

CULTIVATE

Grow your talent with sponsorship

WILLOW

**Leveraging Sponsorship
for Gender Equality and
Inclusive Company
Culture**

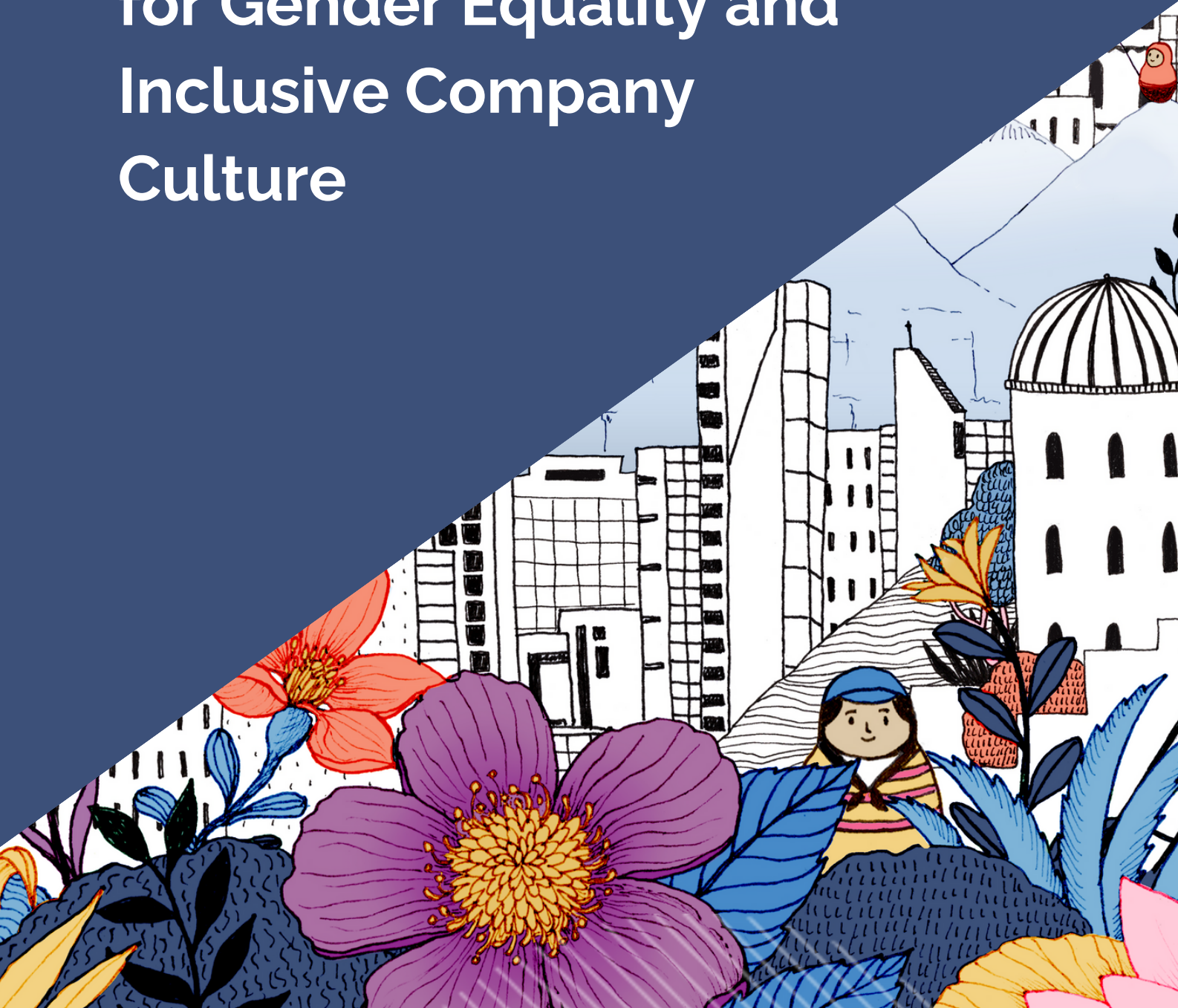


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Executive Summary

A common claim heard across industries is that professional development programs targeted to women offer women an unfair advantage. Unfair advantage assumes that companies are a level playing field where career advancement is a fair and open contest at each point of promotion. In other words, hard work, talent, education and individual attributes are what moves individuals ahead.

