

Securing your future leader

Building diverse and inclusive CEO pipelines

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Reconciliation

Champions of Change Coalition acknowledges Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples as the Traditional Custodians of the lands on which we work and live.

We pay our respects to Elders past and present and commit to building a brighter future together. Our head office is located on the lands of the Gadigal people of the Eora Nation. The 'Eora people' was the name given to the coastal Aboriginal peoples around Sydney. 'Eora' means 'here' or 'from this place'.

The workplaces of our people and Champions of Change Coalition Members span the nation and the world. We extend our respects to the Traditional Custodians of all the lands on which we and our Members work and live.

About this resource

This resource draws on more than 40 in-depth conversations with CEOs, Board Directors, Chief People Officers and recruiters, as well as feedback from across our Coalition. It was led by the Property Champions of Change Group and is designed to help organisations build inclusive, future-fit CEO pipelines that improve the representation of women and other under-represented leaders, to help secure the right talent for the challenges ahead.

It gives CEOs, Board Chairs and Directors, and People and Culture teams practical guidance on broadening leadership pathways; ensuring inclusive, fair and transparent selection processes; systematically tracking progress; and setting new appointees up for success in increasingly complex environments.

While building a diverse and inclusive CEO pipeline must start with inclusion in early and mid-career pathways, this report focuses on CEO pipelines as the most challenging horizon, where women and diverse leaders remain least represented and progress has been slowest.

Our goal is to elevate and advance women in all their diversity, strengthening organisations and ensuring everyone has the opportunity to contribute and succeed. [Read more.](#)

Real stories on the career pathways of Australian CEOs

Alongside this resource is a collection of case studies from women CEOs who share candid reflections on their leadership journeys – the enablers, barriers and lessons learned.

Scan the QR code or visit the link below to explore their stories.
championsofchangecoalition.org/category/ceo-insights



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We've set out to tackle one of the toughest challenges in corporate Australia: building CEO pipelines that reflect the full depth of talent and lived experience across our communities. The organisations that get this right will be the ones that stay ahead. Boards that fail to build gender-equal diverse and inclusive CEO pipelines will find themselves short of choice, capability, and ultimately credibility. Today, leadership strength and inclusive capability are inseparable.

”



Elizabeth Broderick AO
Founder
Champions of Change Coalition

“

It's a responsibility across the whole organisation, Boards and Directors, current CEOs and People and Culture teams to develop systems which enable the full diversity of potential CEOs to progress to leadership.

Women and people with diverse backgrounds often face compounded barriers to progression. Boards and CEOs have a responsibility to confront those barriers, embed inclusion in every decision, and listen to those most affected. When they do, organisations create environments where diverse talent can thrive and be recognised for their capabilities and leadership.

”



Dr Anna Cody
Australia's Sex Discrimination Commissioner

Introduction

Champions of Change Coalition continues to support organisations in building leadership pipelines that reflect the full breadth of talent, capability and lived experience in our society. This work has never been more important.

The context in which CEOs lead is evolving rapidly – shaped by new technologies, shifting expectations and complex stakeholder demands. To thrive, organisations need leaders who bring strategic foresight, operational strength and agility, and who are equipped to lead inclusively into an increasingly dynamic and uncertain future.

Yet across industries, we still see persistent patterns in who gets selected to lead. Despite progress, the CEO role remains one of the least gender-balanced and least diverse positions in corporate Australia.

These challenges are not confined to the corporate sector – many areas of government and the community sector, particularly those that remain male-dominated, also face similar barriers to building diverse and inclusive leadership pipelines.

Many organisations still rely on narrow definitions of readiness and traditional career pathways that exclude more than they include. Too often these approaches are reinforced by opaque selection criteria, limiting notions of 'good fit' and outdated ideas of 'merit' that prioritise familiarity over capability and perpetuate leadership profiles that reflect the past rather than the future.

Importantly, CEO appointments are fundamentally context-dependent. No single type of experience guarantees success. Organisations that intentionally cultivate diverse, adaptable leadership pipelines can more confidently elevate the right leader, with the right capabilities, when the moment demands.

At the same time, it is entirely within the strategic remit of the Board (and equivalent governing or appointing bodies) to test the external market in specific circumstances. Where this occurs, it is essential that recruiters are provided with clear capability criteria and a firm expectation of a diverse and inclusive candidate slate.

Recognising that ingrained habits and assumptions can influence how leadership potential is recognised, this resource focuses on system-level changes that can help shift those patterns within organisations, enabling more consistent, transparent and inclusive decision-making.

Diversity and inclusion are embedded throughout, as essential drivers of effective leadership. Our experience shows that leadership teams that have a broad range of perspectives, experiences and styles are better equipped to perform, adapt and meet evolving stakeholder expectations. Building inclusive CEO pipelines expands the pool of future leaders and ensures organisations are well placed for successful CEO transitions.

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The CEO appointment is the most critical decision a Board will ever make – it's your best window to get it right for all stakeholders.

To maximise this opportunity, Boards must move beyond passive risk management and adopt an active, growth and competitiveness mindset. This requires a collective commitment from the entire Board, with every member playing an active role.

”

Andrew Stevens
Chair
Champions of Change Coalition

Introduction

Building diverse and inclusive CEO pipelines requires deliberate action from Board Chairs and Directors, CEOs and People and Culture teams across five key themes.

1. Criteria and capability frameworks

Articulate the contemporary skills, capabilities and experiences needed for leadership and the CEO role, ensuring profiles align with the organisation's future strategy and long-term goals.

2. Representation, pathways and exposure

Ensure diversity and gender balance in the functions, roles, development programs and experiences considered critical on the pathway to leadership.

3. Systems and culture

Address long-term barriers and views that can unfairly disadvantage women and diverse talent in their careers and progression opportunities.

4. Selection approach

Develop structured, inclusive, future-focused CEO selection processes that challenge outdated notions of professionalism, executive presence and merit, while also ensuring fairness and transparency.

5. Enabling leadership success

Actively set up new CEOs for success by ensuring organisational systems, culture and support structures are inclusive and aligned, especially for women and diverse leaders.

Board Chairs and Directors*

Use this resource to test your current CEO pipeline strategy and challenge assumptions about readiness, experience and potential.

CEOs

Use this resource to proactively shape a future-ready and inclusive pipeline, by role-modelling commitment, sponsoring diverse talent and working with your board to align pipeline development and succession planning with the organisation's long-term strategy.

People and Culture teams

Apply the frameworks and insights to embed inclusive pipeline planning into leadership development, talent and rewards systems.

Aspiring leaders

Use the insights to understand what boards and CEOs are looking for, to plan your career and pursue access to development opportunities.

Recruiters

Use this resource to shape more inclusive executive search practices and influence client expectations around candidate profiles.

*Throughout this resource we refer to Board Chairs and Directors which is intended to encompass equivalent governing or appointing bodies.

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If leadership conversations only include people who look and think the same, decisions narrow and blind spots grow. Seeing the world through a single lens doesn't create stability, it creates stagnation. We lose insight, connection and credibility with the communities we serve. Valuing diverse lived experience and intentionally creating space to hear and act on those insights keeps organisations learning, connected and future-focused.

Kristen Hilton

Convenor

Champions of Change Coalition 2015/2017 and Fire and Emergency Groups

”

Explore more lived experiences from over 15 CEOs at:
championsofchangecoalition.org/category/ceo-insights

1. Criteria and capability frameworks

Building a diverse, inclusive and future-ready CEO pipeline starts with being clear about what great leadership looks like, today and into the future.

This involves Board Chairs and Directors, CEOs, People and Culture teams and recruitment partners working together to define the future-focused skills, experiences and leadership qualities that matter.

When these expectations are visible and shared, it helps aspiring leaders understand what it takes to be a CEO and how to get there. It also supports everyone in making informed, confident decisions about who's ready to lead, and opens the path to a wider pool of future CEOs.

It is also important for Boards, CEOs and People and Culture teams to interrogate how 'merit' is defined. Traditional views often prioritise linear career paths, particular functions, or subjective traits like 'executive presence', which can exclude diverse candidates. Capability frameworks should be grounded in evidence-based skills and future-oriented leadership qualities, rather than legacy definitions of merit.



No one ever said, 'This is what we're looking for and this is where you need to develop'. I was left trying to guess what mattered, and by the time I figured it out, the opportunity had passed.



I was praised for getting things done, but no one ever talked to me about leadership. I wasn't seen as someone with potential, just someone who delivered. No one told me what I needed to develop or how to get there. I wasn't part of the inner circle, and I didn't have the sponsors or networks that others did. The conversations about leadership were happening – just not with me.



Today's leaders must be agile, collaborative and capable of moving fluidly across organisational domains. Leadership must embrace diversity of thought and reflect the rich tapestry of communities served. This transcends mastering a single role, instead cultivating deep empathy and an enterprise-wide perspective through diverse organisational experiences.



