

# DO WOMEN REALLY NEED HELP TO PROGRESS?



A practical look at 5 invisible forces  
that shape women in leadership



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The research is clear:

companies with  
more women in  
senior leadership  
roles outperform their  
competition. Period.

For organisations, there is no denying the benefit of a balanced leadership team. But do we really need to intervene to help women progress or is the current business case enough to pull women through without extra support?

This paper takes a practical look at the forces that shape women's leadership journeys, why things haven't changed as much as we think they have and what we need to do differently to support and advance more women to reach the top.



# The case for more women in leadership

One morning, after a meeting, a client pulled me aside and whispered, ‘Do you think the men will feel left out if we run a “Women in Leadership” program without them? And do you think the women will get the wrong message—that they need help?’

We had just been discussing the roll out of a Women in Leadership program. The business case was strong, the

board appetite was high and the HR team was poised and ready ... but there were concerns: How would the culture react to the company’s attempt to do the right thing? Would this be seen as just ‘ticking the box’? Would a ‘women’s only’ program compromise the efforts of fairness and inclusion? Would the women themselves balk at being singled out?



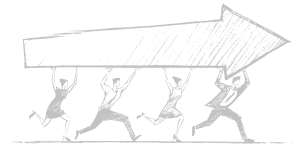
# What does the research say?



## Bring in the dosh

Companies with a larger number of senior women produce better financial performance.<sup>1</sup>

+6%



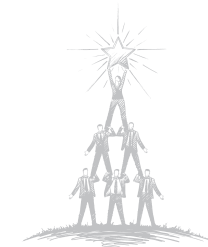
## Improve engagement

11,434 adults surveyed by Gallup showed a 6% higher engagement rate of employees led by females.<sup>2</sup>



## Enhanced culture

Women rate higher in overall leadership effectiveness than their male counterparts, with the greatest gap evident at the highest executive levels.<sup>3</sup>



## Lift the pack

Boards with more women are more ethical,<sup>4</sup> companies with more women on executive committees bring in more revenue,<sup>5</sup> and balancing a team of men with women lifts the collective intelligence of the group.<sup>6</sup>

# What prevents progress for women?

Over the past 10 years, I have supported women as an Executive Coach, a Keynote Speaker at women's conferences and as the lead Facilitator of Women in Leadership programs, all aimed at helping women build visibility, impact, and the confidence to strategically advance their career goals



and the success of their organisations. During that time, one thing became clear—**women need help to progress.**

As frustrating as that is to acknowledge, it's the cold hard truth. It's not because women are broken or lack the skills; nor is it because men are evil and are holding women back. Not at all. Women need help to progress because the issues preventing gender equality at work are subtle and sometimes invisible, yet all too pervasive. They are embedded in the fabric of our corporate lives and

creep into our cultures from a multitude of angles and attitudes, making the status quo hard to shake.

The issue with gender equality in workforces today is primarily the result of what researchers call 'second-generation bias'. It is not overt or malicious but it is why men don't feel they are being biased and why women may not *feel* explicitly or deliberately disadvantaged ... and yet the numbers aren't changing. Why not?



“[‘Second-generation’] bias erects powerful but subtle and often invisible barriers for women that arise from cultural assumptions and organizational structures, practices, and patterns of interaction that inadvertently benefit men while putting women at a disadvantage.”<sup>7</sup>

“Second-generation bias does not require an intent to exclude; nor does it necessarily produce direct, immediate harm to any individual. Rather, it creates a context—akin to “something in the water”—in which women fail to thrive or reach their full potential.”<sup>8</sup>



# 5 invisible forces that hold women back

There are many factors that cause the current absence of women in leadership roles. For the purposes of this discussion, we'll explore five of the invisible and subtle forces that shape women's opportunities and impact their careers.



1

## The system is stuck: Bias, babies and boys' clubs

While individual attitudes are changing, many organisational systems are not. There is still inherent bias in our behaviours and in many of our HR systems like recruitment, promotions, and pay grades.



**217**  
years

The time it will take for disparities in the pay and employment opportunities of men and women to end.<sup>9</sup>



“Women are still underrepresented at every level in the corporate pipeline.”<sup>10</sup>

“...The difference in promotion rates between men and women in this company was due not to their behavior but to how they were treated. Gender inequality is due to bias, not differences in behavior.”<sup>11</sup>

Women with children still face obstacles with childcare, inflexible work hours, and unpaid domestic and primary carer duties. This compromises their ability to put in the 'face time' to get ahead.



