

Case Study

Women's Leadership in Science, Engineering and Technology (SET) The *Smart Women – Smart State Taskforce's* Board Shadowing Program

It is well documented that women are under-represented on boards, and that women's pathways to board positions are not always easy. To explore a strategy that could assist organisations increase the representation of women on boards, the Queensland Government Office for Women ran a pilot Board Shadowing Program for emerging women leaders in SET industries.

The board which ran this pilot program was the *Smart Women – Smart State Taskforce* (the Taskforce), a body established in 2006 to provide advice to the Minister for Women on strategies to increase the participation of women and girls in SET. More information about the Taskforce and the *Smart Women – Smart State Science, Engineering and Technology Action Plan* is available at www.women.qld.gov.au/smartstatestrategy.

This information sheet gives an overview of the pilot Board Shadowing Program. The information will assist other government agencies or industry organisations to implement a similar program to promote and develop women's leadership skills.

Aims

The pilot Board Shadowing Program proposed to:

- Draw on the expertise of Taskforce members to enhance the capacity of emerging women leaders in SET industries;
- Provide practical experience in board processes and operations;
- Provide an opportunity to develop networks for participants with women leaders in SET industries; and
- Demonstrate leadership to other government boards and committees by supporting the development of women's leadership skills.

Structure

Board placements were for a period of six months. There were three participants in the pilot. Each participant was paired with a volunteer member of the Taskforce, who acted as an informal 'board contact'.

Taskforce members were to give insight into leadership and career development strategies, and to explain board processes to participants. Participants were to have an observer role only, and were not able to vote or contribute to discussion.

Outcomes

The overall aim of the Board Shadowing Program was to build the leadership and 'board readiness' skills of emerging women leaders, in this case, within SET industries.

The results of the evaluation suggest that participants gained valuable insight into how a board operates, and appreciated the opportunity to observe female leaders in the SET industries interacting on the Taskforce. Pairing each participant with a Taskforce member was perceived as essential and beneficial on both sides.

"I found the Board Shadowing Program fascinating and invaluable. The chairing, structuring and discipline of the meetings were a real education in how to achieve results, maximising contribution from a large and diverse group of people. Apart from the knowledge I gained, it was a real confidence booster to see so many female leaders contributing at the boardroom table. The exposure and experience was very valuable in a subsequent directorship interview."

Claire Brereton,
Board Shadowing Program participant, 2007.

Both participants and Taskforce members indicated that the overall concept of the board shadowing program supported the development of women's leadership skills and gave insight into board processes and operations. Participants also appreciated the opportunity to observe female leaders in a board setting, and indicated the program was a good networking opportunity in itself, as well as promoting their awareness of other networks within the SET industries.

It was acknowledged that a good relationship between board contacts and participants relationship takes time to establish and develop. The pairing of Taskforce members and Board Shadowing Program participants was designed to assist participants to maximise the board shadowing experience. It should be noted that the board shadowing program was not designed as a mentoring program per se, which would have different objectives and outcomes. All participants noted that a well-structured program is important, and that the goals of participants should be actively discussed with the board members. A willingness to share information on the part of the board member is also important.

Taskforce members found that the presence of board shadowing participants did not negatively impact on the work of the Taskforce or meetings. It was also commented that the presence of board shadowing participants encouraged reflection on Taskforce meetings by members.

Recommendations

- A Board Shadowing Program should include the opportunity to attend enough meetings to fully understand the practices and processes of the board, and any relevant working group meetings.
- A Board Shadowing Program requires a structured approach to a mentor/mentee relationship, including:
 - a clear understanding of each participant's aims and desired outcomes;
 - the opportunities offered by the specific board;
 - structured meetings between mentors and mentees;
 - debriefing following meetings; and
 - a period of 'shadowing' that maximises the benefits of the program.

- Meeting dates and debrief sessions between mentors and mentees are scheduled well in advance.
- In order to maximise outcomes, participants should be made aware of the structure, objectives, and operations of the specific board that they will be observing in advance of the Board Shadowing Program.
- Participants should be selected for level of experience and "fit" with the board.
- The relationship between board members and Board Shadowing Program participants should be developed and maintained by both parties. It is suggested that:
 - participating board members arrange a preliminary meeting with their Board Deputy to advise her on the history and work of the board, and to establish her aims and desired outcomes from the Board Deputy Program. A participant, for example, may be interested in gaining insight into the policy process, or observing how a government body works, or developing confidence regarding public speaking and articulating ideas. Ideally, this will be documented and kept by both parties for future reference;
 - participating board members work with Board Deputies to identify how the deputy structure may (or may not) meet the participants' aims and objectives in order to ensure that expectations of the program are met; and
 - that all participants establish an agreement about the frequency, type, and structure, of mentoring and debriefing meetings that suits both participant's timeframes and preferred communication methods.

The Board Shadowing Program is recommended as a model which enables women to gain knowledge of board processes, build networks, and further develop leadership skills. It is considered suitable for implementation across a range of boards, including government, community and private sector boards, particularly in industries where women are under-represented.

More information on the *Women on Boards Strategy* can be found on the Office for Women's website at www.women.qld.gov.au/womenonboards, or by calling Women's Infolink on 1800 177 577.