RESOURCES

- [Champions of Change CEO pipeline criteria](#)

1. Criteria and capability frameworks

Actions to take

Board Chair and Directors

- **Define what is needed** – Identify the organisation's future strategy and goals, then define the skills, essential experiences, values and leadership qualities required to lead the organisation into the future (see [CEO pipeline criteria](#)). This includes commercial expertise, as well as adaptability, inclusive leadership, values-driven decision-making and the ability to lead through complexity.

Explicitly identify the key experiences necessary for the CEO role, such as operational leadership, investor relations or market-facing roles, and incorporate these into succession planning. Actively broaden diversity by developing talent in traditional feeder roles such as CFO and commercial leadership and also in non-traditional feeder roles, ensuring all candidates gain exposure to essential experiences and growth opportunities that prepare them for the CEO role.

Consider which capabilities and essential experiences must be held by the CEO and which can be complemented by the executive team, prioritising leadership over technical depth where it can be sourced elsewhere.

- **Make the criteria transparent** – Share these expectations openly with internal talent, executive teams and recruitment partners. Be clear about how to meet expectations and how development opportunities will support readiness.
- **Seek diverse views** – If the Board and executive team are not yet diverse, actively seek diverse perspectives to inform the framework (by engaging external experts and consulting with diverse internal candidates) to ensure it captures a broad range of leadership qualities and experiences.

CEO

- **Co-design the capability framework** – Work closely with your Board to shape a shared, future-focused leadership capability and critical skills framework that reflects where your organisation is heading and evolving leadership expectations.
- **Prioritise it** – Elevate CEO pipeline planning to a strategic priority by assigning clear ownership, setting defined timelines and measurable outcomes, and embedding accountability at the executive leadership level (e.g. Chief People Officer) for leading these efforts across the organisation.
- **Share it** – Ensure leadership expectations are clearly articulated, widely communicated, and reflected in talent identification and development processes, from assessment criteria to promotion decisions.
- **Use it consistently and transparently** – Apply the leadership criteria consistently and openly across relevant talent discussions and development programs.

People and Culture Team

- **Show the path** – Design clear and transparent development pathways (such as the Australian Public Service Capability Matrix or the Champions of Change [CEO pipeline criteria](#)) to help leaders understand and build the capabilities and critical experiences they'll need to become leaders of the future. Plan for flexible paths, cross-sector moves, career breaks and part-time roles as valuable leadership experiences.
- **Embed it in systems** – Make sure the CEO capability framework is part of recruitment, development, performance reviews and promotion processes, so it becomes part of everyday practice.
- **Start conversations** – Talk openly with emerging leaders about what's expected, how they're tracking, and where to focus. Ensure internal candidates receive clear, actionable, constructive feedback focused on their growth and leadership potential, not just performance evaluation. Use the framework to guide these conversations and encourage proactive career management.
- **Bridge the gaps** – Use the framework to spot capability gaps early and design development plans that are fair and targeted, including high-impact stretch opportunities.
- **Keep it alive and accountable** – Use the framework in regular conversations and talent reviews, so it becomes a practical tool, rather than a tick-box exercise.

Champions of Change CEO pipeline criteria

Traditional CEO pathways have often prioritised financial and operational expertise, especially profit and loss responsibility and capital management.

But the role of today's CEO is broader, demanding a comprehensive set of enterprise leadership capabilities, including inclusive leadership, stakeholder engagement, digital fluency and ethical, values-driven decision-making in complex and disruptive environments.

The strongest CEO candidates combine commercial acumen with the ability to inspire teams, draw on the strengths and capabilities of their team, navigate uncertainty, and lead change. Many women and leaders from diverse backgrounds have developed these capabilities but are often overlooked due to narrow perceptions of traditional career paths and leadership readiness.

Here we provide an exposure draft of the core skills, capabilities and critical experiences for contemporary leadership, developed through extensive member consultation and a comprehensive literature review.¹

Diversity and inclusion have been intentionally embedded across all leadership categories, reflecting our experience that inclusive leadership is not standalone but essential to business success and competitive advantage. This framework offers a flexible foundation for career planning, talent development and CEO pipeline planning. It can be adapted to suit different organisations and sectors.

By sharing this resource, we aim to support Board Chairs and Directors, CEOs, and People and Culture teams to elevate a clear set of leadership expectations, and to help managers and aspiring leaders proactively plan and build the skills and experiences needed for modern leadership.

Organisations need clear and transparent leadership criteria so that:

- **Board Chairs and Directors** have a consistent and aligned view of the skills and capabilities needed in a future CEO, enabling objective assessment of potential successors
- **CEOs** know which skills and experiences to prioritise when recruiting and developing talent for inclusive leadership pipelines
- **People and Culture** teams can align talent management and development to broaden and strengthen leadership pipelines
- **Managers** can confidently guide and support emerging talent in building necessary leadership capabilities aligned to future organisational needs
- **Employees** can map and amplify their strengths, identify areas for development, and plan and pursue critical experiences on the pathway to leadership
- **Recruiters** can source candidates whose skills and experiences align with the leadership demands of the future.

Find out more on the [Champions of Change CEO pipeline criteria](#)

Champions of Change CEO pipeline criteria

Category	Skills, capabilities and behaviours	Critical experiences
1. Strategic direction and vision	- Strategic foresight; anticipating market trends, driving long-term growth, and navigating complexity. - Making timely, decisive choices that position the organisation for success. - Engaging and aligning diverse teams on vision and strategy.	- Experience leading transformational change, restructuring, turnarounds. - Visible and inclusive leadership.
2. Adaptive, ethical and inclusive leadership	- Agility to adapt boldly and pivot in response to change. - Courageous, ethical and inclusive decision-making informed by diverse perspectives. - Authenticity, emotional intelligence and leadership that inspires trust and creates safe, respectful and inclusive cultures.	- People leadership experience, particularly ensuring equitable engagement with and access to opportunities for diverse leaders. - Operational excellence including examples of effective issues and crisis management. - Leading on sustainability.
3. Stakeholder engagement	- Strategic leadership of engagement with employees, investors, customers, regulators, and communities, focusing on outcomes that deliver lasting impact and align diverse stakeholders. - Clear, empathetic, inclusive communication; active listening that builds trust and sustains constructive relationships, enabling leaders to address complex challenges at scale.	Stakeholder and board engagement experience towards mutually supported outcomes.
4. Talent and team development	Proven commitment to diversity; sponsorship of diverse talent, CEO pipeline planning, talent retention, and working with a team with a gender-balanced leadership approach.	Talent development experience, building diverse executive pipelines and inclusive cultures, with a track record of reliably delivering on commitments to people and culture outcomes.
5. High-performance delivery	- Translating strategies into measurable outcomes; inclusive accountability practices recognising diverse contributions. - Managing full profit and loss responsibilities; driving revenue growth; cost management; and delivering sustainable financial performance.	Experience driving performance, sustainable growth and innovation.
6. Future readiness and innovation	- Enthusiasm for innovation, digital transformation and calculated risk-taking, informed by diverse insights. - Understanding of current and emerging technologies and digital transformation to maintain competitive advantage. - Ability to lead digital innovation and shape tech-enabled futures. - Use of AI for strategic decisions, objective recruitment and inclusive talent management.	- International and cross-cultural experience, or cross-sector or multidisciplinary experience proactively spanning boundaries and identifying opportunities. - Direct experience harnessing emerging technology, AI and digital transformation to enable inclusive, data-driven decision-making, talent development, and innovation.
7. Leadership authority, resilience and reliability	- Highly credible, respected and connected industry leader. - Emotional stability, resilience to recover and grow from setbacks, continuous self-awareness and learning, especially around addressing unconscious bias and inclusive leadership. - Ability to align diverse stakeholders and solve problems at scale.	- Experience leading or managing complex change initiatives; exposure to crisis or high-pressure situations; industry, cross-functional or international assignments; entrepreneurial or start-up experience; leadership simulations and scenario training. - Strong capacity for reflection, mindfulness, and personal development.
8. Customer and market orientation	Deep understanding of the market and market dynamics within which the company is operating, and associated economic and social drivers to inform customer strategies.	Customer-facing commercial experience, ensuring diversity and inclusivity are integral in market approaches.
9. Financial acumen and governance literacy	Deep understanding of financial reporting, capital allocation and regulatory compliance. Experience leading budget planning, audit processes, and financial oversight.	- Ability to communicate complex financials to boards, investors, and stakeholders. - Exposure to board-level governance and risk oversight responsibilities.

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Deliberate decisions at different points in your career are important. They can feel risky, but having a growth mindset is essential. There are many paths to CEO – what matters is being intentional about the experiences you seek and the learning you prioritise.

”

Vicki Brady

CEO
Telstra

“

Technical professional skill and knowledge will only get you so far. It is the soft skills that I think we really don't put enough emphasis and focus on and it's really important.

”

Susan Pearce

Secretary
NSW Health

Explore more lived experiences from over 15 CEOs at:
championsofchangecoalition.org/category/ceo-insights

2. Representation, pathways and exposure

An inclusive and future-ready CEO pipeline is built over time through intentional actions that shape who gets noticed, supported and stretched.

It requires being intentional in creating pathways where women, and diverse talent, have the same chance to be seen, heard and supported to succeed.