While we're starting to see some shifts in the way we have these conversations, many workplaces are still far away from real change.

Cultivated in the right way, workplace sponsorship has the potential to be an effective game-changer, not just for women facing entrenched structural barriers at work, but also for leaders to really step up and start thinking deeply about the ways gender equality can be improved in their workplace.

A sponsorship program targeted at emerging female leaders, and owned by senior management, is a necessary strategy to overcome biases and systemic barriers to women's advancement. Progressive companies recognise that creating a transparent, more equitable system of sponsorship boosts the company's ability to utilise its whole talent pool.

If organisations want to create genuine, equitable conditions for women, then they must be prepared to embed targeted solutions, such as sponsorship.





Introduction

There has been decades of research into gender equality, but businesses are not necessarily seeing results from the programs and targets they are putting in place. Cultivate Sponsorship is for businesses that are looking for a program backed by research that will help them attract and retain talented women and see them progress into leadership roles throughout the span of their careers.

The Cultivate Sponsorship program was built on Australian research into what drives the differential outcomes in women's and men's career progression, and one of the key elements is informal networks of sponsorship. High-potential women are over-mentored and under-sponsored relative to their male peers. Cultivate is about providing the tools to change behaviour and workplace culture and putting knowledge into action.

This White Paper defines gender equality, inclusion and the role that sponsorship plays in overcoming biases and systemic barriers to women's advancement. Moreover, the paper outlines the difference between sponsorship and mentorship, explains how sponsorship can address gender imbalance in leadership, discusses the challenges companies may face when implementing sponsorship and illustrates the positive outcomes of sponsorship programs.

Understanding Gender Equality and Inclusion

Gender equality is when people of all genders have equal rights, responsibilities and opportunities (State Government of Victoria, 2021). Sustainable Development Goals 5 and 10 of the United Nations 2030 Agenda focus on achieving gender equality and reducing inequality through the social, economic and political inclusion of all. The UN explains, "gender equality is not only a fundamental human right, but a necessary foundation for a peaceful, prosperous and sustainable world." (UN Women – Headquarters, 2022).

A research report '*Women in leadership: Lessons from Australian companies leading the way*,' conducted by the Business Council of Australia, McKinsey & Company and the Workplace Gender Equality Agency, found that women constitute 42 percent of all employees, yet make up only a quarter of executive roles and only 10 percent of CEOs at large, profit companies. Although the report discovered that there has been significant progression in organisations creating and executing gender equality strategies, unfortunately this does not promise females that they will secure leadership positions and is not a sufficient tool for female leadership development. (Cermak, et al. 2018).

In an inclusive work culture, employees know they are an integral part of the organisation, and believe that differences in backgrounds, social identities, and life experiences are a strength, instead of a weakness. Employee perceptions of inclusion and acceptance in workplace culture can be one of the key predictors of employee engagement, turnover intentions, and burnout. (Centre for Creative Leadership, 2023).

A lack of gender equality impacts women in the workforce at all levels. For Australian women, pay parity remains an ongoing issue. The Workplace Gender Equality Agency summarised the latest update of the gender workplace statistics and found that the full-time average weekly ordinary earnings for women are 13.8 percent less than for men. This has decreased by 0.4 percent since May 2021. There is an evident decline in gender equality in the workplace meaning that programs such as Cultivate are critical to implementing cultural change (Workplace Gender Equality Agency, 2022).

The effects of the pandemic sadly brought forward real perceptions of women's jobs. According to the Centre for Creative Leadership (2022), the effects of the global pandemic saw women's jobs deemed as non-essential from the workforce in conjunction to men. Furthermore, the repercussion of lockdowns has seen 35 percent of the women who left or lost their jobs still unemployed as of February 2022. Even before the pandemic, women were vastly underrepresented in senior management roles and made up half of the workforce across the globe.

