



Confidence and Sponsorship

A winning partnership for achieving gender equity at senior leadership levels



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Executive Summary

Confidence and sponsorship – a winning partnership for achieving gender equity at senior leadership levels

A leadership development and sponsorship program is changing the way women and men perform and value themselves, and each other, across senior levels at KPMG Australia.

Determined to see more women in senior leadership roles, KPMG's executive team considered a different and more progressive approach was required to accelerate change. In supporting high potential female talent, the firm engaged an independent expert to formally leverage the reputational capital of its senior male Partners and empower its women with the confidence to take action when career opportunities arise.

Based on key requirements from KPMG's People Performance & Culture team the program was designed and delivered by Dr Jess Murphy and is known internally at KPMG as the Bird-Walton program. The program's design recognises that one of the greatest impediments to the advancement of women is their lack of access to senior sponsors, especially men. Over a 6-month period, the program challenges male Partners to step outside their comfort zones, become vulnerable and experience the workplace through the eyes' of the women they sponsor. Similarly, the women are exposed to the dynamics of senior leadership and inspired with the practical tools, inner knowledge and nuanced capabilities critical to becoming an effective and impactful leader.

Close to 200 people have participated in the program since May 2015. Independent qualitative and quantitative research by Australia's Deakin University and Cairnmillar Institute provides empirical evidence that the program is delivering ongoing measurable transformational leadership and behavioural change, helping deliver on the "Intervene on Talent" workstream in KPMG Australia's first Diversity and Inclusion strategy.

Overview

The KPMG Bird-Walton program is designed to empower high potential women with the confidence to take action when career opportunities arise and increase their organisational impact through senior leadership roles. It also evolves how senior male leaders use their own power and reputational capital to effectively advocate for women.

Honouring Nancy Bird-Walton, a pioneering aviatrix and champion of women's advancement, the pilot program brought together 24 of KPMG's high potential women and 24 male Partners as their sponsors to participate in a 6-month experience facilitated by Dr Jess Murphy involving interactive workshops, coursework and one-on-one sessions.

To measure the initial pilot program's behavioural change impact, Dr Jess Murphy engaged independent researchers to conduct a longitudinal research study involving the women and Partners along with the women's line managers. Deakin University in partnership with the Cairnmillar Institute supervised a series of qualitative interviews and quantitative surveys that were conducted over a 12 month period at three time points – pre-program, at the program's conclusion and 6 months following.

Key findings

KPMG's high potential women are performing with increased confidence and actively progressing their career goals as a result of the Bird-Walton program. Stepping into a more expanded self-identity, the women are utilising existing and new networks – often strengthened by their sponsors – to develop authentic relationships, raise their profile and increase their organisational impact.

Harnessing the power of sponsorship, the women are more willing to push the boundaries, less risk adverse, know what they stand for, and able to learn from these experiences and grow. Most importantly, the women are more comfortable and confident in their unique potential and what they can personally bring to senior leadership teams.

The program is also delivering substantial value for the Partners. In becoming a sponsor, many have experienced significant personal growth in the way they think and act – with some understanding for the first time the legacy they can create for others.

One of the biggest shifts for Partners has been their perceived confidence to sponsor effectively. Many began the program feeling very confident about being an effective sponsor. As the program progressed they were exposed to the complexities of sponsor relationships, developing greater awareness of the gender-based challenges and differential processes for women and men within the professional services setting. At the program's conclusion many acknowledged they'd over-stated their confidence initially, signaling a major shift in self-awareness and individual growth.

The program is opening the minds – and hearts – of Partners to more diverse and inclusive thinking and action, paving the way for women's advancement to senior ranks. Strategically, the program is becoming a catalyst for leadership teams made up of diverse talent, where all individuals can confidently contribute in their unique ways and perform at their best.

“I find myself counting men at meetings that I'm at... there's a lot of those meetings that I attend where there's only one or two women and 90% men”

Male sponsor, at program's conclusion.

Senior male leaders are truly understanding what it means to be vulnerable and the legacy they can create for others.

Women are more confident in their unique potential and what they can bring to senior leadership teams.

Key Insights – for KPMG and like-minded organisations

Women and senior male leaders are more confident and self-assured.

1. Instilling confidence works

KPMG's high potential women and senior male Partners are more confident and self-assured because of the program.

Strong personal brands, clear career paths and appreciation of the dynamics and nuances of effective executive leadership have contributed to the women's ability to actively and confidently pursue their leadership goals and aspirations. From a transformational leadership perspective, the women have moved from a cautious and unclear perception of their potential to a position that's more assertive, strategic and certain.