If only a narrow group of people get access to the right opportunities, then only a narrow group will ever be seen as 'ready'. Perceptions of merit are shaped by access. When sponsorship, stretch assignments or visibility are unevenly distributed, some leaders are seen as 'high potential' while others are overlooked – regardless of actual capability. Interrogating how these opportunities are allocated is central to disrupting narrow notions of merit.

When critical pipeline roles, exposure, networks and sponsorship are offered with strategic foresight, it opens leadership pathway opportunities for a much broader group of talent, rather than for a chosen few.

Starting succession planning early, well before a vacancy, allows women and diverse candidates to be identified, developed and supported over time. This keeps the CEO success profile and talent mapping current, ensuring candidates are ready when transitions occur.

At the same time, it is important that the leadership trajectory is well timed, so that CEO candidates are 'well-placed' or 'ready' at or near the point of CEO transitions. Although this resource focuses on CEO pipelines, the same principles apply to leadership pathways more broadly – and this requires long-term investment across multiple time horizons (see page 36).

I was overlooked for the talent development program because I was on parental leave and then working part time. By the time I came back full time and re-established my career and networks, I was considered outside the 'age window' for leadership pathway opportunities.

My manager suggested I pursue a career in [functional role] because I was more likely to be able to progress and get bonuses while also looking after my young family. I found out the hard way this also completely closed off pathways for my leadership aspirations.

Leadership potential isn't discovered, it's deliberately cultivated and communicated. Invest early by explicitly mapping career trajectories, building individual experiences and developing critical skills. By nurturing next-generation leaders with intentional support and strategic foresight, we can build a sustainable, diverse leadership pipeline.

RESOURCES

- [In the eye of the beholder: Avoiding the merit trap](#)
- [40:40:20 for gender balance: Interrupting bias in your talent processes](#)
- [The Panel Pledge](#)
- [Pitch Pledge: Gender balance in capital transactions and leasing](#)
- [Sponsorship Track: A practical guide to gender inclusive progression](#)

2. Representation, pathways and exposure

Actions to take

Board Chair and Directors

- **Model what you expect** – Build a Board that reflects the values of the organisation and the diversity of its customers and the communities it serves.
- **Set clear expectations** – Set expectations for a gender-balanced and diverse executive leadership team and make building an inclusive leadership pipeline a CEO accountability.
- **Look down the line** – Monitor representation and experience in the pipeline, especially at CEO-1 and CEO-2 roles. Ensure gender balance and diversity at every stage, and that the leadership trajectory is well timed, so that CEO candidates are 'well-placed' or 'ready' at or near the point of CEO transitions.
- **Set up good governance** – Establish a Board committee to oversee CEO succession and inclusive pipeline development. Ask for regular reporting on diversity, inclusion and progression and interrogate the patterns, gaps and tough spots where talent pools are narrow.
- **Personally contribute** – Consider how you can personally offer exposure, visibility or experiences to high-potential women and diverse leaders.
- **Have a wide-angle lens on talent** – Maintain a broad view and connections with diverse senior talent across your industry/sector and beyond, given internal succession may not always be appropriate.

CEO

- **Lead from the front** – Prioritise gender balance and diversity in the roles and functions that feed into CEO appointments, including enabling, commercial, operational, financial and customer-facing areas.

Grow CEO-1 and CEO-2 pipelines by offering stretch roles, leadership opportunities, and job rotations. Work with People and Culture to build skills, create mobility opportunities, or bring in external talent if needed.
- **Make it matter** – Set targets and build inclusive leadership outcomes into senior leaders' performance indicators, scorecards and performance reviews.
- **Sponsor** – Personally champion women and diverse leaders by connecting them to stretch roles, high-profile assignments and key stakeholders, including the Board.

Facilitate their participation in industry forums, client engagements and peer executive networks to increase visibility and readiness.
- **Plan ahead** – Don't wait for a vacancy to think about succession. Work with your People and Culture team to set up clear processes to identify and develop high-potential talent early, including people from diverse and non-traditional team backgrounds, and across your industry or sector.

People and Culture Team

- **Make the process visible** – Create clear, inclusive pathways to executive roles. Help individuals understand what's required and proactively identify talent, moving away from hidden rules or 'being tapped on the shoulder'.
- **Use data to spot barriers** – Track leadership progression by gender and other identity markers. Use this to find and fix the points where diverse talent is under-represented or gets stuck.
- **Support early leadership growth** – Build systems that give early-career talent leadership opportunities and broad exposure, regardless of work patterns, caring responsibilities or background. Avoid funnelling talent into narrow specialist roles too early.
- **Equip managers** – Provide tools and development to help leaders have career conversations and set aspirations, and offer tailored and actionable development support for their teams. Encourage shared accountability across managers and teams.
- **Facilitate broad exposure** – Offer secondments, cross-functional projects, regional or international roles and job swaps that build the capabilities needed for senior leadership, and ensure they are accessible, including those with caring responsibilities.
- **Plan for career flexibility from the outset** – Anticipate that leaders may have children, take career breaks, face geographic mobility challenges, or need flexibility at times. Build this into development pathways, rather than letting it become a barrier.
- **Monitor and report** – Regularly report pipeline diversity and career progression data to executive teams and the Board. Embed these insights into talent reviews and leadership decision-making.

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The great thing about sponsors is that they don't just advise you. They invest some of their political capital into your reputation, they open doors for you and great sponsors actually stay with you because they believe in your potential.

Virginia Briggs
CEO and Managing Partner
MinterEllison

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I took every opportunity that was given to me, including moving sideways, so I was becoming a generalist rather than a specialist. If I reflect on the role that I'm in now, I am so grateful that I developed that breadth and that experience.

Vanessa Hudson
CEO
Qantas

”

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3. Systems and culture

The culture of an organisation and the systems it puts in place to grow talent lays the foundation for who succeeds.

If we want a CEO pipeline that's truly inclusive, we need environments where people with different life experiences, including those with caring responsibilities, from diverse backgrounds, or outside traditional networks, are supported to develop and lead.

For many women, progression to senior and CEO roles coincides with life stages that bring additional pressures, including health transitions such as perimenopause and menopause, and the 'sandwich years' of simultaneously caring for children and ageing parents. Systems and cultures that fail to acknowledge and support these realities risk losing experienced leaders just as they are ready to step into the most senior roles.

Boards, CEOs, and People and Culture teams own the systems that build cultures of inclusion, care, safety and belonging, and enable different leadership styles to thrive.



I've seen people promoted into senior roles because they delivered results, even when their behaviour went against what the organisation says it values. It tells you loud and clear what the real priorities are, that culture is secondary, and that some people are protected and given multiple chances, no matter how they treat others. Others don't get the same room to fail or grow. It's harder when you're a woman, especially if you've come through a different career path or bring a different lived experience.



Hiring more diverse people isn't inclusion if the system stays the same. Without real change, those leaders are expected to succeed in a culture that still works against them, and they often end up carrying the responsibility of changing it, too, with little support.



I was told I needed more 'polish' and 'executive presence' to be considered for senior roles, even though my results consistently outperformed my peers. As a woman of colour, I felt I had to work twice as hard just to be seen as equal.



I aspire to not just talk about values like respect and inclusion, but also to model these values and embed them into every decision, every policy and every process. When systems are designed this way, people feel safe, supported and empowered to give their best, and the very best talent, in all its diversity, can rise and be recognised.



RESOURCES

- [A conversation guide](#)
- [7 Switches: A Guide for Inclusive Gender Equality by Design](#)
- [FOCUSED on Everyday Respect](#)
- [Disrupting the System: Preventing and responding to sexual harassment in the workplace](#)
- [Flexibility Shifting Expectations: Flexibility for frontline, shift and site-based roles](#)

3. Systems and culture

Actions to take

Board Chair and Directors

- **Be clear about the culture you expect** – Define the non-negotiable attributes of leadership in your organisation, such as respect, integrity, inclusion and accountability, and embed these in how CEOs and executives are selected, assessed and supported.
Go beyond 'hygiene' traits to describe the mindset, behaviours and capabilities needed to lead in a complex, diverse and fast-changing environment.
Embed inclusion and culture survey results into the CEO's objectives and key results.
- **Embed inclusive leadership at the top** – Support unconscious bias training for the Board, CEO and executive team, ensuring inclusive leadership mindsets and behaviours are modelled and reinforced at the highest level of the organisation.
- **Challenge role design** – Test assumptions about what it means to 'do the job', questioning whether demands of constant availability, travel and intensity are truly essential, or simply reflect outdated models of leadership. Redesign CEO roles for sustainability and inclusivity to broaden who can succeed and create healthier and more effective leadership for the long term.
- **Back structural change** – Challenge traditional views of leadership and support bold ideas that open up leadership, from job-share roles and flexible pathways to return-to-work programs. Encourage shifts that make it easier for more people to step up.

