

Gender equality leadership

Understanding barriers to gender equality at your school

Background

EREA's Pathways to Leadership program was designed in response to EREA's gender equality strategy, which found several barriers prevented women from aspiring to leadership positions at equal rates to men. These barriers contribute to low levels of women in top leadership positions with less than 1 in 5 principals and just over 1 in four deputy principals across EREA schools being women.

As sponsors in this program, your role is to understand and address the often invisible barriers that prevent women from reaching senior leadership positions in your school. The first step is to meet with women in your school and explore their lived experience via listening and learning conversations.

To support that process, we have prepared a summary of the barriers that were identified in EREA's gender equality strategy. It's important to note that while these findings reflected insights from dozens of EREA teachers, leaders and administrators, they are not universally true. That means women in your school might not experience these issues and/or there may be other challenges that impact women more than men.

We then outline a simple process for assessing your school's challenges and opportunities.

Common gender equality barriers

Gender stereotypes and the dominant archetype

Ascending the path to senior leadership depends on so much more than raw talent. Your networks, personality type, confidence and life capacity are all major contributors to your ability to navigate organisational systems, capture opportunities and manage the intensity that leadership aspirations bring.

This reality means some people face more potholes, dead-ends and detours than others. How much you fit in with the dominant archetype is a major indicator of the ease of your path. Gender is a key predictor of the dominant archetype, especially in the all-boys educational setting.

EREA's gender strategy diagnostic revealed a widespread perception that an 'EREA man' and 'EREA leader' is built on a hetero-normative masculine stereotype – a white man, who's engaged in sport, works full-time, has a commanding presence and a deep voice. Former EREA students were also perceived to have a particularly strong position.

This common view of an ideal leader is reinforced in the school's role in guiding the formation of young men. We identified an entrenched view that this was a role best suited to the typical EREA man, creating a barrier for women being considered for leadership positions. It also holds women back from applying because they discount themselves.

Externally, there is also a perception that some parents only want male leaders as role models and only certain types of females would want to work in an all-boys school.

Women also reported being unfairly judged when they assertively spoke up and/or challenged others in meetings. This is known as 'stereotype backlash', and it arises from socially conditioned views that women should be compliant. That means when they're not, they're judged more harshly than men for the same behaviour.

Lack of transparency around leadership opportunities

Without a formal talent mapping process program, some EREA schools are heavily reliant on networks and recommendation-based appointments for leadership roles. The 'tap on the shoulder' method is known to favour men.

In the diagnostic we also found men were more likely to have access to mentors who supported their career success, confounding the barriers created by a lack of transparency around leadership opportunities.

Resistance to change

Among some male teachers and leaders, there was an overt resistance to acknowledging any presence of a 'boys club' or any gender bias that created barriers for women. Without strong buy in to acknowledge the cultural and structural barriers for women to become leaders of EREA schools, progress will be slow.

Work intensification and the lack of flexible working options

The increasing demands of the principal and other leadership roles present very real barriers for women and men who are not willing or able to make the lifestyle sacrifices that come with significant community leadership.

This high stress role has now become a 'lifestyle choice' that lacks work/life balance and hasn't evolved in nature from one that was previously designed to be held by Brothers whose lives were dedicated to the School and Church.

It is more difficult for women who are primary carers to take on those commitments, especially when their children are young. Part-time or job-share leadership roles are a highly effective way of addressing those challenges – for women and men. These are uncommon in leadership roles.

In addition, when women take parental leave, this time is deducted from their tenure calculation, impacting their recorded years of experience when applying for promotions.

A culture of mismanaging under-performers

When we ran the Pathways to Leadership program in 2020, the aspiring female leaders identified the mismanagement of underperformers as a major impediment to their aspirations. A failure to manage poor performers meant top talent carried the load. In an environment where heavy demands prevent women from aspiring to leadership, creating a culture of accountability is critical for smoothing their path.

Confidence and career preferences

Our diagnostic revealed women were more likely than men to favour classroom teaching to fulfil their purpose, with the perception that leaderships roles were weighed down by bureaucracy and compliance. A lack of confidence in their ability to fulfil those responsibilities, and other leadership duties, confounded their hesitation.

Empathy conversations: Understanding barriers at your school

To prepare for our first session on Monday 16 May, we request you have some empathy conversations with women at your school. Here's a template for how they run:

1. Select 3 – 5 participants who can provide a cross-section of views (e.g. different levels of experience, cultural backgrounds or tenure). You may choose to conduct a series of 1 on 1 conversations or have a conversation with a group.
2. Position the conversation in the context of gender equality and your commitment to understand the lived experience of women at your school.
3. Prime the conversation by sharing this document as background and ask if these women relate to these challenges.
4. Open the discussion with this question: "What's it like being a woman at [name of school]?"
5. Listen and learn. Probe by asking "tell me more about X, Y, Z", as often as needed until all issues are exhausted.
6. Conclude by asking what you can do as Principal or a senior leader to address these barriers.
7. Reflect on what you've heard and come to our first session with insights to share with the group.