Women need to be their own greatest champions.

The well-respected journal *Cell Metabolism* is featuring a ‘Women in Metabolism’ series, asking female scientific leaders to share their stories and words of wisdom for the new generation. Key themes throughout have been to “dare to take yourself seriously” and ensure you have sponsors who can campaign aggressively on your behalf and provide you with perspective.

This is sage advice for female scientists, particularly those at postdoctoral level and beyond, in a fiercely competitive, male-dominated sector.

An issue echoed by many over the years relates to the difficulty that many women have with self-promotion and owning their success. It is a common reflection that women tend to underestimate their abilities. A female leader in metabolism, Associate Professor Deborah Muoio, wrote that women tend to ask for more after they deliver and men ask first and promise to deliver. Maybe, she says, we should take some lessons from the guys.

In fact, it is something that I employed when trying to enter the senior research fellowship scheme, says Associate Professor Rebecca Ritchie. “The first year I applied, I didn’t even get an interview, I wasn’t even remotely close. The difference between that and securing a National Health and Medical Research Council Fellowship the following year was that I thought of two or three leading male scientists and I considered what they would have written about themselves if they had my CV. Even years later, when I share my application with others, I feel the need to point out that what is written is not how I view myself. But it is clear that if you don’t present yourself in the best possible light, it will still be assumed that you have, and you won’t get anywhere.”

Perhaps we do need to get a better grip on personal branding, something that people such as Steve Jobs made an art form. His personal brand was defined by words and actions. He made clear what mattered to him – being passionate about what you do, being innovative and not afraid to break the rules, and looking beyond money to something bigger. Many of us are equally passionate about our work. This is why we stick at it despite
the uncertainty and stress that comes with a career in science. But developing our brand and highlighting the unique assets, skills and experience that we bring to the table is something that we also need to hone alongside our ability to do great science and publish in well-regarded journals.

Scientist-turned-business-leader Adele Gulfo wrote in the Huffington Post\(^1\) that personal branding is what differentiates you and your unique value proposition from others, it is not about self-promotion, it is a leadership imperative. Formerly president of Pfizer Latin America, Ms Gulfo says your personal brand “is not a list of accomplishments or an exercise in self-promotion. That’s an important distinction.” She says women need to be their own biggest fan. “I encourage my group heads to continually look for opportunities to surface their great work and compliments they’ve received,” Ms Gulfo says.

However much it might go against the grain, women do need to be their own greatest supporters. But equally, having someone to champion you is also critical. To really champion someone you need to be entrenched in the scientific network at both a national and international level, and of course, most of the people in the networks are male. This is not necessarily an issue, just the reality. We both have several mentors and champions, some are female but most are male. A champion or sponsor might suggest you as a speaker for an international conference, to be on an editorial board or to take on a policy role in an advocacy organisation. While such positions are achieved on merit, you do need to be on people’s radars in the first place to be offered such opportunities and a champion can play a pivotal role in this.

Professor Sharon Bell and Professor Lyn Yates, who undertook a research project examining Women in the Science Research Workforce\(^2\), found that “networks, connections and knowing the right people are seen as equally important as being good at your work” and that those whose circumstances did not provide the opportunity or time to develop supportive and influential networks were unlikely to succeed. The corporate sector is no different. The 2011 McKinsey report Unlocking the full potential of women in the US economy\(^3\) found that despite women’s unflagging confidence and desire to advance, the lack of a sponsor in upper management to create opportunities and exclusion from informal networks were key reasons that women choose to remain at their current level or move to another organisation.

Being your own greatest champion, owning your success and developing a supportive network of mentors and champions is critical to female scientists achieving even greater success. For many of us, we need to consciously work at incorporating this into how we do business on a daily basis.

Professor Bronwyn Kingwell will feature in the ‘Women in Metabolism’ series in Cell Metabolism.

References

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UK Charter encourages institutions to rise to the challenge on gender equality.

Founded in 2005 in the UK, the Athena SWAN Charter is a scheme that recognises commitment to advancing women’s careers in science, technology, engineering, mathematics and medicine (STEMM) employment in higher education and research.

A decade after it was introduced, enthusiasm for the Charter has led to international action with pilot programs introduced in another two countries, expansion to incorporate additional higher education disciplines and the introduction of new principles to cover professional and support staff.