CEO

- **Model what matters** – Show that flexibility and caring responsibilities aren't barriers to leadership, by making them visible in your own life and supporting them across your team.
- **Expect inclusive leadership** – Make inclusion a core part of what it means to lead in your organisation. Set clear expectations and hold executives accountable for modelling inclusive behaviours and creating psychologically safe workplaces.
This includes aligning behaviours with organisational values and ensure accountability for anyone who engages in poor behaviour.
Embed inclusion into risk frameworks by tracking talent data on recruitment, promotion and progression. Use these insights to identify systemic gaps and ensure accountability across the leadership pipeline.
- **Listen and respond** – Create safe environments to hear directly from employees, especially those from under-represented groups about what's working and what's not. Show how you're acting on what you hear.
- **Change the shape of roles** – Redesign at least one executive role to be job-shared or part-time, and demonstrate that leadership can flex with life. Ensure flexibility is built into leadership pathways, not just specific roles.
- **Talk openly about progress** – Use diversity data to identify barriers and track progress. Share both the numbers and the stories to celebrate wins, acknowledge gaps and engage others in the progress you are making.

People and Culture Team

- **Strengthen the data** – Build systems to collect and track robust and insightful diversity and inclusion data across leadership progression, employee experiences and culture. Co-design the systems with employees to build trust and ensure psychological safety and anonymity to encourage honest feedback.
- **Get the full picture** – Go deeper than broad representation metrics to uncover who is progressing and who isn't, interrogating gender, culture, disability, age, working patterns and other factors.
- **Turn insights into action** – Use data to identify 'broken rungs' in the system and co-design targeted solutions, from development opportunities to flexible pathways.
- **Build inclusive habits** – Support leaders with tools to make growing talent part of everyday leadership. This includes how they give feedback, run meetings and make decisions.
- **Redesign with care in mind** – Create career pathways that allow for breaks, care responsibilities and different life rhythms, without penalty. Provide practical supports such as parental or carer leave during transitions.
- **Design recruitment for inclusion** – Ensure recruitment and selection processes include diverse selection panels and anonymous recruitment processes to reduce unconscious bias, focusing assessments on skills, experiences and potential rather than subjective 'cultural fit'. Interrogate concepts of 'merit'.
- **Review, reflect, refine** – Make progress reviews routine rather than reactive. Use quarterly check-ins to track inclusion and culture goals, and adjust course where needed.

“

Supporting people with caring responsibilities is essential to strengthening CEO and talent pipelines. Careers must adapt to life's caregiving demands, or we risk losing exceptional leaders. By valuing caregiving as a leadership strength, we keep the pipeline strong and opportunities open and inclusive.

”

Peter Huddle
CEO & Managing Director
Vicinity Centres

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Flexibility is particularly important at CEW because our mission is about equality inside and outside of work, including the sharing of caring responsibilities for people who are in families where this is possible. It's a big-picture vision, and modelling work-life integration is part of leading authentically in this space.

”

Lisa Annese
CEO
Chief Executive Women (CEW)

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4. Selection approach

To unlock the full value of our CEO pipelines, we need to be thoughtful and inclusive in how we choose future leaders and how we develop them, rather than relying on reactive or ad hoc processes, or narrow or subjective definitions of readiness and familiarity.

Even though the Board is ultimately responsible for appointing the CEO, fair, transparent and consistent selection processes at all levels, especially those led by the CEO for key pipeline roles, are essential to building and maintaining an inclusive CEO pipeline. People and Culture teams play a vital role in elevating a broad range of candidates, guiding fair decisions and supporting those who are not selected.

When there are structured, inclusive and transparent processes, it allows every candidate to be evaluated consistently and fairly, and ensures the final decision is grounded in what leadership really demands today and in the future.

These processes are most effective when planning starts early rather than in response to a crisis or departure of an incumbent CEO. A multi-year horizon creates the space to develop, assess and support a wider pool of potential CEOs.



I found myself in a strange position where neither the Board nor the outgoing CEO would take ownership of the decision process. Each pointed to the other as the key decision-maker. This lack of clarity undermines trust and creates the impression that factors beyond the stated criteria are driving selection decisions.



The Executive search firm couldn't provide a gender-balanced slate of candidates for our Chief Commercial Officer role, a typical feeder role for the CEO position. When we asked them to broaden their lens to include Chief Marketing Officers, the field was instantly more diverse.



Inclusive CEO pipelines are built by looking beyond traditional pathways and experiences, exploring the level below, adjacent sectors and regional talent pools. It can take more time and effort, but it reduces the greater risk of groupthink and strengthens leadership with a broader range of perspectives and lived experiences.



RESOURCES

- [Champions of Change CEO pipeline criteria](#)
- [In the eye of the beholder: Avoiding the merit trap](#)
- [40:40:20 for gender balance: Interrupting bias in your talent processes](#)

4. Selection approach

Actions to take

Board Chair and Directors

- **Be ready to respond** – Whether planning a smooth transition or facing an unexpected departure, be prepared to act with clarity and purpose. Knowing you have a strong pipeline, understanding the process you'll follow and knowing who is making the decision means you're not starting from scratch.
- **Be clear about what matters** – Use the inclusive leadership capability framework to prioritise the skills and experience needed for the organisation's next CEO. Be clear about what's essential and what could be developed, brought in or outsourced. Share these criteria and the selection process openly.
- **Oversee the process with care** – Use structured assessments, diverse panels and expansive shortlists, and set clear expectations for external search partners. Document how each candidate aligns to agreed criteria, challenge subjective judgments that favour familiarity, and ensure diverse experiences are valued equally. Regularly review processes for fairness and potential bias.
- **Ask different questions** – Challenge the reflex to choose 'safe' or familiar options. Ask what risks there might be in not choosing the less traditional candidate.
- **Be open about the decision** – Communicate the rationale for CEO appointments, how the choice aligns with strategy, values and what the organisation needs next.
- **Support growth and readiness** – Give constructive feedback to unsuccessful candidates so they understand what's next in their development, rather than focusing on where they fell short.

CEO

- **Set the standard for what great leadership looks like** – Ensure your senior leader selection criteria match where your organisation is heading. That means valuing inclusive leadership, adaptability, alignment to purpose, and the ability to lead through change, not just time in role or technical expertise.
- **Make the process clear and consistent** – Use structured interviews, diverse panels and fair assessment tools for every senior hire. Require leaders to clearly explain hiring and promotion decisions, and challenge outcomes that don't reflect the diversity you're aiming for.
- **Challenge your own assumptions** – Be willing to rethink what leadership readiness looks like. Value different leadership styles, lived experiences and non-linear careers. Don't let your own or familiar pathways limit your view of others' potential.
- **Be transparent about decisions and support growth** – Talk openly about senior appointments – how choices were made and how they support your strategy and inclusion goals. When internal candidates miss out, give straight and meaningful feedback.

People and Culture Team

- **Stay aligned on what good looks like** – Ensure the criteria used to select and develop senior leaders match the leadership expectations set for the CEO, so the pipeline is building toward the right kind of future leadership.
- **Support fair decisions at every level** – Work with the CEO and executives to build consistent, structured selection processes for all roles, especially senior appointments. These are the decisions that shape your CEO pipeline, so they need to be fair, transparent and inclusive.
- **Take a data-driven approach** – Track who's in the pipeline, who's progressing, and where the gaps are. Use data to help your CEO and Board make informed decisions and keep a broad talent pool front of mind.

Use data to drive reflection and continuous improvement on the process and understand any biases that might be at play (e.g. track language/words used to describe different candidates, seek feedback from people interviewed to understand their experience and identify opportunities to improve).
- **Guide the process, even when you're not leading it** – While the Board owns CEO recruitment, People and Culture teams can support a smooth and fair process, from working with search firms to shaping onboarding and setting the new CEO up for success.

“

Get away from the assumption that leaders look the same as you do, and as their predecessor. They won't.

”

Christina Ryan
CEO
Disability Leadership Institute

“

It is a risk to mistake familiarity for capability when making CEO appointments. Selection too often centres on financial or operational experience, overlooking the broader leadership and enterprise skills needed to lead through complexity and change. The leaders most ready for the future may have led differently, in different contexts, or faced different challenges.

”

Kylie O'Connor
CEO Investment Management
Stockland

Explore more lived experiences from over 15 CEOs at:
championsofchangecoalition.org/category/ceo-insights

5. Enabling leadership success

Appointing a CEO is a critical milestone, and it is essential that support structures are in place for a new CEO from the outset, particularly where the successful candidate may have broken the mould.

Too often, diverse leaders are celebrated at the time of appointment but left to navigate cultures, systems and expectations that were designed for a different era of leadership.

Women and diverse leaders stepping into CEO or executive roles, especially in historically male-dominated environments can face subtle resistance, cultural exclusion, or unrealistic expectations to prove themselves. They can also face ongoing interrogation of their merit and be required to 'prove' themselves repeatedly in ways their predecessors were not. Without intentional support, the risk of attrition, burnout or missed opportunity is high.

Enabling leadership success requires active endorsement from the Board, structured support from People and Culture teams, and the expectation of safe, inclusive and respectful behaviours at all levels.



I was supported by the Board, but the visible support from Directors didn't stop the resistance, instead it was driven underground and it manifested in subtle undermining of my leadership. The appointment of candidates who don't look like those that came before needs to be made alongside a commitment to system-wide culture change.



