

LIGHTBULB MOMENTS

Gordon Cairns, Origin Energy Chairman

My lightbulb moment was when I was the Chief Executive of Lion Nathan and McKinsey had just published a seminal article on the “war for talent” which really differentiated between the good companies and the underperforming companies and all of a sudden it struck me that in the war for talent we were only recruiting from 50% of the gene pool so we were actually limiting our ability to compete. That for me was the turning point.

The only way we'll change the system is if we get men talking to men and confront the issue. The view that women aren't tough enough, the view that “well there's no point in promoting a woman because eventually when she gets to family formation age she'll go off and have kids”, the view that a maternity leave is just an excuse for why women are not getting promoted. We have to address that unconscious bias which is seldom spoken but deeply held.

There always is a personal dimension. I have a wife who had to give up her career in order that I could pursue my career and that the family were comfortable and settled and well nurtured. The interesting thing is she's a lot smarter than I am and would have had a better career than me so we'd go to dinner parties in London or in the United States or in Sydney and the men would turn around and say to her “what do you do?” and she would say “I'm a housewife” and they would immediately turn away and talk to someone else because in their view being a housewife wasn't that interesting. No one asked her whether she had had an interesting and significant career, which she had then chosen to give up. As far as they were concerned she was a failure and boring because she had decided to be a housewife. I saw that as a moral dilemma that we needed to address and the moral dilemma is irrefutable that we need to be able to provide the support systems and the infrastructure and the sponsorship to enable women to do both.

In any culture change people are afraid to change. We don't like change. We're creatures of habit so if you're confronting a system change like this you have to understand that people have deep rooted fears about the change. “What does it mean for me? Am I having to change? Am I having to confront my own ego, my own self-worth?” For me the issue now is to confront the men who are unwilling to change and to help them to see that the change will actually be a positive; if you will, to confront their fears.