To offset the pandemic's recent hit to women's progress in the workforce – and continue to implement cultural change – organisations must provide women leaders with the resources and support they need to succeed such as offering the opportunity to participate in the Cultivate Sponsorship program. A vital step companies can take towards supporting women leaders is to prioritise sponsoring women, as sponsors are critical to helping aspiring women leaders gain the perspective and connections they need to take on larger roles and advance their careers.

In 2019, the World Economic Forum predicted it will take 257 years to close the economic gender gap (Thorne, 2020). This is not acceptable. Cultivate Sponsorship is laying the pavement for women's progression, by giving business leaders an active role in their career development along with a shift in awareness and mindset about the importance of committing to this as a part of their leadership legacy. Sponsorship is about empowerment. A culture of sponsorship is a culture of leadership, empathy, kindness, and a willingness to remove barriers that are in place for under-represented groups.



The Role of Sponsorship

Sponsorship is a strategic alliance between a senior leader and an emerging leader. Sponsors believe and invest in the careers of emerging leaders by giving them access to opportunity, supporting their skill development and advocating for them. When emerging leaders are recognised and supported, they add value to the company.

Research by Harvard Business Review (2010) demonstrates that whilst men and women access professional development programs, progression to leadership roles often depends on sponsorship – which women have a hard time accessing. Men are more likely to be offered promotions or assignments critical to advancement, for example – roles with high visibility, profit and loss responsibility or international assignments.

FIGURE 2-1
The definition of sponsorship



Diagram on Sponsorship by Harvard Business Review research report: The Sponsor Effect: Breaking Through the Last Glass Ceiling, page 7.

What mentorship lacks, sponsorship delivers. It is a strategic and proactive relationship developed between a senior leader and a high-potential team member. The senior leader sponsors the high-potential individual by providing tactical counsel, access to power networks and advocating on their behalf, gaining them access and exposure to high-profile projects and promotional opportunities within the organisation. Organisations can use sponsorship programs to reduce gender inequalities and empower women to break into leaders.

A sponsorship program targeted at emerging female leaders, and owned by senior management, is a necessary strategy to overcome biases and systemic barriers to women's advancement. Progressive companies recognise that creating a transparent, more equitable system of sponsorship boosts the company's ability to utilise its whole talent pool.

If organisations want to create genuine, equitable conditions for women, then they must be prepared to embed targeted solutions, such as sponsorship. Sponsorship creates a culture of genuine inclusion that is needed for both men and women's careers to thrive successfully and equally.

This diagram below by Catalyst (2019) outlines the differences between coaching, mentorship and sponsorship.

COACHES, MENTORS, AND SPONSORS: UNDERSTANDING THE DIFFERENCES

"A coach talks *to* you, a mentor talks *with* you, and a sponsor talks *about* you."

* Roles may sometimes overlap



COACH



MENTOR



SPONSOR

<p>A coach provides guidance for your development, often focused on soft skills (e.g., active listening) rather than technical skills (e.g., financial acumen).</p>	<p>A mentor informally or formally helps you navigate your career, providing guidance for career choices and decisions.</p>	<p>A sponsor is a senior leader or other person who uses strong influence to help you obtain high-visibility assignments, promotions, or jobs.</p>
<p>Who Drives the Relationship? You and your coach are responsible for driving the relationship—you can reach out to your coach when you need help, but your coach can also reach out to you.</p>	<p>Who Drives the Relationship? You drive the relationship. Your mentor is reactive and responsive to your needs.</p>	<p>Who Drives the Relationship? The sponsor drives the relationship, advocating for you in many settings, including behind closed doors.</p>
<p>Actions Provide development feedback outside the formal performance evaluation process.</p>	<p>Actions Help you determine possible career paths to meet specific career goals.</p>	<p>Actions Advocate for your advancement and champion your work and potential with other senior leaders.</p>





Benefits of Sponsorship for Gender Equality

C-Suite positions are typically designated from previous experience of line roles meaning that women are not typically in these jobs, creating a barrier for women's leadership trajectory. This is due to a lack of sponsorship painting the pathway for women to ensure that they receive the opportunity to grow and stepping-stone jobs.