I walked into a leadership culture that wasn't ready to support someone who looked or led like me – and no one seemed to notice until I was already drowning. I was expected to lead differently, but held to the same old norms. Without real backing from the board down, diverse leaders are left to carry both the expectations and the burden alone.



From day one, I felt like I was set up to succeed. The Board backed my appointment and my leadership. I had space to lead authentically, support when I needed it, and champions across the organisation who made sure I wasn't doing it alone.



5. Enabling leadership success

Actions to take

Board Chair and Directors

- **Provide strong and visible support** – Publicly and privately back new leaders to succeed. Actively counter inappropriate language, objections or behaviours, and reinforce confidence in the appointment.
- **Actively set up new CEOs for success** – Ensure organisational systems, culture and support structures are inclusive and aligned, especially for women and diverse leaders.
- **Boldly rethink job design** – Reimagine how CEO jobs are structured, from workload distribution to travel expectations, to expand the pool of capable candidates and model modern, sustainable leadership.
- **Engage directly with the new CEO** – Engage directly with the CEO, particularly during transition, to understand any barriers, provide access to networks and ensure the Board-CEO relationship is built on a foundation of openness, trust and support.
- **Model safety, respect and inclusion** – Ensure the Board models safety, respect and inclusion in all its interactions with each other, the CEO and Executives, setting standards and expectations that can congruously flow through the organisation.
- **Counter isolation** – Encourage a culture of active sponsorship across the senior leadership team.
- **Reinforce that leadership success is collective** – Ensure clear messaging that performance, inclusion and culture are shared leadership responsibilities, not solely on the shoulders of the new CEO.

People and Culture Team

- **Onboard for influence and connection** – Ensure new CEOs are supported to understand the organisational context and build internal connections, relationships and early wins. Facilitate their engagement with employees and senior leaders to strengthen alignment and trust.
- **Prepare for leadership transition** – Prepare the executive team and key leaders for the leadership transition, modelling inclusive behaviours that welcome difference and challenge outdated practices or norms that are no longer fit for purpose.
- **Ensure wraparound support** – Support the incoming CEO including through access to external coaching, sponsorship or peer networks, particularly where they may be 'firsts' in their context.
- **Anticipate challenges** – Anticipate challenges including hesitancy or subtle resistance, particularly in male-dominated environments, and work with leaders to address this proactively and constructively.
- **Review and adapt people systems** – Ensure people systems, from communications to performance management, are inclusive and support the new CEO's leadership approach and priorities.

“

There is an unwritten rule that CEOs of larger not-for-profit organisations provide more help to smaller or emerging organisations. It's a practice that have adopted myself and I very much take a movement or sector perspective when thinking about other CEOs and organisations in my eco-system and how we can collaborate and support one another as leaders.

”

Anna Brown OAM
CEO
Equality Australia

“

Aurecon's culture of self-driven determination and giving people opportunities based on their potential has been critical. Having confidence in people's talent while ensuring safety nets are in place to support when needed are essential to ensure you are growing a strong workforce and pipeline of leaders.

”

Louise Adams
CEO
Aurecon

Explore more lived experiences from over 15 CEOs at:
championsofchangecoalition.org/category/ceo-insights

Champions of Change

summary of practical tools

Summary of practical tools

Tools and resources to support Member action in building diverse and inclusive CEO pipelines:

1. Background	26
Details key challenges faced by organisations seeking to build diverse and inclusive CEO pipelines.	
2. Key roles in CEO pipeline planning	30
Details the role played by different actors in building a diverse and inclusive CEO pipeline, including Board Chairs and Directors, CEOs and People and Culture teams, managers and employees.	
3. A conversation guide	32
A conversation guide to prompt your own reflections or spark meaningful discussions on inclusive CEO pipeline planning among Boards and Executive teams.	
4. Looking across the horizon: A time-based lens for building future-ready CEO pipelines	36
Sets out the three time horizons necessary to build diverse and inclusive CEO pipelines.	
5. Strengthening decision-making	37
Supports Board Chairs and Directors, CEOs and senior executives to proactively identify and disrupt biased decision-making patterns.	

1. Background

The business case

CEO appointments are among the most consequential decisions a Board can make, shaping an organisation's strategy, performance, culture, credibility and long-term resilience.

Inclusive CEO pipeline planning is a critical issue for Boards, CEOs and Executive Leadership Teams, because diverse and inclusive leadership drives performance.

+7% company value

Companies with gender-balanced executive teams (40:40:20 balance) have a net company value around 7% higher than their less balanced peers²

+25% profitability

Gender-diverse executive teams are 25% more likely to outperform on profitability³

+36% return on equity

Gender-diverse boards deliver up to 36% higher return on equity over five years⁴

+5% increase in market value

ASX-listed companies appointing a woman CEO saw a 5% increase in market value⁵

+19% innovation revenue

Companies with above-average diversity scores show stronger innovation outcomes⁶

+70% market access

Diverse teams are more likely to capture new markets and better serve customer needs⁷

+76% talent attraction

Over three-quarters of jobseekers consider diversity a key factor when evaluating prospective employers⁸

1. Background

Current state

There are more women in the workforce than ever before, yet imbalance persists in CEO pipelines as detailed in the 2025 CEW Census.⁹

90% of ASX 300 CEOs are men

Only 1 in 4
new CEO appointments are women

80% of traditional CEO pipeline roles are held by men (Group Executive, COO, CFO)

41% of ASX 300 companies have no women in CEO pipeline roles

Talent from diverse backgrounds is also under-represented, with only 9% of all ASX 300 Board roles held by directors from culturally diverse backgrounds.¹⁰ The under-representation is even more acute for women with intersecting identities, including First Nations women, culturally diverse women, LBTIQ+ women, and women with disability. For example, while women comprised 46% of Board Directors across five sectors in 2022, culturally diverse women (defined as women with non-Anglo Celtic origins) accounted for only 5.7%.¹¹

Many organisations continue to face barriers in building CEO pipelines that reflect the full breadth of available talent and experience. Outdated assumptions, rigid definitions of leadership readiness, and informal selection dynamics often narrow the field of who is seen as a credible successor.

While Boards and equivalent governing bodies ultimately own CEO appointments, the responsibility for cultivating strong, diverse and future-ready leadership pipelines is shared. It requires sustained commitment from CEOs, executive teams, People and Culture leaders, and managers at every level.

For further information on amplified disadvantage experienced by people with intersecting identities, see:

- [Diversity Council of Australia, Cracking the Glass-Cultural Ceiling](#)
- [Australian Institute of Company Directors, Beyond the pale: cultural diversity on ASX 100 Boards](#)
- [Disability Leadership Institute, Survey of Australian Disability Leaders 2016](#)
- [Pride in Diversity, Cracking the Rainbow Glass Ceiling: Applying an intersectional lens: LGBTQ+ & gender workplace inclusion](#)
- [Jumbunna Institute for Indigenous Education and Research, Gari Yala \(Speak the Truth\): Centring the workplace experiences of Indigenous Australians](#)

1. Background

Challenges

Drawing on insights from our Members, this section outlines the key challenges organisations must address to build CEO pipelines that are both inclusive and aligned with the complexity and demands of contemporary leadership.

Action

Criteria/capability framework

Traditional practices

- Boards often rely on traditional CEO profiles shaped by legacy leadership models. This reinforces narrow criteria rooted in past, often male-dominated, experiences. Critical skills such as adaptability, inclusive decision-making, stakeholder engagement and innovation are undervalued despite their importance in today's business landscape.

Future-ready approaches

- Provide a clear, expansive and transparent articulation of the contemporary skills, capabilities and experiences required on the pathway to leadership and specifically for the CEO position.

Representation, pathway and exposure

- CEO pipelines draw from a narrow set of pathway roles – often in operations, finance or revenue – where men remain over-represented.
- Sponsorship and stretch opportunities are often informal, favouring those with existing visibility or familiarity with senior leaders.
- Visibility and advocacy tend to favour leaders who fit existing norms, including working patterns and personality styles.
- Senior leaders more frequently advocate for candidates who mirror their own backgrounds.
- The same cohort is granted high-profile, strategic assignments that increase visibility to boards and executive recruiters.
- Informal and/or exclusive networks limit informal business development opportunities and exposure to decision makers.
- Leadership authority, credibility and respect within an organisation or industry often reflect access to stretch roles with profit and loss, operations, risk or strategic oversight and key networks – not just advocacy efforts.
- High-potential women are frequently encouraged to 'build their brand' without equal access to the roles and networks that help to create reputational capital.
- Long employee tenures, particularly in some sectors, mean that when transitions do occur, they are seen to carry significant risk for continuity, capability and culture.

- Ensure diversity and gender balance in the roles (functional and line), development programs and experiences considered critical on the pathway to leadership.
- Make visible the informal sponsorship that often benefits leaders from traditional pathways and introduce formal sponsorship mechanisms within CEO pipeline processes to track sponsorship equity across talent demographics.

