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Joe Hockey, Australian women need more than “mentors”

BY ANGELA PRIESTLEY / MAY 01, 2013 7:59AM /  /  (0)



When it comes to policies addressing women in leadership, our likely future government does not appear to have all that much to offer.

Yesterday, shadow treasurer Joe Hockey had an opportunity to outline his party's policies regarding working women in front of an audience of around 350 at an Executive Women Australia lunch in Sydney.

While he delivered a passionate and off-the-cuff speech (he dispensed with the prepared material earlier) that paid homage to his great grandmother, mother and six-year-old daughter and expressed frustration at the slow progress of corporate Australia when it comes to women on boards, he failed to present a solid idea that could help.

Well, he did offer up mentoring as a solution. He said more men should be mentoring. Corporate Australia should better promote mentoring. Company Directors should extend its mentoring program. All of us should be getting a mentor.



"I've been honest with you," he said during the audience question time. "I have publicly stated that I want male mentors and role models to step up to the plate in corporate Australia." When pressed further if that would be a policy, he added "well, it's a statement!"

We've all heard that idea before. Plenty of us feel over-mentored. Indeed, we see certain organisations that push their internal mentoring schemes as their grand vision for fixing the lack of women in their management circles as a bit of a cop-out.

Unfortunately, mentoring's not a policy. Joe Hockey can tell corporate men all he wants that they should be "mentors" but they're not necessarily going to listen, and even if they did, are corporate women really willing to see mentoring as their one and only means for getting ahead? And will it really make a difference?

Talking to female company directors I've found a common sentiment that mentors have been more of a "nice to have" along the way – a means for obtaining friendly ideas and answers from trusted advisers. It's sponsors who have really made the difference in their careers – finding an individual within their own organisation or professional circle who is willing to recommend them or back them for a new role or board position.

That's because the boys' club still exists in corporate Australia. And one of the most effective ways to break into it is to find a powerful enough person (usually a man) willing to put his own reputation on the line to support you. It's a way to crack the referral networks and get your name on the relevant shortlist so your talent can speak for itself.

Relying on this only as the key strategy for getting more women on boards and into leadership positions will be a slow and frustrating journey.

Hockey also suggested telling men to think of the women who're missing out on leadership positions as potentially being their wives and daughters (this changed former prime minister John Howard's thinking on the issue, according to Hockey).

"Tell them [men]. Encourage them to do it. When they don't do it. Ask them why. Ask them the killer question: do you want your daughter to miss out on this? It's a powerful line. It really is. It's the most powerful line."

Hope is never a good strategy. And hoping men will fix our lack of women in leadership is particularly problematic. Not all men have wives and daughters (as one woman pointed out to me following the event). Not all men will see the idea of women missing out as a good enough reason to not refer their male buddy, or to deviate from the status quo when recruiting for new positions.

Meanwhile, Hockey said quotas should only ever be a last resort. He doesn't believe we need to go there as we're making progress – the ASX 200 has, after all, achieved a 15.7% rate of women on boards. Pity about the rest of the ASX, where less than 10% of director and senior executive positions are held by women.

Mentoring has its benefits and the Chairmen's Mentoring program of Company Directors can rightly take some of the credit for the small increase in the number of women on ASX 200 boards.

But too many companies are passing off mentoring as their key diversity initiative for seeing more women achieve leadership positions. We don't need our future governments to do that too.