**5.5x**  
more housework



"The number of times women with a partner are more likely than their male counterparts to do all or most of the housework. However, women are not advancing, while men are."<sup>12</sup>

**9x**  
more childcare



"Women are at least 9 times more likely to say they do more child care than men."<sup>13</sup>



“Men are perceived as more responsible when they have children, while women are seen as being less committed to work.”<sup>14</sup>

“Motherhood triggers assumptions that women are less competent and less committed to their careers. As a result, they are held to higher standards and presented with fewer opportunities.”<sup>15</sup>



Boys clubs still exist even if they are not all characterised by overt 'locker room' behaviour. This is where decisions are made, deals are done, relationships are forged and jobs are gained. You have the makings of a boys club anytime there is a regular and institutionalised *pattern* of behaviour where men are making decisions and discussing work without women. It can be hard to break the traditions and networks of the past, especially when they feel benign, but unless we are proactively addressing those issues, we are inadvertently enabling them.





“If you aren’t actively including, you are probably accidentally excluding.”  
Heidi Grant, Ph.D

“Compared with men, women report that they are consulted less often on important decisions.”<sup>16</sup>



10% vs 17%



“Only 10 percent of senior-level women report that four or more executives have helped them advance compared to 17 percent of senior-level men.”<sup>17</sup>

“The resulting underrepresentation of women in top positions reinforces entrenched beliefs, prompts and supports men’s bids for leadership, and thus maintains the status quo.”<sup>18</sup>



**2**

**Social backlash and double-binds:  
Women are damned if they do  
and damned if they don't**

Women are told to ‘speak up’, ‘ask for a pay rise’ and ‘be more assertive’ but when they do, they are told they are too bossy, too ambitious and too aggressive (by both men and other women). When women (or any group) act outside of their traditional stereotypes they face a social backlash: a magnified and skewed interpretation of their actions in an unflattering way.

“Studies show that assertive women are more likely to be perceived as aggressive; that women usually don’t ask for what they deserve but when they do, they risk being branded as domineering or, worse even, “ambitious.””<sup>19</sup>

“When women ... leaders advocate for other women ..., it highlights their low-status demographics, activating the stereotype of incompetence, and leads to worse performance ratings.”<sup>20</sup>





For centuries, women have traditionally played the nurturing, caring, and supportive role, helping others get what they want and downplaying their own achievements. Society doesn't like women who brag or who are too confident. We think it's brash and unladylike and definitely not how women should behave to get ahead. And yet when women don't sing their own praises or claim credit for great work they become invisible and overlooked. The social backlash creates a difficult double bind for women—they are damned if they do and damned if they don't.



“Because women as a group have less power than men, they face an additional barrier to using power—women are expected to be communal, caring, and submissive. These societal expectations produce an unfortunate double bind: when women do feel and project power, they are punished.”<sup>21</sup>

“Studies by Rudman show that **both** men and women are less likely to hire assertive, self-promoting women.”<sup>22</sup>

Another common double-bind for women centres on likability and competence. Research has shown that women are seen as either likable or competent but rarely both. If they

are highly competent, they are seen as cold and if they are likable, they are seen as less competent. To be acknowledged as confident leaders, women must be perceived as both competent and likable at the same time.

“People tend to see warmth and competence as inversely related. If there’s an apparent surplus of one trait, they infer a deficit of the other.”<sup>23</sup>

“Numerous studies have shown that women who excel in traditionally male domains are viewed as competent but less likable than their male counterparts. Behaviors that suggest self-confidence or assertiveness in men often appear arrogant or abrasive in women.”<sup>24</sup>

A woman with curly hair is sitting on a black chair in a row of white chairs against a yellow wall. She is looking down at a clipboard she is holding. She is wearing a light blue shirt and a pink skirt. The background is a solid yellow wall. The floor is light grey.

3

## Waiting for permission, perfection and a tap on the shoulder

Society has taught women to be 'good, patient girls'. Women wait for permission, invitations, and encouragement, and miss out on opportunities in the process.

## 60% vs 100%

“Men apply for promotions when they think they can meet 60% of the listed qualifications. Women only apply when they believe they meet 100%.”<sup>25</sup>

They wait until they are good enough, experienced enough, confident enough, or brave enough before throwing their hat in the ring. And they wait too long. Their expectations of perfection keep them from moving themselves forward at the same rate as men.