A sponsorship program can embed a leadership style that inspires positive changes. A sponsor can implement procedural changes that will create a better workplace for all of its constituents. At a personal level, a sponsor is focussed on helping their sponsee achieve their goals. For a sponsee, transformational leadership can take place in the act of paying it forward. It can also take place when they feel like their voice, and the voice of their people, is being heard by their employer.

Cultivated in the right way, sponsorship has the potential to be a game-changer, not just for women facing entrenched structural barriers at work, but also for leaders to really step up and start thinking deeply about the ways gender equality can be improved in their workplace.

CASE STUDY: Male Leaders Dedicated to Sponsoring Women for Accelerated Success



CLIENT: Consult Australia is the peak body for the Built Environment industry which includes businesses providing design, advisory, and engineering services including large government public works projects to private sector projects in the built and natural environment.

PROBLEM/CHALLENGE: Gender imbalance at senior levels within organisations (notably male-dominated industries such as engineering, construction and the built environment) – Structural barriers to progression – Underrepresentation of females in senior management – Unclear pathways for female progression. (Cultivate Sponsorship, 2021).

SOLUTION: Consult Australia (through its Champions of Change Group) appointed Cultivate Sponsorship to build a customised sponsorship program to increase the proportion of women promoted and retained into leadership in member firms such as AECOM, GHD and Jacobs through effective sponsorship for all talent.

OUTCOMES: Recognition of the barriers to progression pathways – Retention of female talent in senior positions across participant companies – Building leadership capability and confidence to have the conversations needed and effectively advocate for sponsees across the business – Creating a culture of sponsorship that benefits all talent. (Cultivate Sponsorship, 2021).





**CASE STUDY: Inside the Cultivate Sponsorship program at AECOM:
How Sponsorship help can shift the dial on gender equality and assist
female talent thrive in their organisations.**



PROBLEM/CHALLENGE: AECOM sought to build on its existing policies and structures to facilitate more women entering leadership ranks. AECOM was looking to augment their approach to succession planning to create better visibility of future leaders amongst the leadership team.

SOLUTION: The Cultivate sponsorship program matched an original three pairs, including the CEO, as an innovative way to engage with a broader pool of female talent within AECOM, which has now grown to almost 20 pairs per year. This initiative aimed to help move the dial on gender equality and support female talent at AECOM thrive for sustaining change.

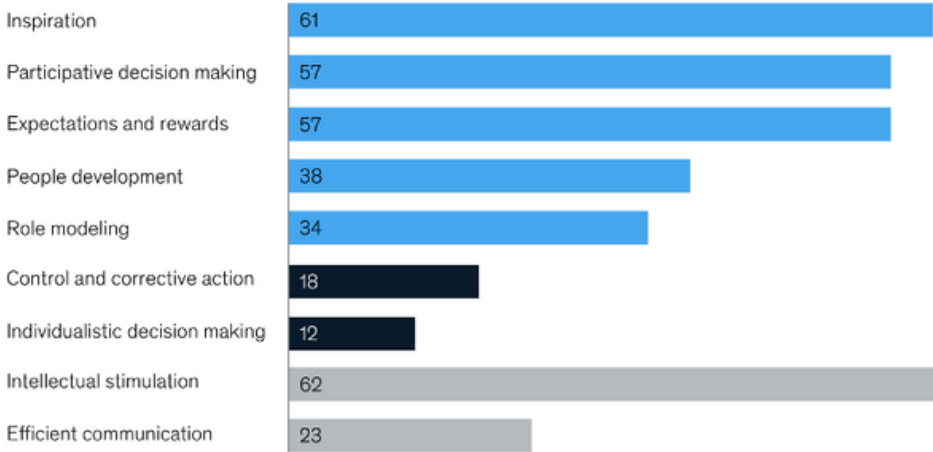
OUTCOMES: Another focused channel for addressing the gender imbalance in an industry-related male-dominant firm, sustained initiatives to promote and progress women, additional structures and relationships put in place to remove barriers, create more opportunities, and consistently help women move past inequalities.

