

Switching to diversity

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Putting diversity on the agenda has been one of Transpower Chief Executive Officer Alison Andrew's priorities since she joined the company three years ago.

"Initially our focus has been on recruiting and retaining more women and more Māori. We picked those two areas because women make up half the population, and we currently have a very low Māori representation in our workplace.

"We are trying to do this in a smart way — in all parts of the business, including technical, and at all levels of seniority. In recruitment, we have looked at how we appeal to women in advertising — language is now gender neutral in advertisements. We have also made unconscious bias training essential if you are making appointments," says Alison.

Flexible arrangements such as part-time work and job sharing are on offer, and there has been an extensive review of remuneration to check for any gender bias.

As with many STEM-based organisations, Transpower is largely male-dominated with 526 male and 215 female. Most women tend to work in administrative or financial roles, rather than in the technical or operational side of the business. While trying to address this, Alison acknowledges that there is a general shortage of women engineers.

"When I studied engineering I was part of a very small group of women. My son has just graduated as an engineer, and at least a quarter of his fellow graduates are women. It's progress but it has been very slow," she says.

Part of the Champions for Change, Alison is one of a group of chief executives who are committed to creating a diverse, inclusive and more flexible workplace that will foster more diverse leadership.

"Diversity is about being able to initiate different ideas, so you make better decisions. Organisations that are more diverse have more shareholder value — although they can be trickier to run because you have people who disagree with you. You have to learn to manage conflict better.

"It's not just about being diverse, it's about being able to be yourself when you come to work. There is a place for everyone — you need to be able to ensure that the workplace culture is inclusive so everyone feels comfortable," she says.

This takes time, and will only work if you can bring people with you, she says.

"It is a difficult dialogue because no matter which way you look at it you risk alienating people. We have people who have been working here for 40 years — and are still passionate about what they do. We need their depth of experience just as much as we need young people coming in with new ideas."

Leadership is another area Transpower has focused on. Typically, chief executives and senior leadership have been drawn mainly from the technical side of the business.

“We think we need to open up some of the traditional criteria. To be a leader you need to be able to inspire and empower people, and be able to hold them to account. You don’t necessarily need to be an engineer.”

She says there is no quick fix for diversity. "This is something that we will be doing for a long time."

