Cairn Energy)*

The boardroom culture was said to be collegiate and informal, "not a bunch of shrinking violets", as the chair Norman Murray commented, "not a set of clones". There were reported to be few

confrontations, and not much politicking. There is a strong emphasis on finance and risk. The board frequently invited senior executives into boardroom discussions and strategic reviews, so there was no mystery about what went on. The female finance director commented that she felt quite comfortable on her promotion as she knew all the directors well and had been involved in so many board meetings beforehand. The chair and directors were connected to others across the company, people knew who they were and there was little social distance.

*"The culture is a very open one and a positive one and it encourages contribution from others. With the board, there are lots of people who are not board members who come in, for example, to present on key things and important issues, so they do very much listen to that team beneath them, around them, that are supporting them as well as taking their own decisions." (Female non-board director, Cairn Energy)*

There were women at all levels of management, and it seemed that gender diversity had ceased to be an issue for the senior women. There was a strong

culture driven by the CEO, drawing on his experience in the sporting world, of stretching people when they were young, encouraging them to take risk, and preparing them for more senior positions.

## CASE STUDY 4: THE XANSA BOARDROOM CULTURE

*"It's perhaps a little more outspoken than it was when there were so many women. When almost all the women were founder members of the business, it was more difficult for them to accept that one should do things differently. I don't think gender is the issue really, it was much more that they had worked together, they'd built it up over the years." (Female NED, Xansa)*

In the technology case study firm, Xansa, which had been founded by a woman, and which for many years had a female dominated board, there was now only one female NED on the corporate

board, and one female director on the executive team. As the board membership had changed, and the former female founder partnership style (where the women understood each others' perspectives so well that they needed less discussion) disappeared, directors reported that there was now more openness in discussions. Senior women outside the board felt that there was less of a supportive culture than before, and less visible evidence that women could make it to the top.

The chair, Bill Alexander, had recently become acting chief executive, and both he and the managing director, Steve Weston, were seen as inspiring leaders. The board was reported by directors to be very formal and process oriented, and non-executives did not get involved outside the boardroom. Hence it was perceived by outsiders as not connected to the day to day operation of the firm. However, the chair was trying to create more opportunities for board member interaction, for example having occasional board meetings in India, and encouraging directors to talk to staff at the office, to provide opportunities for conversation, to break down the barriers and allow better communication. He also felt that boards were best run with a courteous culture that was inclusive.

*"I think every Board that I've been on, there is a courtesy within the Board which would make sure that there wasn't any reason why people couldn't speak their minds." (Bill Alexander, Chair, Xansa)*

Senior women felt that the diversity issue now focused on ethnic rather than gender diversity as the company's international base expanded, leaving less support for women's issues. On the positive side, there was good flexibility that benefited everyone, drawing on the IT to make it happen. There were flexible reward packages too, with people able to select options that fitted their family circumstances. There was a new comprehensive leadership assessment programme, and senior executives, male and female, were encouraged by the chair/acting chief executive to find themselves one non-executive directorship in a smaller company to develop their capabilities as directors. The female NED also recommended this to women.

## CASE STUDY 5: THE CCLRC BOARDROOM CULTURE

In this case study, with a public sector “Council” rather than a corporate board, the all male executive board was perceived by women just below board level to be very homogeneous, very competitive and aggressive, with big egos

*“Very clever scientists with very strong characters who have got to be approached very carefully, lots of egos, and the politics is a bit scary.”  
(Senior female, CCLRC)*

fighting for their turf. The male directors generally did not see the culture as aggressive, although previously there had been some territorialism and competition for scarce resources, but the directors did feel that they could be open and highly critical in the boardroom without people taking it personally.

There were very few opportunities for outsiders to come and present their work, so there was a perceived distance and mystery about what went on in the boardroom. Nonetheless, three women had made presentations to the board and one actually enjoyed it. But one reported that they were “a nice bunch of guys” but she didn’t know the protocol, they were all very clever, and there wasn’t any room for people with weak arguments, (“they love arguments”) so she feared that she would not be able to put her points lucidly enough.

*Board culture is “more about showing your intellectual prowess in meetings and the robustness of your argument rather than getting the job done and achieving an outcome.” (Senior female, CCLRC)*

Male directors felt that women were not ambitious enough, and that this was holding them back. Women scientists reported that they really wanted to be part of the decision-making structures, and they were ambitious for promotion to this board despite their perceptions about how difficult that would be. Although they felt that their individual ambitions were not recognised, they reported being well supported by their line managers and generally by other directors. Diversity was considered appropriate by the senior males if it was not in conflict with meritocracy. A recent diversity drive led by the chief executive, Professor John Wood, had opened up the debate, and his efforts as champion for diversity were much appreciated by all the women.

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