A survey conducted by McKinsey & Company (2019) showed that women exhibit leadership traits more frequently than men.

Relative importance of nine leadership traits to addressing future challenges, % of top executives identifying behavior¹

Frequency of the behavior observed in each gender

■ Women apply more² ■ Men apply more ■ Women and men apply equally

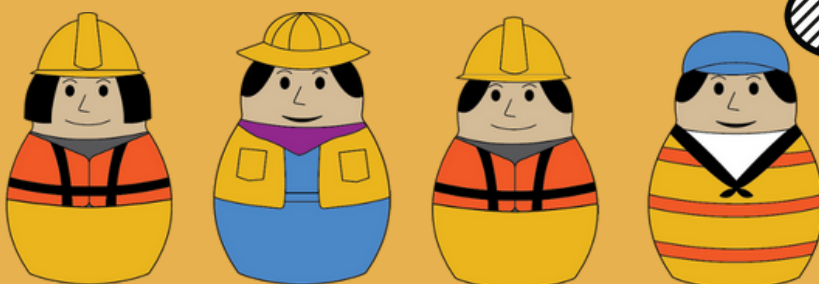


¹Respondents could choose up to 4 types of behavior.

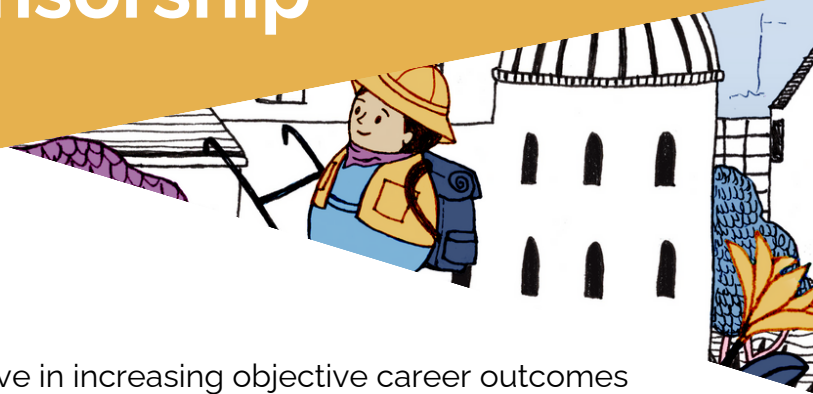
²Includes "apply more" and "apply slightly more"; the types of behavior the survey suggests that women should apply slightly more are inspiration and participative decision making.

Source: *Women Matter: Time to accelerate—Ten years of insights into gender diversity*, October 2017, McKinsey.com

Sponsors believe and invest in the careers of emerging leaders by giving them access to opportunity, supporting their skill development and advocating for them. When emerging leaders are recognised and supported through sponsorship, they add value to the company.



The challenges of Implementing a culture of sponsorship



Sponsorship has been found to be effective in increasing objective career outcomes such as promotions and pay increases by providing proactive career-related support. However, women are more likely to be offered mentoring with a peer who is not at the level of seniority they are aspiring to reach, whereas men are more likely to be actively sponsored by a senior member of the management team (Workplace Gender Equality Agency, 2016).

Without sponsorship, women are not only less likely than men to be appointed to top roles but may also be more reluctant to go for them (Ibarra, H, Carter NM & Silva C 2010).

A common misconception is that professional development programs targeted to women offer women an unfair advantage. Unfair advantage assumes that companies are a level playing field where career advancement is a fair and open contest at each point of promotion. In other words, hard work, talent, education and individual attributes are what moves individuals ahead.