1. Background

Challenges

Action

Systems and culture

Traditional practices

- Leaders are rarely held accountable or incentivised to build diverse CEO pipelines.
- Subjective or poorly defined 'potential' criteria reinforce dominant leadership stereotypes, disadvantaging capable women and diverse candidates despite equal or superior performance.
- Leadership assessments often favour subjective traits like confidence and 'executive presence', perpetuating existing norms.
- Confidence is frequently conflated with competence, disadvantaging capable candidates who don't fit traditional styles of leadership, especially women and diverse leaders who face additional barriers such as the competence-likeability trade-off.
- Expectations around constant availability and mobility disproportionately disadvantage leaders with caring responsibilities – often women.

Future-ready approaches

- Address long-term barriers and traditions that can unfairly disadvantage women and diverse talent, including outdated views on leadership skills, experience and potential and lack of flexibility.
- Interrogate whether systems reward actual leadership capability or replicate cultural biases about merit.

Selection approach

- Limited transparency in CEO recruitment criteria and processes creates ambiguity and allows biases to favour familiar leadership profiles.
- Women and diverse candidates are often seen as 'risky' due to unconventional career paths and perceived reputational risks.
- Men are still more likely to hold stepping-stone CEO roles, so the external talent pool for senior appointments is skewed from the outset. When Boards seek external candidates with CEO experience to be included in the mix, women internal candidates are disadvantaged as they often haven't yet had the opportunity to 'tick the CEO box'.

- Develop structured, inclusive and forward-thinking CEO pipeline planning strategies.
- Ensure CEO selection process is transparent and evidence-based, and rationale for appointment is clearly communicated.
- Boards document how each candidate aligns to agreed criteria, challenge subjective judgments that favour familiarity, and ensure diverse experiences are valued equally.

Enabling leadership success

- Women and diverse leaders are more likely to face subtle doubts, scrutiny or second-guessing of their capabilities – even after a rigorous selection process.
- Diverse leaders are often placed under a spotlight, expected to simultaneously deliver exceptional results and drive cultural change – a double burden that can lead to burnout or attrition if not proactively supported.
- In historically male-dominated sectors, the culture may be slow to adapt to different leadership styles, creating misalignment and exclusion. Many women and diverse CEOs may be the 'first' or 'only' in their context, increasing the risk of isolation and making informal leadership networks harder to access.
- While Boards may publicly support diverse appointments, unspoken discomfort or resistance from teams can slow progress or create cultural drag.

- Ensure the CEO is actively supported through transition and beyond.
- Boards and executives model respect, challenge outdated norms, and share responsibility for leadership success.

2. Key roles in CEO pipeline planning

Building diverse, inclusive and future-ready CEO pipelines requires clear accountability and collaboration across the organisation. While the Board ultimately owns CEO appointments, CEOs, People and Culture teams, managers and employees all play key roles in shaping diverse leadership pipelines and embedding inclusive practices. For the purposes of this document, we focus on Boards, CEOs, and People and Culture teams.

Role	Board Chair and Directors	CEO	People and Culture teams
Responsibilities	• CEO pipeline planning is a critical Board responsibility, shaping the future leadership, culture and strategic direction of an organisation. Many Boards are now focused on ensuring that CEO pipeline processes are inclusive, future-fit and reflective of the full breadth of leadership talent available. • Boards leading on inclusion and gender equality are asking for visibility into CEO pipeline criteria, processes and outcomes – including progress on gender balance, the depth of diverse talent pipelines, and the systems that enable or constrain access to top roles. • Strong practice includes setting clear and transparent criteria and processes, along with incentives and accountability for ensuring that diverse talent is getting access to the critical experiences required for CEO readiness. • Board Chairs and key Board Committees are uniquely positioned to influence CEO pipeline outcomes by setting the agenda early, fostering consensus across diverse Board perspectives, championing accountability for inclusion, and defining clear expectations with recruiters for future-fit candidate slates.	• CEO leadership is essential to advancing inclusive CEO pipeline planning. It requires setting the standard, oversight and accountability, and driving sustained change across the organisation. CEOs signal what matters, and when inclusion is embedded into strategic priorities, talent systems follow. • Regardless of the starting point, CEOs must lead deliberate, data-informed action that ensures gender-balanced and inclusive leadership pipelines for the future.	• People and Culture teams lead the implementation of inclusive CEO pipeline planning. They embed CEO skills, capability and experience criteria into talent systems; ensure fair and consistent assessment processes; and support data-driven decision-making. Their role also includes designing stretch opportunities, enabling visibility of diverse talent, facilitating executive development, and tracking progress across the pipeline with a focus on capability, performance, equity and diversity.

“

The most important role of a Board is to appoint the CEO. That job is infinitely easier if you have a deep pool and diverse talent to choose from so you can secure exactly the right person with the right skills for the challenges that lie ahead.

”

James Fazzino
Convenor
Champions of Change Coalition National 2015, National 2017 and Energy Group

2. Key roles in CEO pipeline planning

Role	Managers	Employees	Recruiters
Responsibilities	When equipped and accountable, managers can be powerful advocates for capability and performance-based progression that expands the leadership pipeline. They identify and develop emerging talent, create inclusive team cultures, support employees with caring responsibilities, and play a critical role in providing stretch opportunities and feedback. Their influence shapes who gains visibility, sponsorship, and access to critical roles and experiences.	Employees can help shape inclusive CEO pipeline outcomes by actively engaging in their own career development and progression. This includes understanding the requirements, seeking feedback, pursuing growth opportunities, and building credibility and respect through stretch assignments and cross-functional exposure. By voicing barriers, contributing to an inclusive culture, and navigating their own career pathways, employees help broaden the leadership pipeline and demonstrate readiness for future executive roles.	- Recruiters have significant influence in who is seen as 'CEO-ready' by broadening search criteria, sourcing beyond traditional networks, and ensuring shortlists are genuinely diverse. - Recruiters also play a critical role in respectfully challenging the brief to disrupt narrow notions of merit or 'fit', supporting Boards and Chairs to see alternative pathways and undervalued leadership capabilities.

“

I was very conscious from early on that I wanted to create as many options for myself as possible – and from early in my professional career, I realised that to have the opportunity to be considered for a CEO role that I needed to get ‘line’ (or Profit & Loss) experience. So, I asked for and accepted such opportunities, and knocked back opportunities to take on ‘functional’ roles – even if in some cases they would have arguably been more senior.

”

Kathryn Fagg AC
Director
Champions of Change Coalition

3. A conversation guide

Champions of Change Coalition's approach is to listen, learn, lead with action, and reflect on our own experiences, perspectives and assumptions to identify opportunities for improvement.

To better understand different approaches to building inclusive CEO pipelines, Members of the Champions of Change Property Group conducted approximately 40 interviews with CEOs, Non-Executive Directors, Chief People Officers, and recruiters. The insights gathered from these interviews informed the approach outlined in this resource.

The following conversation guide was used during the interviews and can be used to prompt your own reflections or spark meaningful discussions on inclusive CEO pipeline planning among Boards and Executive teams.

3. A conversation guide

CEO conversation guide



CEO pathways and appointment patterns

- What have been the most common pathways to the CEO role in your organisation or sector?
- Are there specific roles or experiences you see as essential stepping stones for future CEOs?
- How have you challenged traditional thinking about what qualifies someone to become a CEO?
- Are you seeing shifts in what Boards or stakeholders expect from future CEOs – in leadership style, background or capability?

CEO pipeline strategy and governance

- Do you have a formal CEO pipeline for your own role? If so, how far ahead is it planned and reviewed?
- How is CEO pipeline planning treated in your organisation – as a contingency plan, a risk mitigation tool, or a strategic investment?
- What structures (e.g. Board committee, CEO involvement) support disciplined, inclusive CEO pipeline planning?
- Have you built internal CEO-ready candidates, and how do you track their readiness over time?

Bias, risk and objectivity in CEO selection

- How do you and your Board assess 'CEO readiness' in a way that challenges bias and expands the candidate pool?
- Have you encountered perceptions of 'risk' in elevating non-traditional or diverse CEO candidates? How have you responded?
- What frameworks or tools help your organisation move beyond intuition and bias in CEO pipeline decisions?
- How do you ensure high-potential internal candidates are not overlooked in favour of external 'safe bets'?

Candidate identification and exposure

- How early do you identify internal talent as potential future CEOs – and how do you ensure they are seen by the Board?
- How do you provide stretch opportunities or strategic assignments that build CEO readiness?
- What's your approach to balancing experience and potential when considering future CEOs?
- How do you ensure high-potential women and diverse candidates are not just identified, but truly positioned for CEO success?

External partnerships: Search and selection

- What do you require from executive search firms in CEO appointment processes to ensure diverse shortlists?
- How do you assess whether search partners understand your expectations around an inclusive CEO candidate slate?
- Have you found innovative practices in CEO searches that helped surface a broader, more diverse slate?

Board dynamics and accountability

- How involved is your Board in setting expectations for a gender-balanced and diverse CEO pipeline?
- How does your Board monitor progress and hold you or the executive team accountable for CEO pipeline outcomes?
- Has your Board's own composition influenced how the CEO pipeline is approached?
- What governance mechanisms support alignment between the Board and executive on CEO appointments?