“Underqualified and underprepared men don’t think twice about leaning in. Overqualified and overprepared, too many women still hold back. Women feel confident only when they are perfect. Or practically perfect.”<sup>26</sup>



Brenda Major, a social psychologist at the University of California at Santa Barbara, has been studying the problem of self-perception for decades. In her work, she refers to one of the most reliable and predictable pieces of research that shows men consistently over-

estimate their **abilities** and subsequent **performance**, and women routinely underestimate both. The actual performances, when tested, do not differ in quality.<sup>27</sup>



“Research shows women routinely underestimate their abilities and subsequent performance, whilst men overestimate both. It is one of the most consistent findings you can have.”<sup>28</sup>

# 4

## Women against women: The enemy within

In some cases, other women can be the enemy. Unfortunately, Queen Bee syndrome is still alive and well. This is where strong, powerful, senior women, kick the career ladder off the wall once they have climbed to the top, to keep other women from following in their footsteps.

While it is not the majority of senior women, it is still too many and coupled with the sense that women don't support other women enough, it remains an unnecessary obstacle.



“Women in positions of power can be punishing toward women below them in their organizations. These queen bees tend to see other women as foes to be thwarted.”<sup>29</sup>

“Women don’t help other women nearly enough at work.”  
PepisCo Chairman and CEO, Indra Nooyi.<sup>30</sup>



#### 4: WOMEN AGAINST WOMEN: THE ENEMY WITHIN

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Added to this internal sabotage from the sisterhood is the desire for women to make it on their own terms. Understandably some women hate quotas, they rail against special treatment and reject help as they want to make it on their own. No-one wants to be the token appointment for any role—male or female. This is completely understandable and yet equally naive if women are not aware of the other invisible forces at play. This is not just about helping women, it's about changing an unfair system.



# 5

## Men don't feel the effects: How power blinds us

If you are an elephant, you don't need to care where the cat is. If you are a cat, you need to care, very much, where the elephant is placing its feet. The elephant has no sense of what it's like to look

out for bigger animals because it's just never needed to. The elephant doesn't understand the privilege it has been afforded by its size, simply because it has never known any different.



Senior men in leadership roles are surrounded by senior men. Senior women in leadership roles are also surrounded by senior men. Because men are in the majority, they have little idea about what it's like to be a minority group in this situation, simply because they rarely experience it in leadership environments. And how could they? In key management roles across the country, men occupy over 70% of the positions.<sup>31</sup> It's not happening to them. This is not necessarily their fault and most likely not their intention. It does, however, explain why men believe that diversity is important yet at the same time don't understand how women are not getting a fair go already. Without access to stories, examples and conversations about what it's like to be a minority inside the dominant group, men are left wondering what all the fuss is about.

“There appears to be a disconnect between men's interest in gender diversity and their understanding of the challenges women face: 70 percent think gender diversity is important, but only 12 percent believe women have fewer opportunities.”<sup>32</sup>



“Women hold 12.9% of chair positions, 24.7% of directorships, as well as represent 16.3% of CEOs and 28.5% of key management personnel in Agency reporting organisations.”<sup>33</sup>

“Over one-quarter (29.9%) of Agency reporting organisations have no key management personnel who are women.”<sup>34</sup>



# Tips for supporting the development of more women



So women *do* need help to progress to the top. Not because they are the ones who need the help, but because the issues of gender equality are woven into the cultural and structural fabric of our organisations. This issue is collectively ours to address together. Men are not the enemy, they are the allies. As are other women and together every professional within an organisation has an important part to play in moving the needle on gender equality.

So what can we do as women, as men and as leaders in organisations to support the development of more women into leadership roles?

## Tips for Women

- ◆ **Opt in.** Don't wait for permission, perfection or an invitation to throw your hat in the ring. Do what it takes to build the courage to move forward without feeling ready. You will be rewarded.
- ◆ **Get and give support.** Attend women in leadership programs, build a support network, get a sponsor who will advocate for you and a mentor who will guide you. Support other women. A rising tide lifts all boats: the more women at the top, the easier it will be for others to get there.
- ◆ **Know your purpose.** Be clear on what you want and know the value of your contribution. Make no apologies for your ambition and go for what you want.