In 2011, Catalyst released a report named 'Fostering Sponsorship Success among High Performers and Leaders'. The report found that in order to enable sponsorship in organisations, the following needs to be implemented:

1. Leading by example. As time progresses, those who were sponsored become sponsors.
2. Ensure the process of sponsorship is transparent to all those involved. When left to chance, there is no guarantee that it will work as planned and be inclusive of those who need it most.
3. There are processes in place to educate and build awareness of sponsorship and adequate training is available.
4. Structured team-based sponsorship approach facilitate equitable and diversity in sponsorship programs
5. Understand that there is a continuation of relationships that can emerge and evolve throughout the sponsorship program.
6. Ensure that sufficient information, support and resources are available



Introducing Willow: Our Gender Equality Sponsorship Program

Willow is the only comprehensive gender equality sponsorship program based on Australian research, focusing on talent progression and retention in the workplace. The program spans six months and is delivered through a user-friendly app, allowing flexible and convenient participation. The program features a combination of individual and paired exercises, creating an engaging and supportive environment for sponsors and sponsees alike. Key components of the program include:

1. Fortnightly Online Sessions: Participants will access 16 informative and interactive modules through our custom learning platform. These sessions provide valuable insights, practical strategies, and thought-provoking exercises designed to facilitate professional growth and advancement.
2. Monthly Sponsorship Pair Meetings: Sponsors and sponsees will meet monthly for structured one-hour sessions. These meetings offer a dedicated platform for discussing progress, setting goals, and nurturing a strong sponsorship relationship. Through these interactions, sponsors can provide guidance and support tailored to the unique needs of their sponsees.
3. Webinars with Cultivate Experts: Cultivate Sponsorship provides three webinars featuring expert insights to ensure continued progress and offer additional support. These webinars allow participants to check in on their progress, address any challenges, and receive valuable guidance from the Cultivate team.



Measurable Impact and Testimonials

To showcase the tangible impact of the Willow program, Cultivate Sponsorship provides an Impact Report based on a series of closed and open-ended questions asked at the beginning and end of the six-month program. These quotes directly highlight the transformative experiences and positive outcomes reported by previous program participants (Cultivate Sponsorship, 2023)

What Cultivate Sponsorship program participants say...

- 78 percent of women participants said the program de-mystified what senior leaders do in their organisation and they felt more likely to put their hand up for the job.
- 80 percent of sponsors said the program gave them a clear vision of the gender equality legacy they wanted to leave in their organisation.
- 89 percent of women participants said that the program gave them more confidence to go for a more senior role.





Building an Inclusive Sponsorship Culture

To create a supportive environment for sponsorship, a cultural change needs to be enforced in the workplace to make way for gender equality in leadership. A White Paper published by the Centre for Creative Leadership titled '*Unlearning your organisational culture*' explains that diverse teams drive better business performance and companies with more diversity become innovative, resilient, and better able to respond to the ever-shifting challenges (Creative Centre of Leadership, 2020).

Moreover, the paper goes on to explain that what actually determines whether a new initiative or undertaking will be successful is the ability to sustainably change workplace culture. A commitment to equity, diversity, and inclusion will create a strong organisational culture and an encouraging environment for sponsorship programs.



Conclusion



The 2023 Women's Agenda Women's Ambitions Report statistic, indicating that 25 percent of women surveyed are aiming for a promotion in the next two years, underscores the critical importance of sponsorship in advancing gender diversity and empowerment in the workplace. Sponsorship supports women in their career aspirations and fosters an environment where they can thrive, develop, and contribute significantly.

Sponsorship is about understanding that a sponsor and sponsee are on a parallel leadership journey that intersects with one another. It is not about 'fixing the sponsee' nor is it a passive relationship on the part of the sponsor. By partnering with organizations committed to sponsoring women, we support their career journeys and help drive progress towards more significant gender equity, ultimately benefiting businesses, society, and the women themselves.

It is through sponsorship that Australian workplaces will see real change in achieving equality and equity within corporate Australia.



WILLOW
GENDER EQUALITY PROGRAM

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