
— **Exclusive**

Even in the C-suite, some women feel disrespected

Euan Black *Work and careers reporter*



Jul 8, 2024 – 6.35pm



Listen to this article

4 min

About a year into her first C-suite role, Melissa Reader had a client meeting from hell.

She had been tasked with highlighting and identifying solutions to problems in the client's business. But when she delivered her advice, the older man receiving it repeatedly interrupted her and peppered her with questions "from a place of intense scrutiny".

"It really shook me," said Ms Reader, now the chief executive of Violet, a virtual care platform that helps people navigate the last stages of life. "It rattled me to a point where I was questioning my own ability."



Violet chief executive Melissa Reader says she's learnt to assert her power as CEO after having some negative experiences early in her C-suite career. **Sahlan Hayes**

Although all men in C-suite positions believe their opinions are valued, 10 per cent of C-suite women believe their views are disregarded, according to new research by employee engagement platform Culture Amp.

Based on responses from more than 24,000 senior leaders globally, across companies with at least 1000 employees, the survey data also found a respect gap between men and women at the top echelons of business.

All C-suite men said they felt respected at their company, but 25 per cent of C-suite women said they did not.

Common form of disrespect

Aubrey Blanche-Sarellano, Culture Amp's vice president of equitable operations, said being ignored or interrupted were common examples of disrespect for women in the workplace.

She told *The Australian Financial Review* that research by Textio co-founder Kieran Snyder had found that women were three times more likely than men to be interrupted while speaking in meetings – and not just by men.

“Everybody interrupts women more than they interrupt men, and that behaviour is an implicit signal that people's opinions aren't valued,” Ms Blanche-Sarellano said.

Other research had found it was common for a woman to put forward an idea only for it go unnoticed until a man repeated it, she said.

Culture Amp's analysis, which excluded companies with less than three women in its C-suite to ensure it was "looking exclusively at larger groups to help avoid bias", did not show if C-suite women felt more respected or valued today than they had done before, and the company was unable to break down the data by industry or by country.

Equity and inclusion

But Ms Blanche-Sarellano said she expected the Australia-specific numbers would be similar to the global average, and that feelings of not being respected or listened to would be higher for C-suite women in male-dominated industries.

"Creating a culture of prioritising equity and respect is a way to address this," Ms Blanche-Sarellano said, adding that companies would undermine their performance and end up losing their top female leaders if they failed to address these problems in their organisations. Research has found that more diverse executive leadership teams are more likely to deliver above-average profitability [<https://www.afr.com/work-and-careers/workplace/why-executives-are-getting-more-bonuses-for-hitting-diversity-targets-20230529-p5dc6q>].

She said that companies should make it clear that they valued equity and inclusion by doing things like introducing transparent hiring and promotion practices and considering smaller interventions, such as introducing a no-interruptions rule in meetings to ensure that people had a better chance of being heard.

As for Ms Reader, she said her tough client meeting was instructive in that it helped her develop her own authority and style of leadership. Over time, she said, she's learnt how to assert her positional power as a CEO as well as her "personal power in terms of what I stood for".

"I'm a lot stronger in that area," Ms Reader said, adding that she also tried to bring a sense of curiosity and empathy to all her conversations.

"If there's a dynamic or a conversation that is not aligned with what I'm doing, I'm always trying to ask questions from a place of curiosity, rather than scepticism.

"But I think, as you really grow into C-suite roles, you have to learn how to take up your own authority and your own role and use those wisely."

**RELATED****The 'magic and mundane' leadership style of Danielle Wood**

<https://www.afr.com/women-of-influence/the-magic-and-mundane-leadership-style-of-award-winner-danielle-wood-20240607-p5jk4r>

**RELATED****It's not what you do but who you are: gender pay gap myths busted**

<https://www.afr.com/work-and-careers/workplace/it-s-not-what-you-do-but-who-you-are-gender-pay-gap-myths-busted-20240430-p5fmr2>

Euan Black is a work and careers reporter at The Australian Financial Review. *Email Euan at euan.black@afr.com*