

Unfinished Business

**11 Voices of Success
at VicRoads**

Norah Breekveldt

To all the men and women at
VicRoads dedicated to creating
a fair, diverse and inclusive
organisation.

JUDITH PETTITT

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Acknowledgements

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Finally, to all the readers of this book – may the stories and lessons from these inspiring people continue to guide you on your career journey.

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Preface

'I have come to believe over and over again that what is most important to me must be spoken, made verbal and shared, even at the risk of having it bruised or misunderstood.' Audre Lorde, African American writer, feminist and activist

Unfinished Business contains the memoirs of eleven courageous and inspiring people, who are all at the top of their game at VicRoads. They are courageous because they publicly share some very personal stories about their own hardships and struggles. Their memoirs are inspiring because they fire our imagination and help shift our thinking to new possibilities.

These people don't consider themselves heroes, and they don't see their lives or circumstances as extraordinary. Yet each one has a staggering narrative of persistence, resilience and battling against the odds. These stories matter. They give women hope that there is a way through their own difficulties and challenges – that they too can achieve a truly inspiring and rewarding career whilst successfully combining their work and their personal lives. These people have true power and wisdom.

The memoirs are not complete stories or comprehensive biographies of each of their lives. There are so many experiences that form and shape us that it is impossible to do their complete stories justice. Instead, they are recollections of events, some significant and others

seemingly trivial at the time. They describe moments of true meaning and identify turning points that shaped their futures. Many of their messages are as true for men as women, because men too miss out when work and life commitments are out of balance.

Each memoir reflects and adds to the beauty of the others. It is the hope of our subjects that their experiences take the case for change from people's heads to their hearts – that they will shift the organisation's ideas of what is possible and move people to strive even harder to achieve their goals.

Introduction

Australian society has always prided itself on having a go, practicing fair play and being an egalitarian society where opportunities exist for anyone to succeed and excel.

Yet despite decades of effort towards making women equal to men in the workplace, women continue to be denied opportunities and are still a long way off from being considered equal. Although we can point to modest improvements, women remain under-represented at every transition point, with the disparity greatest at senior levels of leadership. And even where programs are in place to help women balance work and family, many think twice about utilising these programs, concerned that using them will negatively affect their careers.

The case for diversity in business has been convincingly argued over several decades and is really not in doubt anymore. When it comes to gender diversity, performance improves when more women lead – firms with more women in top management are more profitable and companies with gender diversity have more revenue, customers, market share and profits.

Gender equality is good for the economy too. The Grattan Institute found that if Australian women did as much paid work as women in Canada – which would mean an extra six per cent of women in

the workforce – our gross domestic product would be boosted by \$25 billion.*

There is abundant evidence that when mothers return to work it is good for families, as well as society. A National Bureau of Economic Research (USA) study published in 2013[†] found that daughters of working mothers are more likely to be employed, hold supervisory positions and earn more money than the daughters of mothers who don't work outside the home. Sons of working women are also more likely to spend time caring for family members and doing household chores than are the sons of stay-at-home mothers.

Initiatives to eliminate gender bias, such as parental leave policies and workplace flexibility, are good for men too. Research by Samone McCurdy from Monash University found that 80 per cent of fathers would like to be the primary carer of their child but only 2 per cent have actually done so.[‡] Men also experience a double whammy when it comes to gender stereotyping: society discourages them from being the primary caregiver and, as they are often the primary breadwinner, there are higher financial penalties if they take time off work. Perhaps by experiencing the difficulties women have faced for decades, men can join the chorus and demand their share of flexible working practices, alongside mothers.

VicRoads has been on its own journey of discovery regarding creating a culture of diversity and inclusion.

The CEO, John Merritt, came to VicRoads from the Environment Protection Authority (EPA) in 2014. He says he felt warmly welcomed and accepted from the start, despite coming from a non-engineering background.

* Daley, *Game-changers: Economic reform priorities for Australia* (Grattan Institute, 2012).

† Dunifon, Toft Hansen, Nicholson, Palmhøj Nielsen, *The Effect of Maternal Employment on Children's Academic Performance* (National Bureau of Economic Research, USA, 2013).

‡ Breekveldt, *Career Interrupted – How 14 Successful Women Navigate Career Breaks* (Melbourne Books, 2015). McCurdy wrote the chapter “‘You Did What?’ Taking the Daddy Track’.

His first impressions, however, were of an outdated government organisation that had, in part, lost its way and become inward-looking. It was a masculine culture, led by dominant, competent and respected men for long periods of time. Paternalistic and autocratic in equal measure, decision-making percolated to the top and then, once made, decisions cascaded down to an obedient and deferential workforce.

An over-reliance on technical engineering expertise rather than leadership excellence perpetuated a culture that was rigidly bound and conformist. John describes it as having ‘an insidious, seeping impact of significantly undermining the confidence of very capable, impressive people and eroding their resilience so that they struggle to cope with change’.

VicRoads’ traditionalist psyche was on show every day, said John, but it was most obvious in its lack of diversity. Like most organisations, VicRoads recruited in its own image, middle-aged, grey-haired men coincidentally hired people who looked and acted just like them, says John:

It’s just stark, to sit around a leadership table of all men, to have fifty-five male executives and only a handful of women. To have a situation where in twenty years of outstanding graduate intakes, not one of those women has ever made it to the executive ranks. It’s something you would find in a museum. Nothing says more about our datedness than our lack of diversity.

Change has arrived like a high-speed freight train. No longer inward-looking and technical, VicRoads is now judged on the customer experience. Displaying empathy and practising acts of boldness and daring that reflect the ‘care, share, dare’ behaviours are now valued over conformity and defence of the status quo. Leaders are now charged with creating a diverse and inclusive workplace, representative of the constituents they serve. Getting on board with these changes is compulsory.

At VicRoads there is action behind the diversity rhetoric, and many women and men are rightly proud of the organisation’s progress towards equality in recent times. The people in this book are excited about the new opportunities presented to them and are grabbing them with both hands. Their lives are changing. It’s exhilarating and

exhausting in equal measure.

Many VicRoads leaders understand the benefits of creating a truly diverse and inclusive organisation, and are engaging their hearts and their minds to make it happen. There will be other people who don't get it, who may be either openly hostile or passively resisting, thinking 'please wake me up when it's over', assuming that eventually normal programming will resume. This group, if they continue to operate with old views that are out of step with the new organisation, will be a shrinking pool.

A truly diverse culture is, of course, much more than achieving gender equality, and achieving cultural diversity is the next frontier. However, a recent study by Monash

University found that men born in Australia were twice as intolerant of cultural diversity as women, with 35 per cent of men surveyed rejecting cultural diversity compared to 17 per cent of women.* So it makes a whole lot of sense to increase the number of women in an organisation and lay the groundwork to generate greater acceptance of difference in all ways.

Developing a company's culture is a never-ending journey and the organisation's leaders need to be relentless in pursuing diversity and inclusion in order to stay on the path.

As more women are noticeably successful, more women will be hired. As women move into leadership roles, the stereotype of what a leader is will change and a more balanced model will take root. This is the start of lasting change.

'A truly diverse culture is, of course, much more than achieving gender equality, and achieving cultural diversity is the next frontier.'

* Markus, *Mapping Social Cohesion 2015 National Report* (Scanlon Foundation, 2015).

‘It is not our differences that
divide us. It is our inability to
recognise, accept and celebrate
those differences.’

CHIMAMANDA NGOZI ADICHIE,
NIGERIAN AUTHOR