## Tips for Men

- ◆ **Get curious.** Ask questions, cultivate a curiosity for what women might experience at work. Speak to daughters, sisters, mothers and wives and ask about their stories. Question your assumptions and attitudes. This is how we become conscious of the subtle forms of second-generation bias and strengthen our empathy and understanding around impacts and prejudices.
- ◆ **Sponsor women.** Proactively advocate for them. Make sure they are on short lists, on panels and on strategically visible projects. Call on women in meetings and then make sure they are heard without interruption (this goes for all contributors but especially so for women). If you think there are no eligible women to fill leadership roles, dig deeper, they are there. (And PS if you're not already doing equal housework, then this might be a good place to start.)
- ◆ **Ban the boys club.** Don't let work happen without everyone being present. Ask why there are no women in the room and then get some in there. Men are the only ones who can change the system from within without receiving any backlash, so for the sake of the wonderful women in your life, be a 'manbassador' and make things right.



“Men who hold the power to set the norms, behaviours and attitudes prevailing in workplaces are the ones best placed to change them. Because when they talk about changing the system, these men are talking about changing themselves. They are the system.”<sup>35</sup>

“... CEOs and their peers across many business arenas are sharing in a dawning recognition that unless those at the top – mostly men – do something about the gender gap in their workplaces, nothing will change.”<sup>36</sup>



## Tips for Organisations

- ◆ **Close the gap.** Fix the pay gap. Make remuneration scales transparent, and fix any discrepancies. Many companies are doing this already. Be one of them.
- ◆ **Make it fair.** Employ blind CV recruitment practices, mandate equal numbers of men and women on short lists. Rotate secondment roles evenly. Establish clear criteria for success before filling roles and assignments. Make sure men and women are standing on equal starting blocks. This is every people-leaders responsibility, not just senior leaders.
- ◆ **Encourage flexibility.** Ensure flexible work arrangements, extend parental leave for men and women, or even better, provide free childcare for parents at work and watch your engagement and results soar across the board.
- ◆ **Upscale the effort.** Provide 'Women in Leadership' development opportunities to as many women as possible. We don't have time to wait. We need to start new conversations today. We need to see a shift in behaviours right now. A cultural movement (that includes men and women) needs momentum through mass numbers. Start today.



# Better together

“Women will not be able to undo debilitating, ingrained cultural biases on their own. And there’s no reason why they should have to. This isn’t just their problem. This is an economic problem. We need the talent of all our people — to bring that which only they can bring — to solve old problems with new ideas or, to come up with entirely new solutions. This will not happen if we leave a huge swath of talent out of the boardroom — and out of our benefit.”<sup>37</sup>





It is time to make serious progress on this issue. We are armed with data and research and the knowledge and belief that things need to change. The only thing left to do is change.

The conditions that create success for women are outnumbered by the barriers that hold them back. Women do not need fixing, but they

do need help. Women need strategic, systemic support to remove invisible and ingrained obstacles and even the playing field.

We need to work together to fix a societal system that no longer serves us or the success of our organisations. Discussion time is over ... the day for action has arrived.





# Are you ready to support your women in leadership today?

- ◆ Need to fast track your women in leadership and involve the men along the way?
- ◆ Need to take practical action to get the gender agenda moving forward?
- ◆ Want a proven program that creates a culture of progress for women in your workforce?

*“Best course on leadership I’ve done to date. Actual practical tips, which aren’t usually provided.”*



# Women in Leadership

## MAKING VALUE VISIBLE

The Women in Leadership in-house program gives women the confidence, communication strategies and organisational understanding to actively manage their leadership careers.

The program combines the latest in research, evidence based learning strategies, and practical action steps to ensure participants' success. Using a proven, blended learning approach that includes men, women, peers, and senior supporters as part of the mix, the program has gained a reputation for excellence and most importantly for real results.

THE FACILITATOR

**Anneli Blundell**

*Professional People Whisperer*



**Women's response**

**Reputation**

**Opt in to  
leadership roles**

**visible**

**valuable**



**Opt out of  
leadership roles**

**contributing**

**undervalued**

**invisible**

## In the masterclass participants will:

- ◆ Understand the impact of confidence on risk taking, self-promotion, reputation and results
- ◆ Explore personal and positional power and how that impacts courage, visibility and results
- ◆ Learn the communication habits that kill leadership credibility
- ◆ Apply key behaviours to be heard, seen and to make an impact in meetings and presentations
- ◆ Understand organisational and cultural barriers to women's success
- ◆ Explore the double-binds and backlash that make regular advice difficult to enact
- ◆ Develop strategies for support through sponsorship and mentoring
- ◆ Foster new networks with like-minded women

*“It’s about building presence, improving visibility and strategically managing the right professional impact.”*



“The coaching component was essential to the success of the program. It helped embed the learnings we had, and kept us accountable to the action plans that we set.”