Lessons learned and leading practice

- What has worked well – and what hasn't – in your experience with CEO pipelines?
- If you could shift one mindset or practice in CEO pipelines today, what would it be?
- What unexpected value or impact has come from making CEO pipelines more inclusive?

3. A conversation guide

Non-Executive Director conversation guide



Board leadership and influence

- How do you view the Board's role in shaping and overseeing gender-balanced CEO pipeline planning?
- What levers do non-executive directors have to influence inclusive CEO pipelines – formally and informally?
- What specific actions or behaviours distinguish Boards that are leading on this?

Structures, metrics and accountability

- What governance mechanisms have been most effective in embedding inclusive CEO pipeline planning?
- What metrics or indicators do you consider essential to track progress and hold leaders accountable?
- How can Boards ensure that accountability for inclusion is sustained – not just episodic?

Barriers, bias and awareness gaps

- What common challenges have you encountered when Boards try to embed diversity and gender balance at CEO level?
- Where do you think Boards and organisations most often underestimate bias in CEO pipeline decisions?
- How have you seen Boards identify and address gaps in their CEO pipeline practices?

Leading practice and lessons learned

- Can you share a compelling example of a Board-led approach to inclusive CEO pipeline planning?
- What strategies or conditions helped make that successful?
- Looking back, what key lessons or insights have shaped your thinking on inclusive CEO appointments?

3. A conversation guide

Recruiter conversation guide



Landscape and industry insight

- Based on your experience, what are the most common pathways to CEO roles in the [insert] sector?
- Where do you see the greatest barriers to entry for women and diverse candidates in CEO pipelines?
- Are traditional definitions of 'CEO-ready' in the [insert] sector evolving? If so, how?

Building the pipeline

- What practical steps could strengthen the pipeline of CEO-ready women in [industry], particularly from non-traditional pathways?
- How do you identify and nurture high-potential women for future CEO roles – even if they are not 'ready now'?
- What's needed to ensure these efforts are sustained rather than one-off initiatives?

Influence and role of search firms

- What influence do executive recruiters have in shaping gender-balanced CEO shortlists? Can you share examples where that influence has driven change?
- What actions has your firm taken – internally or with clients – to embed inclusive practices in senior executive searches?
- How do you challenge client assumptions about what a 'strong' or 'safe' CEO candidate looks like?

Results and reflections

- Can you share an example of a successful appointment that came from applying a more inclusive search approach?
- What lessons have you learned from working with organisations that are leading in inclusive CEO pipeline planning?

4. Looking across the horizon: A time-based lens for building future-ready CEO pipelines

Building an inclusive and future-ready CEO pipeline takes time, commitment and deliberate action to ensure the best candidates are identified, developed and set up for success.

This requires Board Chairs and Directors, CEOs and People & Culture teams to think earlier and differently about building CEO Pipelines, shifting focus from individuals to building a pipeline of readiness.

A robust pipeline means broadening access to the roles, relationships and experiences that equip leaders for CEO success. It also requires clarity on the organisation's long-term strategy, defining the CEO success profile around leadership capabilities and critical experiences, and alignment between strategy and succession planning before considering names.

Critically, perceptions of leadership potential are often formed well before someone reaches the executive team. That's why early investment in development, stretch and sponsorship is essential to ensure a diverse pool of leaders are ready when the moment comes.

An effective CEO pipeline takes shape across three time horizons. Each requires tailored action to build depth, diversity and capability.

Short term 0–2 years

Focus on preparing senior leaders

- Assess internal candidates against the agreed CEO success profile, confirm readiness and close final development gaps, ensuring they can make timely, decisive choices in complex contexts.
- Provide exposure to Boards, investors, media and other external stakeholders, strengthening ability to align diverse stakeholders for impact.
- Ensure internal visibility and confidence in leadership capability.
- Offer tailored transition support, including executive coaching or role shadowing.
- Maintain visibility of diverse external candidates to benchmark and strengthen options.

Medium term 2–5 years

Focus on developing senior leaders and high-potential talent

- Place leaders in stretch roles across critical operational or commercial areas including 'catapult' assignments to develop adaptability and decisiveness.
- Link targeted development plans to strategic priorities, embedding reliability through consistent delivery in new and challenging contexts.
- Encourage cross-functional, cross-sector, or geographic mobility to build breadth and the capacity to adapt boldly and solve problems at scale.
- Make sponsorship and senior advocacy a core leadership accountability.
- Map broader external markets and identify diverse external talent early. Encourage exposure and information engagement well before vacancies arise.

Long term 5–10 years

Focus on cultivating emerging executive CEO potential

- Embed diversity throughout the pipeline from graduate intake to executive levels.
- Track representation, progression and retention to accelerate talent.
- Invest in structured mentoring, sponsorship and leadership programs, with a particular focus on underrepresented groups.
- Regularly assess leadership team composition and feeder roles to ensure a wide range of perspectives and experiences are represented.
- Apply inclusive, structured methods to identify and develop potential leaders, with particular focus on those who demonstrate adaptability and the resilience to recover from setbacks.
- Build enterprise and commercial leadership capabilities from an early stage.



CEO succession is not an event, it is a process that must start early and run through every level of the organisation. Building a pipeline of diverse talent, from graduates to executives, requires alignment between the Board, led by the Chair, the CEO, and the People and Culture team. Success depends on defining the future success profile, developing internal leaders while staying attuned to the external market, and holding themselves accountable for diversity and leadership outcomes.



5. Strengthening decision-making

Merit is a principle most leaders value deeply. We all want to appoint the most capable, experienced and high-potential candidate. But in practice, 'merit' is rarely neutral. It's shaped by assumptions about what good leadership looks like, how it's developed, and who fits the mould created by incumbents.

Research demonstrates that what counts as 'merit' is often based on traditional career paths, while collaborative, community-oriented and non-linear leadership experiences are undervalued.

If we don't examine how we define and assess merit, it can easily become a shortcut for familiarity. People who have followed familiar paths, led in familiar ways, or come from similar backgrounds are more likely to be recognised as having 'proven' leadership. That doesn't always mean they're the best person for the role – just the most easily recognisable.¹²

Merit should be defined and assessed based on an agreed set of skills, capabilities, experience, performance and future potential. There should be clear, consistent criteria, rather than it being left to gut feel or cultural comfort. It should recognise the value of diverse leadership styles, experiences, and ways of working.

In 2016, Champions of Change Coalition and Chief Executive Women released [In the eye of the beholder: Avoiding the merit trap](#) to help leaders recognise how subjective definitions of 'merit' can unintentionally limit inclusive leadership outcomes.

Building on these insights, the following practical tool supports Boards, CEOs and senior executives to proactively identify and disrupt biased decision-making patterns. By challenging outdated assumptions and broadening perspectives, leaders can make genuinely merit-based, objective decisions, ensuring diverse talent has equitable opportunities to progress into senior roles, including CEO positions.

“

Women aren't held back by a lack of confidence – they make thoughtful, deliberate decisions about the roles they take. They consider the opportunity, how they will be supported in the role, and how it fits with their broader responsibilities. That's leadership in action.

Yet too often, this approach is misread as reluctance, and talented women are overlooked. If we want more and diverse women in senior roles, we must challenge these biases and find ways to enable their careers.

”

Michelle McNally

Group Director, Customer & Asset Management
Vicinity Centres,
and Former CEO, Aware Real Estate

“

As a woman of colour, I've often felt the pressure to shrink parts of myself just to fit into leadership moulds that weren't built with me in mind. Too often, executive presence is measured against narrow, traditional standards, which means people like me have to work twice as hard just to be seen. But when I had leaders who valued authenticity over conformity, I was able to grow, lead and progress.

Experiences like that show me it is possible to build workplaces where people can bring their unique perspectives to help the organisation better understand and serve the communities, customers and clients they work with.

”

5. Strengthening decision-making

Recognising and testing common thinking patterns

Before making a leadership decision, take a moment to reflect on whether any of these thinking patterns may be at play.