But perhaps most importantly, there is evidence of cultural change, with leading institutions accruing data to demonstrate the impact of their activity and achievement in this space.

So what is the Athena SWAN Charter? The Charter is open to any university or publicly funded research institute that is committed to the advancement of the careers of women in STEMM.

Members are able to submit for Athena SWAN Charter awards at institution and department level, based on an in-depth self-assessment that is reviewed by a panel drawn from higher education across the UK. Members are supported throughout the process with workshops, guidance and opportunities to share practice.

The Charter, which is managed by the Equality Challenge Unit (ECU), began with 10 members. It now has 132 members and 462 award-holding departments and institutions.

The success of the Charter stems from the fact that it was set up by academic women in science for academic women in science. Its aims were to level the playing field by getting institutions and departments to self-assess their policies and procedures. This self-assessment had to be led and championed by senior academics and senior management in order to ensure sustainable change and buy in from the top.


All Athena SWAN members must sign up to the principles of the Charter, as follows.

- To address gender inequalities requires commitment and action from everyone, at all levels of the organisation.

The success of the Charter stems from the fact that it was set up by academic women in science for academic women in science. Its aims were to level the playing field by getting institutions and departments to self-assess their policies and procedures.
To tackle the unequal representation of women in science requires changing cultures and attitudes across the organisation.

The absence of diversity at management and policymaking levels has broad implications, which the organisation will examine.

The high loss rate of women in science is an urgent concern that the organisation will address.

The system of short-term contracts has particularly negative consequences for the retention and progression of women in science, which the organisation recognises.

There are both personal and structural obstacles to women making the transition from PhD into a sustainable academic career in science, which require the active consideration of the organisation.

Making progress

The Charter awards institutions that incorporate policies that support the career development of women. There are three levels of awards (bronze, silver and gold), designed to encourage continuous progression and sustainable change. Award-holders have to reapply to renew their awards every three years and demonstrate progress.

For example, a gold award recognises sustained progression and achievement in promoting gender equality and addressing challenges particular to the discipline. A well-established record of activity and achievement in working towards equality in the career progression of women in STEMM should be complemented by data demonstrating continued impact.

In 2013, Imperial College London’s Department of Chemistry won a gold award for showing national leadership in promoting diversity. The department’s initiatives include the establishment of a national careers conference for women in science with the University of Warwick, with the program now taken up by the Royal Society of Chemistry.

The college is leading a Royal Society of Chemistry network to share experiences and promote professional opportunities for women in science. Other initiatives led by the college itself (which has a silver award) that are contributing to cultural change include an annual Athena lecture, departmental prizes named after distinguished female scientists and a women’s portrait series.

Charter expansion

The scope and reach of the Charter has expanded at a rapid pace since 2012.

There was a massive increase in membership and award submissions in 2012, thanks in part to the decision in July 2011 by the Chief Medical Officer for England to link funding for National Institute Health Research Biomedical Research Centres and Biomedical Research Units to the achievement of a silver Athena SWAN award.

The reputation of the Charter has also continued to grow and this has led to the expansion of the Charter. The first expansion was in 2012 when the Royal Society, in response to requests from research institutes, funded a pilot of Athena SWAN to research institutes not affiliated with higher education institutions.

The pilot was a success and research institutes were allowed to join the Charter in April 2014 thanks to funding from the UK Department of Business Innovation and Skills.

The enthusiasm for the Charter has translated into international action with a pilot expansion of the Charter in Ireland. A three-year pilot began in February 2015. ECU is also working with Science in Australia Gender Equity (SAGE), an initiative of

The new principles reflect the progressive nature of the Charter, reinforcing the message that award-holders can never rest on their laurels.
the Australian Academy of Science in partnership with the Australian Academy of Technological Sciences and Engineering to develop the Charter in Australia. A two-year pilot was officially launched in Canberra in September 2015.

In response to feedback from the sector, from May 2015 ECU welcomed to the Charter applications from arts, humanities, social sciences, business and law departments, and higher education institutions that focus specifically on these areas. By 2017, all applicants will be signed up to new principles that have been extended to cover professional and support staff as well as scientific staff. The new principles reflect the progressive nature of the Charter, reinforcing the message that award-holders can never rest on their laurels. Expectations will change as the sector moves forward in the pursuit of equality. ECU is convinced that this is the right approach and looks forward to seeing institutions rise to the challenge.