## In the overall program the participants receive:

- ◆ **Managers' briefing** – a way to enroll line managers in women's success and start changing the system
- ◆ **Women in leadership masterclass** – hands on, practical session, jam packed with research, activities, stories and networking with other brilliant women to provide a road map for career acceleration
- ◆ **Group coaching sessions** – monthly group coaching sessions of small cohorts, to embed the learnings, stay focused, strengthen peer networks and stay accountable to agreed goals and outcomes
- ◆ **Coaching support call** – an online group coaching session to celebrate wins, support progress and maintain focus 6 weeks after masterclass
- ◆ **Celebration session** – a session where managers and participants come together to mark the completion of the program, share wins, celebrate success, reinforce learnings and commit to maintain focus and actions moving forward
- ◆ **Weekly learning ebites** – a series of weekly newsletters aimed at reinforcing the classroom material, maintaining motivation and momentum and providing further resources, videos, books and articles to support continued learning

## What have participants gained after the program?

From new jobs and higher duties, to new behaviours and greater visibility, our participants have enjoyed a wide range of positive outcomes.

### Some examples include:

- ◆ finally securing a co-directorship role against great organisational resistance with all previous efforts being unsuccessful
- ◆ securing a secondment to a new area where in the past the participant was too scared to express interest and missed out on several occasions
- ◆ successfully presenting to senior executives/boards with positive feedback and invitations to do more, enhancing visibility and strategic input
- ◆ and many promotions have been gained as a direct result of the program, several of which the women admitted they would never have applied for before the program

“The value in an ‘all female’ program, was the camaraderie that you gained in extending your network of other female leaders. It also created a safe environment to be open, honest and vulnerable without feeling like you were being judged.”



## What do participants say after the program?

“After the masterclass, I have been more conscious of how people are interacting and have been more assertive in asking for what I want. I now work from home once a week, (having been unsuccessful asking for this in the past). I have also just won an industry award as MD of the year in my industry and am now considering new job offers!” - A.B.

“I gained much needed confidence to apply for (and get hired for) a new role. I positioned myself in a way that I was never seen as before and applied for a job no-one thought I could do and got it!” - N.S.

“After the program we submitted a business case for a new leadership model and it got completely picked apart but we stood our ground and we won! We needed to break through the organisation’s old paradigm and we did it. We pioneered a new collaborative leadership model despite significant push back from the old guard.” – J.D.

“After the women in leadership masterclass, I realised that even though I don’t have a big team, I am indeed a true leader. By changing my self-perception, I changed the perception of other people around me. I stopped talking myself down. I started asking for what I wanted with clarity and confidence. I now have an active sponsor and am fielding new opportunities at a record rate.” - B.A.

“ This program was very valuable and different from other courses I’ve been on; Everything we covered you could take away and apply. It’s exactly what we need at our organisation at all levels. I enjoyed the pace, the day, the set up, listening to others’ stories, and comparing shared experiences. The formula of the program was not overloaded, so you go away retaining a lot of info. It was also interesting to be in the room with other work peers.” - K.H.


“ I have attended a few workshops before that had quite wishy-washy ideas about how to be perceived, and what made a successful manager. But I felt a lot of these previous things either weren’t relevant to my particular industry or my technical role, and weren’t specific. During Anneli’s workshop, I felt that I learnt some actual tools and behaviours that were relevant to my current role, relevant to my industry, and were things I could apply straight away which would benefit my role and interaction with my peers. I left the day with plans in my head about things that I could start to do at work the very next day. It made me excited about actual proactive changes that I could make. Some of them were small and obvious, but some were things I had never thought of doing and it made me excited about the future direction my career could take if I paid attention to what I needed to do to overcome the barriers. I found the program incredibly useful and insightful.” - E.S.

