

Timely target at Treasury a 'light on the hill'

Corporate woman Catherine Fox

For many years secretary to the Treasury Martin Parkinson thought the lack of women in senior ranks would eventually sort itself out, but not any more.

Sure, it's important to have paid maternity leave and flexible work options, but he now believes that there's more to it than that.

Women make up 23 per cent of Treasury's senior executive service, compared with 37 per cent for the public service as a whole and 40 per cent in the Department of Prime Minister and Cabinet.

After reviewing the status of women, Treasury has decided to set a target of 35 per cent women in the senior executive ranks by 2016. Targets have also been set by a number of listed companies recently,

with women making up just 8 per cent of executive management in ASX 200 entities.

Parkinson is the first public sector leader to join the Male Champions of Change group set up by Sex Discrimination Commissioner

Elizabeth Broderick.

"I came to the conclusion we had some sort of systemic blocker that we needed to address," Parkinson says. "I don't ... mean we had conscious or deliberate bias, but often it was the way we thought about job design."

The department went through a review of the opportunities and challenges faced by women staff, which, Parkinson says, was like holding up a mirror.

"There are some things that are worthwhile doing because, for us, it's all about making us an employer of first choice and improving Treasury's effectiveness," he says. He also now believes that attributing all of the

barriers that women face to family commitments is a mistake and too convenient an explanation.

Apart from targets, the department is rethinking how work is structured, Parkinson says.

"The pressure Treasury works under ... makes us think we have to give the job with immediacy to the person who can sit there for the longest number of hours to do it — and that makes sense when you think about it as a task — but if you think of it as a risk strategy, if we had a big task we would not have one person but multiple people," he says.

Improving the level of women is a productivity and efficiency issue and about deepening the pool of leaders, Parkinson says.

Measurement of progress will be a key part of the department's focus on progressing women. An inclusive workplace committee has been established to monitor progress.

The initiatives have been driven by a desire to get to the real causes of the blockage, which Parkinson once thought would be "self-resolving".

"You become convinced that a lot of the things we had done — improved access to part-time work and childcare facilities — were important but ad hoc responses," he says. "No one is under the illusion there's a silver bullet. It won't be quick and requires a sustained effort from leadership and to measure our success."

"Not because we want to have a target per se, but because we wanted to be able to report back to staff on success we've had. If we are successful we'll see the proportion of women in senior ranks rise."

He adds: "It made sense for us to put a light on the hill by committing us to a target, but we are a merit-based organisation, this is not a quota."

Having watched a significant cohort of women coming out of economics degrees at university and with graduate recruitment split about 50/50 between men and women, there was a long-held belief the low levels of women further up the ladder would simply change over time.

So far, the push for more progress on gender representation has been positive, although Parkinson is well aware there are no easy answers.

"The overwhelming response has been positive. I said to the staff at the outset, 'I am going to disappoint almost every one of you. I will do things [which] some will believe have not gone as far as necessary and to others are unwarranted,'" he says.

"Some people think it's a moral issue. It's actually how you can put it into ... language that resonates with people."

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