The ‘leaky pipeline’ describes the continuous loss of women at consecutive career stages within academia.

Source: ECU’s Equality in higher education: statistical report 2014
Practical policies can influence gender inequality.

The recent introduction of the Science in Australia Gender Equity (SAGE) pilot has again focused the spotlight on gender inequality in science, technology, engineering and mathematics. It is a complex and persistent problem, much like in other sectors, but many of us are committed to bringing about change. Even small steps are important.

Several weeks before I started as director of the Walter and Eliza Hall Institute of Medical Research (WEHI) in 2009, I sat down with a group of postdoctoral women and asked for 10 things I could do on day one to address gender inequality. It did not require a committee or a detailed survey; many of the matters discussed were low-hanging fruit. With the exception of child care, most of those things have now been implemented.

So what did we do? Some of the simplest changes were ensuring that all important meetings are held within school hours, to make sure that researchers with child care duties can attend. We set up a dedicated office with hot-desks and an adjoining room in which small children can play and older children can do homework or watch television, under their parent’s supervision.

We designated a separate room to allow women to breastfeed their infants or to express milk.

We demand that at least half of speakers at all conferences and workshops organised by the Institute are women. And we created a gender equity committee with men and women to monitor implementation of policies, gather data on progress, explore what other institutions are doing well and challenge us with new ideas.

Such practical changes were easy, and demonstrable. In other areas, progress has been equally simple to validate. For example, seven years ago we had no female professors or department heads, and now six are women. Change at the professorial level has come about both by being aware of women who are ready to be promoted and perhaps had not pushed themselves forward, as well as making some new appointments.

Other issues require more thought, investment and innovation. The number of female laboratory heads at the Institute has remained at about 30 per cent and we know that the postdoctoral period for women in particular is difficult because it often overlaps with child-bearing years. Postdoctoral women are placed in an invidious position: take some time off and have their productivity drop to near-zero for a period, or postpone having children in the hope of obtaining a faculty position.

So we deliberately started to appoint faculty members at a younger age, in their early to mid-thirties, perhaps after a two to four-year period as a postdoctoral researcher. This ensures women have resources they can use (such as postdocs, research assistants and students) to keep their projects going should they take time out to have children and to care for them.

For women who have children during their postdoctoral period, we offer technical support paid for by the Institute to make sure their projects progress while they are on maternity leave.

We introduced a five-year $1.25m fellowship to support a female laboratory head, who can spend the money as she wishes. It can pay for salaries, child care or consumables.

We also pay for our female scientists to take children and a carer with them to academic conferences, both here and abroad. We do this because we think that presenting at meetings is important for career development.

Some may argue that such initiatives are not affordable for smaller organisations. My view is that every institution has discretionary funds and it is a matter of what you prioritise. Even smaller institutes should be able to introduce some changes.

During this journey, we certainly have not got everything right. Some things that we instituted were not useful. For example, we stopped our women-in-science lectures. We found it was more...
We ... pay for our female scientists to take children and a carer with them to academic conferences, both here and abroad. We do this because we think that presenting at meetings is important for career development.

important to have women properly represented in every speaking program rather than highlight it simply as a women-in-science event. By instead ensuring that we have 50 per cent representation of women at conferences, it normalises participation in science, rather than making it something special.

At WEHI, we want to do more. Now that we have ticked off a lot of the easy things, we have the harder things to do in the next five years. One thing we have not done well is child care. Child care was on the list to be incorporated into the re-development of this Institute before I was director and was taken off the list. That is not great planning, particularly when other institutes on the same research precinct have also been built without similar forethought for such important facilities. Now we are trying to get a child care centre somewhere on our Parkville footprint.

Other key areas of focus will be on quotas and appointments. For example, how do we employ quotas in a way that does not leave women thinking they have been appointed because they are women, and how do we remove barriers to women, actual or perceived, during the recruitment process?

In the future, supporting partners and making science more flexible and productive for everyone, not just women, will also be important.