# Are you ready to move the needle on gender diversity?



**Partner with an experienced operator you can rely on**

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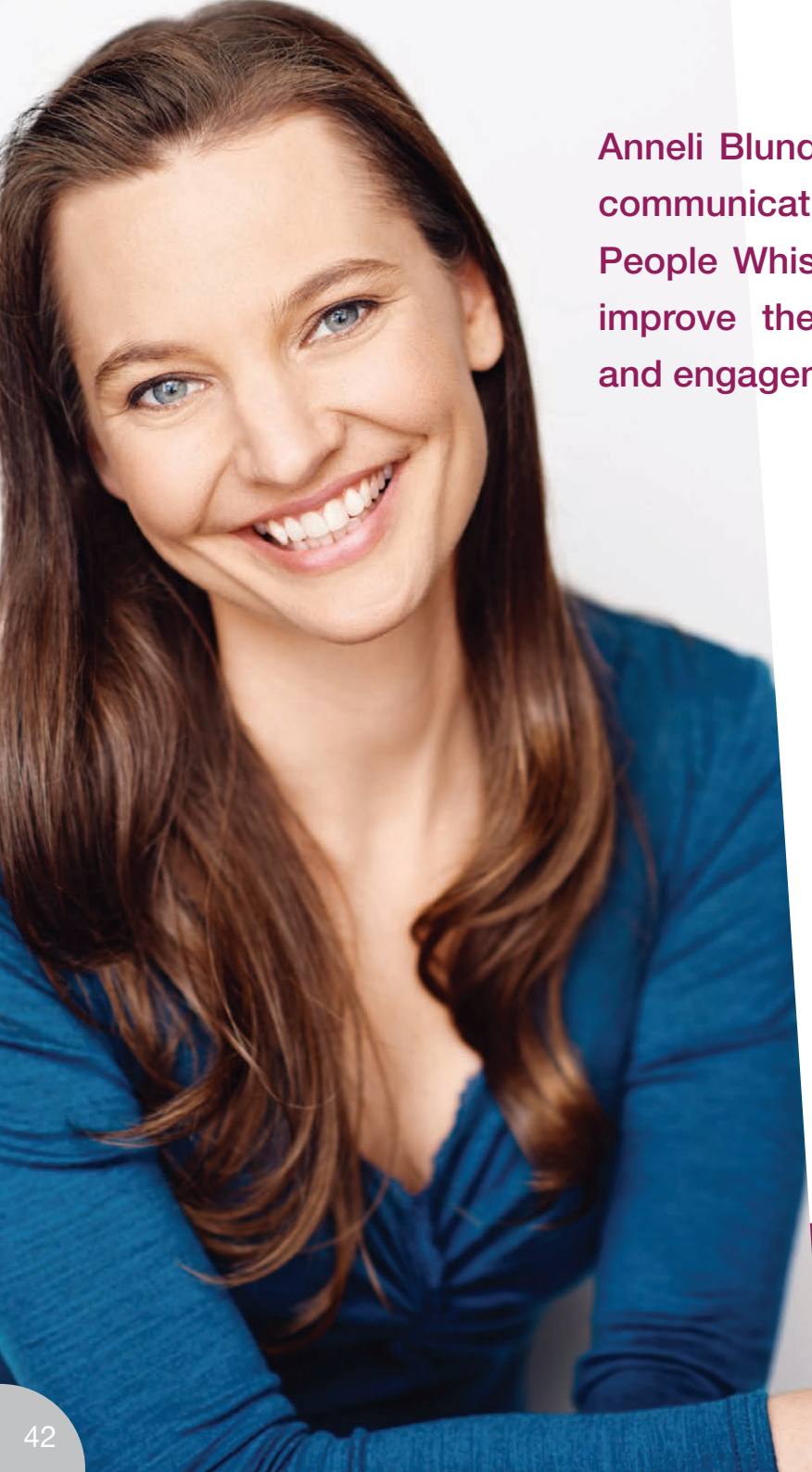
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[www.anneliblundell.com/leadingoutloud](http://www.anneliblundell.com/leadingoutloud)

*“Great presenter. Anneli was very engaging and gave relevant examples that were easy to relate to personal circumstances. She also provided tips and advice on how to achieve goals through theories and research and how they apply to reality.”*



**Anneli Blundell is an author, speaker and communication expert (a.k.a professional People Whisperer), who helps her clients improve their communication, influence and engagement.**

For over a decade she's been helping women to increase their visibility, confidence and personal power for greater professional impact.

Anneli's flagship masterclass, Women in leadership, has inspired women from all over Australia to step in, speak up and stand out through a focus on building presence, improving visibility and strategically managing the right professional impact, in male-dominated industries.

Anneli is the author of several books on shifting human behaviour with her latest book, *Developing Direct Reports: Taking the guesswork out of leading leaders*, providing a reference guide for developing leadership performance on the job.

Oh and she's a nifty parallel parker, a keen runner and a salsa dancing addict who has been featured as an expert across multi media publications including Foxtel's Sky News-Business Success program, The Australian - Business Review, Herald Sun, Daily Telegraph, The Advertiser, The Courier Mail, HuffPost, 3AW, and Modern Business Magazine, to name a few.

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