

Caring about their social footprint

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Treat the gender pay gap as a business objective and you'll see it disappear, says Westpac New Zealand CEO, David McLean.

"Closing the gender pay gap is the same as any other business problem — and once it is seen that way people take it very seriously. Instead of saying we will run our business, and we will do something about pay equity if we have time, we've made it one of our core business objectives. We broke the problem down, measured it, made people accountable for it, and set a three-year target," says David.

Westpac introduced measures such as putting an increased ratio of women leaders within business units on the relevant manager's KPIs. Appointments could only be signed off if there were 50 percent women on the shortlist, and all roles were designated flexible. If managers did not think there could be flexibility in a role, they would have to make the case to HR.

It was a strategy aimed at sweeping aside roadblocks to women's career path, and tackling unconscious bias head on.

"The existing way of bringing women through to leadership positions didn't produce enough women leaders — and the most likely reason was unconscious bias. You could look at every little step along the way or you say, 'it's unconscious bias and take a hammer to it,'" says David.

The bank rolled out unconscious bias training for all staff, including an awareness-raising survey.

"Many people were quite shocked when they saw the result. They think they are neutral but they are not — we all have unconscious bias."

"I would ask managers, 'Before you ask me to sign off on a role, show me a shortlist where half the people are women.' Most of the time they would come back and say, 'we have found this incredible good woman for this role'. The thing is that if someone leaves you usually tend to look for someone who was rather like the person who left even if you are not aware of it," says David.

Three years later, women now make up over half of the bank's managers, something that has made subtle differences to the workplace culture.

"When I joined over 25 years ago, the bank was very male-dominated — particularly in some sections, it was rather like a boys' school. It is far more respectful now, although it hasn't lost anything in terms of business performance."

But David says there is still some work to do before they can declare gender equity.

“We have no gender pay gap role for role, but because there is a skew towards men in senior positions, we still have an overall gender pay gap. We have strong female leadership in the retail branches of the bank, but we have very few in IT or in the financial markets dealing room. These are still issues for us.”

Part of an overall strategy aimed at creating a diverse, inclusive workplace, initiatives have had strong commitment from the top. But David says one of the most powerful ways to bring about change is to involve and empower staff. The bank has set up employee action groups around ethnicity, LGBTI and gender, giving them time to work on issues, and come back with ideas.

“It’s been really successful. We are recognising that we are a service industry, we have to be much more responsive and engaged with the community. Our staff care about our social footprint, whether we are engaging with things and whether we are doing good or harm. It is a real trend and having more diversity will probably accelerate that.”