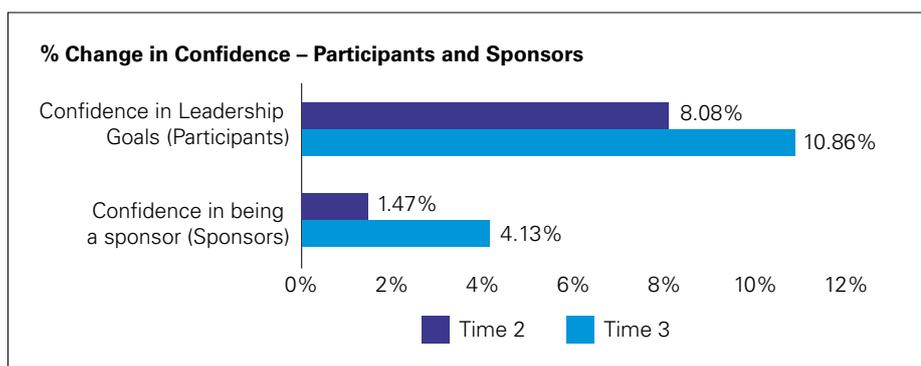
“Participating in the program has given me a new perspective to look at myself and my longer term goals. Using the word ‘pivot’, I’m reframing the ‘thinking’ process, looking at things differently and coming from a more strategic angle and building up my confidence”

Female participant, at program’s conclusion.

For the Partners, the program has significantly altered the way they view their abilities to sponsor effectively and confidently. They’ve moved from believing they could sponsor effectively to realising they’re only just starting to understand what’s involved. Importantly, they’re coming out of the experience wiser and with greater purpose to lead by example and advocate for women.

“I feel much more confident now than I did at the start. Now I would put my confidence at I think an 8, and with hindsight would rate myself at a 5 beforehand”

Male sponsor, at program’s conclusion.



(Graph sources: von Treuer, K.M., Kolar, C., Clancy, E., Cartledge, A., Scott, G.D., & McLeod, J. (2016) KPMG Bird-Walton Program Post Program Evaluation Report, Report prepared for Dr Jess Murphy (p 61)

Note:

Please note: When using scaled scores, the mean is accepted as the single statistic (measure of central tendency) that best represents the data at hand. With respect to percentages - two approaches are available, the first one being simply the percentage of HOW MANY participants improved, and the second one being what was the PERCENTAGE INCREASE of the mean scores. The former tells us how many of the participants improved, but provides no insight into the most meaningful question as to HOW MUCH IMPROVEMENT was achieved. Consequently we have presented the percentage change for the mean scores which is a sensitive index of HOW MUCH improvement actually has been achieved.

2. Walking in another's shoes

The program is intentionally designed to challenge and, at times, confront Partners, disrupting what's comfortable or familiar and exposing them to perspectives that are vastly different from their own but importantly, just as valid.

The opportunity to 'walk in another's shoes' and experience the firm through a female lens became a pivotal moment for many Partners. For the first time, many truly understood how challenging it is to follow a pathway to success that's inherently disadvantaged because of gender and societal biases. Through this experience, the Partners gained a deeper and very real understanding of the invisible barriers experienced by women.

"What I think it has done is allowed me to look at things in a different perspective... try to put yourself in someone else's position... and perhaps reflect more on unconscious bias."

Male Sponsor, at the program's conclusion.

In travelling a different but equally valuable pathway, the program is providing Partners with the strategies, practical tools and more nuanced knowledge to proactively lead from a position of inclusive leadership that influences and facilitates real 'meritocratic' decision-making and promotion of the best talent – in all its forms.

Experiencing the workplace through a female lens was a pivotal moment for senior male leaders.

3. Sponsorship matters

Becoming a sponsor – and appreciating the complexities and nuances of the sponsor relationship – was a transformational experience for KPMG’s Partners.

By participating in workshops that provided a safe and supportive environment, the Partners were more willing to disclose information about themselves and seek clarity on gender issues that may otherwise remain misunderstood. Vulnerable and real conversations between participating Partners – and with the women themselves – helped to close the gap between well-meaning intentions and the impacts and consequences of unintentional exclusion for those who have different but equally valid expectations and experiences.

During the program and beyond, the Partners were able to build rapport with the women and have courageous conversations – learning more about themselves and the women every time they connected.

“It really is the one-on-one... and trying to think how do I actually be this person, how do I be this sponsor? That’s where the value comes from... the interactive process with the sponsee was probably the most valuable in terms of learning.”

Male sponsor, 6 months following the program.

Similarly, the women were highly positive about their sponsorship experience, particularly in terms of how their sponsor influenced on their behalf and helped them to improve their brand and organisational impact.

