

# Top female directors need more than luck

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*Diane Grady is one of Australia's best-known independent directors. Photo: Michele Mossop*

Where would Diane Grady be if her boss hadn't handed her half of his notes on the way into an important meeting and said: "Here, you do the presentation"?

That boss was Fred Hilmer, when he was managing the McKinsey & Company's practice in this country. Grady is now one of Australia's best-known independent directors (on the board of Macquarie Group) and she became the first female McKinsey partner outside the US.

But would Grady have got her foot in that door without the-then chairman of Lend Lease, Stuart Hornery, deciding to go against his aversion to consultants, to appoint her to his company's board?

Hornery had given his headhunters this dictum: "I want somebody who hasn't been a director, who is comfortable challenging conventional wisdom, who knows about innovation and culture change, is more likely to vote Labor than Liberal – and no consultants".

The recruiter talked him around and convinced Grady to take the chairman's call. "He was prepared to listen. He picked me and it was the start of my whole non-executive career.

"Going from McKinsey to Lend Lease when I was in my early 40s made the rest of it quite easy," Grady told a recent gathering, convened by executive development firm, the Stephenson Mansell Group.

Grady was talking about the need for leaders to recognise and develop their people.

Another speaker at the event, Alison Watkins, managing director and CEO of GrainCorp and a director of ANZ Bank, concurs: "People help people".

“Where I have had opportunities in my career, people have offered to help me and I’ve wanted to respond because they have taken the risk on me,” says Watkins. As another McKinsey “graduate”, Watkins had to be encouraged by others to make a play for partnership.

“I didn’t really feel I had the experience.”

Then investor Doug Shears invited her to be the chief executive of Berri Ltd, the fruit juice company he controlled, despite the fact that she had no food and beverage experience and, in 2010, she became the first woman on the board of GrainCorp. “You want to reward the confidence. As women, we need to take charge and be in control of our careers and make it happen. People who realise the potential of women can feel good about the difference they can make.”

### **BCA initiatives important**

Last week, leaders in the business community showed they had got serious about helping women advance to leadership positions.

The [Business Council of Australia launched a guide](#) to members (suggesting some proactive tactics to positively discriminate for women) and the Male Champions of Change [released a report that recommended](#) putting pressure on suppliers to demonstrate their diversity bona fides.

The reason that both these initiatives are important is they are both ambitious efforts to “pull up” women from the middle ranks into senior executive roles. “They attempt to combat bias with the use of procedures, rather than relying on the good luck of having a nurturing, coaching boss.”

Says Grady: “Most of the women leaders I know, who have confidence, had someone early in their career say: ‘I think you are terrific’.”

“Most organisations are primarily male in terms of leadership roles. [Women] don’t get the support and encouragement they need to build relationships in the organisation.

“They are turning out good work, but it isn’t enough if people don’t know about your energy, ability and passion. Senior management isn’t going to run around turning over rocks till they get to your bright light. It would be very helpful if male leaders reached out to their young women and gave them a sense of value and confidence.”

A Stephenson Mansell report, *Art of Leadership Research*, which interviewed 76 senior executives and leaders, determined that their biggest business challenge is leadership and people capability.

Customised leadership development for individuals, teams and organisations was raised by 53 per cent of respondents as the most important success factor.

### **Top leadership competencies**

1. Communication, charisma, and influencing skills
2. Self-awareness, EQ (emotional intelligence) and empathy.
3. Long-term view and vision/future orientation.
4. Empowering people.
5. A developmental mindset, incorporating the ability to learn from experiences and mistakes.