Thinking patterns	Description	Example	Key questions/bias disrupters
Affinity bias	Preferring candidates who share similarities in background, experience or appearance, reinforcing the status quo.	“ He’s a great cultural fit for the team.	• <i>Does this candidate ‘fit’ because they resemble past leaders?</i> • <i>Am I favouring someone who reminds me of myself or shares a similar background?</i> • <i>What unique strengths, perspectives, or skills does this candidate bring to add value to the team?</i> • <i>What opportunities are we forgoing if we don’t look beyond ‘the usual suspects’?</i>
Conservatism bias	Resisting new approaches or diverse candidates due to preference for traditional methods.	“ We’ve always done it this way.	• <i>Am I favouring traditional approaches or dismissing new perspectives?</i> • <i>Am I resisting change because it challenges the way we’ve always done things?</i>
Confirmation bias	Seeking information that confirms existing beliefs while ignoring contradictory evidence.	“ I knew she wasn’t leadership material.	• <i>Am I only considering evidence that supports my view?</i> • <i>Am I evaluating this candidate based on skills or looking for justification to confirm my bias?</i>

5. Strengthening decision-making

Thinking patterns	Description	Example	Key questions/bias disrupters
Assessment asymmetry	Women face harsher scrutiny and receive less credit for success and more blame for failure. Mothers may be perceived as less ambitious or less committed to their careers. This is a systemic disadvantage known as the 'motherhood penalty', which can result in lower wages, fewer promotions, and hiring discrimination. In contrast, fathers may experience a 'fatherhood bonus', where becoming a parent leads to perceptions of greater stability and responsibility, sometimes even resulting in higher pay and career advancement.	“ She is a great performer, but some people think she's cold and distant. “ We couldn't have done it without her, but wasn't he a great leader. “ She probably won't be interested now that she has a family.	• <i>Am I scrutinising some candidates more harshly than others based on factors unrelated to competence?</i> • <i>Am I holding women/diverse candidates to higher performance standards?</i> • <i>Am I making assumption based on caring responsibilities?</i>
Leadership stereotypes	Leadership is still judged through a gendered and cultural lens. Women must balance being competent yet likable, while traits praised in men – such as decisiveness – are often seen as aggressive in women. Outdated ideas of 'executive presence' shape who is seen as leadership material.	“ He's a strong, decisive leader. She's too assertive.	• <i>Do I have a rigid idea of what a leader 'should' look like, where they should come from, or how they should behave?</i> • <i>Am I questioning a candidate's leadership credibility based on outdated cultural or gendered expectations?</i> • <i>Am I evaluating women differently for displaying leadership traits that are praised in men?</i> • <i>Am I judging assertive women more harshly than men?</i>
Risk perception	Appointment of diverse candidates may be seen as riskier than appointment of those from traditional backgrounds.	“ She's great, but she's not ready yet.	• <i>Am I perceiving candidates from non-traditional backgrounds as higher risk?</i> • <i>Am I conflating unfamiliarity or diversity with risk?</i> • <i>Am I unfairly assuming lack of experience or capability?</i> • <i>What evidence am I relying on to define 'readiness', and is it applied consistently across candidates?</i> • <i>Would I assess this candidate differently if they fitted a more traditional leadership profile?</i>

5. Strengthening decision-making

Thinking patterns	Description	Example	Key questions/bias disrupters
Halo and horn effect	Allowing one positive (halo) or negative (horn) trait to overly influence candidate evaluation.	“ He gave such an amazing presentation at the leadership conference last month – I think he’s ready to step into the CEO role. “ She pushed back quite strongly in that executive committee meeting – that kind of aggressive behaviour isn’t what we’re looking for in our C-suite.	• <i>Am I letting a single trait or first impression overshadow a balanced assessment of the candidate’s overall capability?</i>
Traditional career paths	Leadership potential is often assessed based on conventional career trajectories, overlooking diverse experiences.	“ Shareholders expect a CEO with a finance or operations background – innovation/entrepreneurial experience is great but just doesn’t align with the usual path.	• <i>Am I favouring candidates who have followed traditional leadership trajectories?</i> • <i>Am I overlooking diverse leadership experiences, including entrepreneurial, cross-industry or functional experience?</i>
Proximity bias	Favouring those most visible to leadership, overlooking equally capable but less connected candidates.	“ I don’t know her; I haven’t spent any time with her.	• <i>Am I giving more opportunities to people who have the most visibility to current leaders?</i> • <i>Am I excluding remote or less visible talent?</i>

5. Strengthening decision-making

Thinking patterns	Description	Example	Key questions/bias disrupters
Cultural expectations	A lack of diverse leaders reinforces the perception that leadership isn't accessible to under-represented groups.	“ Our overseas clients might not feel comfortable with a woman CEO. “ I'm not sure our industry is ready for someone from their background in such a visible leadership role. “ I don't see anyone who looks like me in senior leadership here, so I'm not sure if this is the right move. I worry that being the 'first' means I won't be accepted, and I'll have to be twice as good just to be seen as equal.	• <i>Have I considered how a lack of role models may impact candidates' leadership opportunities?</i> • <i>Am I ensuring there are opportunities and visible role models for diverse talent? Am I providing tailored supports?</i> • <i>Am I assuming this candidate lacks ambition? Have I directly asked the candidate about their aspirations?</i>

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We're using AI to identify patterns in language, recognition and decision-making that reveal hidden bias – helping us see what often goes unnoticed.

For example, analysing differences in how men and women are described gives us insight into dynamics we might otherwise miss. By shifting from gut feel to data-based criteria for development, hiring and promotion, we're building fairer systems and more inclusive outcomes.

”

5. Strengthening decision-making

Thinking patterns	Description	Example	Key questions/bias disrupters
The confidence gap	Confidence is often misread as competence, but its display is judged differently depending on who's showing it. Women, especially from diverse backgrounds, may hesitate not from lack of capability, but from strategic awareness of greater scrutiny and bias. Assertiveness seen as strength in men may be penalised in women. These double standards distort leadership assessments and narrow the CEO pipeline.	“ He's a natural leader – he speaks with such confidence. “ She's great, but she needs to back herself more before she's ready for the top job. I'm not sure she sees herself as a CEO. “ Even though I've been in senior roles for years, I still feel like I have to prove I belong in every executive meeting. “ Sometimes I wonder if they only see me as the 'diverse candidate', even though I have more experience than most of the leadership team.	• <i>Am I mistaking confidence for competence, and am I applying this standard consistently across all candidates?</i> • <i>Am I mistaking caution for non-readiness, rather than having strategic awareness of the additional scrutiny and risks for women?</i>

Challenge your thinking – a quick self-check



Use these prompts to pause and assess your reasoning:

- Would I make the same decision if the candidate had no disability, or was a different gender, age, cultural background, or from another career path?
- Am I prioritising familiarity and comfort over the potential for fresh perspectives and impact?
- Have I given all candidates an equal opportunity to demonstrate their skills and leadership potential?
- Am I mistaking confidence for competence, and am I applying this standard consistently?
- Am I defaulting to traditional, individualised notions of merit?
- Have I considered potential, cultural leadership, or the needs of the executive team as a whole?

Elevating and advancing women in all their diversity

Efforts to advance gender equality, including women's representation in leadership, have not benefited all women equally. Women facing overlapping and compounding barriers such as racism or ableism remain significantly under-represented in leadership pathways.

Inclusive gender equality requires considering and engaging all people in efforts to achieve gender equality, with a particular focus on elevating and advancing currently under-represented and marginalised groups. The goal is to create respectful, safe and inclusive cultures of belonging for all.

Building CEO pipelines that reflect the breadth of talent in our communities means increasing the visibility of this talent, ensuring diverse perspectives inform decisions, and embedding structural change to remove systemic barriers. This calls for sustained, intentional action, including:

- capturing and amplifying the experiences of under-represented women through disaggregated data and targeted listening and learning
- co-designing solutions that address barriers faced by women with diverse lived experiences
- tracking and assessing all actions in this resource to ensure equitable outcomes for women in all their diversity.

By highlighting specific groups who experience exclusion, we make their experiences visible and build understanding of how exclusion operates in organisations and society.

Throughout this document, the terms 'women', 'women in all their diversity', 'women experiencing intersecting inequalities' and 'diverse people' are used. 'Women' includes cis, intersex and trans women. 'Women experiencing intersecting inequalities' refers to the structural inequalities and multiple, intersecting and compounding barriers to inclusion and progression faced by women from socio-economically disadvantaged backgrounds; First Nations women; ethnically and/or racially marginalised women; single parents and sole caregivers; women with disability (visible or invisible); neurodivergent women; and LGBTIQ+ women. 'Diverse people' refers to the variety of people and identities that make up the population.

Our goal is to develop a diverse, inclusive leadership pipeline that reflects the full breadth of talent in our communities, strengthening organisations and ensuring everyone has the opportunity to contribute and succeed. We welcome engagement, insights and feedback to inform our ongoing learning and strengthen our collective efforts.

“

When talent from diverse backgrounds help design solutions, we see the opportunities and barriers more clearly. Leaders have a responsibility to open pathways so diverse talent can thrive, lead, and strengthen our organisations.

”

Dale Connor

COO and CEO, Construction
Lendlease

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Being part of CEO conversations on succession planning showed me what it takes to build a pathway to leadership and why emerging women need to be in the room. The absence of culturally diverse women in senior roles is clear, and change will take recognition, visibility, and a very specific and targeted approach to talent development and sponsorship.

”

Emerging Leader

Lendlease

Learn more about the pilot by Champions of Change Coalition and Lendlease on listening and learning from women with diverse lived experiences: championsofchangecoalition.org/resource/building-diverse-and-inclusive-ceo-pipelines

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Champions of Change Coalition includes CEOs, secretaries of government departments, non-executive directors and community leaders who believe gender equality is a major business, economic, societal and human rights issue. Established in 2010 by Elizabeth Broderick AO, our mission is to achieve inclusive gender equality across our workplaces by 2030 and a significant and sustainable increase in the representation of women in leadership.

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