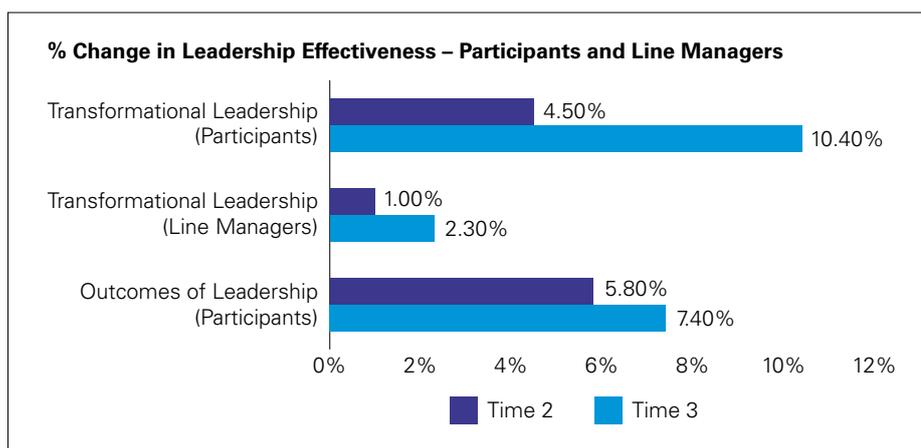
“My sponsor has been very open in discussing my career goals, sharing experience and brainstorming plans on how to move forward, and probably most importantly is actually enabling some of those things to happen.”

Female participant, at program’s conclusion.

4. Taking action, having impact

The program has been designed to instill confidence in women and men to take action – and the KPMG experience demonstrates high potential women are increasing their profiles and organisational impact as a result. The program further demonstrates an increasing confidence in men to effectively sponsor high potential women and a greater insight into the unique barriers experienced by these women. Uniquely, the program quantifies any changes in transformational leadership as perceived by both the participants and their line managers. The program results establish an increase in both transformational leadership and leadership effectiveness.

Women are increasing their profiles and organisational impact, and taking action when career opportunities arise.



(Graph sources: von Treuer, K.M., Kolar, C., Clancy, E., Cartledge, A., Scott, G.D., & McLeod, J. (2016) KPMG Bird-Walton Program Post Program Evaluation Report, Report prepared for Dr Jess Murphy (p 63)

Since the program's inception, 26 female participants have been promoted into more senior roles, including eight women who have joined the KPMG Australia Partnership. The program has contributed to KPMG's progress towards its gender targets, achieving an increase from 20 percent female Partners in 2015 to 24 percent in 2017, with the aspiration to achieve 30 percent by 2020.

Others are much clearer and certain about their paths to success and, with greater self-awareness and belief, they know what they need to develop and improve in order to achieve their career goals.

Global Impacts

In leveraging the program insights, KPMG is well placed to further infuse gender equity into its workplace culture, leadership style and the firm's functions, processes and systems.

There's a strong willingness among the Partners to truly understand – and listen to – what women want and need. Partners are personally invested in using sponsorship to accelerate change and want to be part of the women's success now and in the future as well as the firm's success by actively engaging in the solution. The opportunity now is to capture this potential and use it to KPMG's advantage.

Integrating sponsorship more broadly and clearly communicating its value to the business as a whole will also ensure women continue to advance outside formal programs by sponsors delivering both promotions and strong transitions within their own lines of business – and as part of their legacy to the firm.

“So I've made a conscious effort to put team members in front of senior folk with my backing, letting them take a lot of initiative and have the direct relationships. I've got more involved in some of the diversity initiatives of the firm and taken on a role with a couple of external bodies where we've done studies on gender equity to try and promote more senior women.”

Sponsor, 6 months following the program

This case study is a proof-point for KPMG, demonstrating its commitment to seamlessly integrate diversity and inclusion at its most senior leadership levels. KPMG can use the insights – and empower those who have participated in the program – to support like-minded organisations striving to achieve similar outcomes and results.

Male leaders want to truly understand – and listen to – what women need and to be part of their success.

Conclusion

The program has, and continues to, influence KPMG's high potential women and senior male Partners to believe in their unique potential and value the contribution they make to both the firm and each other.

The transformational leadership impacts resulting from the program are fast-tracking KPMG's vision to be a workplace that champions and demonstrates 'diversity of thought' at the highest levels, and at every level.

Globally, many organisations understand the value of diversity and inclusion but struggle to effectively embed sustainable change and ensure ROI on such initiatives. This is an example of sophisticated leaders at KPMG recognising both the challenges at hand as well as the opportunity, and in collaboration with Dr Jess Murphy, together disrupting the status quo to positively transform both individuals and the organisation now and for the future.

Inspiring Confidence. Empowering Change.

Report produced by KPMG Australia and Dr Jess Murphy.

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