Challenging ourselves and others is vital. Bigger changes have occurred when we have spoken openly, passionately and sometimes bluntly about the challenges faced by women in the science sector. I have previously spoken about the need for the Australian Academy of Science to introduce changes to pave the way for more female fellows. Organisations such as these are now actively engaging in gender equality discussions.

The National Health and Medical Research Council has issued guidelines and minimum standards on gender equality to institutions that wish to receive funding. More than 32 research and science organisations, including WEHI, have signed up to participate in the SAGE pilot, an initiative of the Australian Academy of Science in partnership with the Australian Academy of Technological Sciences and Engineering.

We have made progress. But equally, as we have ticked off the easy things, there has been an increase in expectation.

People are now holding us to account on the harder things. It is critical that we embrace the difficult challenges and that men and women keep speaking about this topic. For too long it has been a feminist issue, we need the entire scientific community to deal with it.

Professor Doug Hilton has been named an inaugural ‘Male Champion of Change’ by the Victorian Equal Opportunity and Human Rights Commission for his work to improve the representation of women at senior levels of medical research.
Want to move the needle on gender diversity? Think like a disruptor.

It feels like every day existing markets, industries, technologies and processes are being replaced with something new, better and more efficient. What if that type of disruptive thinking was applied to a critical issue such as building gender equality and diversity in the workplace? What would that look like? How are organisations outside of the science sector approaching this issue?

ANDREW PENN
Chief Executive Officer, Telstra

Like a lot of organisations today, Telstra spends a great deal of time looking at the impact (real and potential) and the opportunities of digital disruption.

After all, the world is full of examples of where fundamental change is being driven by innovation, technology and talented disruptors.

In business, this is uprooting command-and-control structures – once the industry standard – and in all of our lives it is bringing exciting changes to how we think, behave, learn, work and live.

I wanted to share some thoughts on applying disruptive thinking to building workplace gender equality and diversity in the hope they might make a difference.

Cumulative effect of many actions

Innovation and change sometimes comes in flashes of brilliance, sudden light-bulb moments. But that is relatively rare.

More often it is many small intentional and creative actions, iterations piled one on top of another coupled with a real determination to achieve a better outcome.

Telstra continues to develop and roll out many things to build gender equality: some big, some small; some successful, some not.

The central idea is that if we keep doing the same thing we should expect the same result. That will never work, so we are constantly looking for disruptive new approaches to achieve the change we want.

One of the most important things we have done is change our approach to flexibility in the workplace. We start from the premise that every role in the company can be done flexibly if we give our people the tools and connectivity they need to make working away from the office as seamless as being in the office.

For a company used to a traditional command-and-control structure, All Roles Flex was initially a big challenge, a jump into the unknown.

Making it work – and it has worked – has required trust, courage, creativity and a determination to challenge and disrupt the traditional approach. I am convinced we are a better organisation for it.

I also chair a Diversity Council, which includes my entire leadership team. The council acts as a performance planning forum but it also sends a powerful message to the organisation about the expectations and values of the company’s leadership.

Other actions have included developing mentoring, networking and sponsorship programs, ensuring women are represented on every recruitment list and in every interview panel. We are also committed to the UN’s HeForShe initiative because diversity is a problem for everybody, not just women.

Collectively these initiatives have not solved our diversity issues but they are making a difference. A big part of this is persistence, resilience and a determination to keep trying new things at a high tempo. Just like disruptors do.

Top down and bottom up

Innovation and the ideas to disrupt the status quo to drive gender diversity can come from anywhere in the organisation – top down from the leadership team, bottom up from the frontline and everywhere in between.
What matters, though, is having the right culture. Culture is critical because your people need to feel empowered to share their ideas and stories and call out issues. Leaders will never have all the answers and some of the best ideas and freshest thinking will come from deep down in the organisation.

To facilitate the sharing of ideas and stories we use an internal social media tool, Yammer. It gives us the ability to share stories and this is really important because the lived experience of diversity – hardship and achievement, discrimination and determination, exclusion and inclusion – enriches the organisational culture, and feeds change at the grassroots.

Stories put a human face on the change we are trying to make: Such as the story about one of our senior lawyers who was able to rearrange his working week to care for his elderly parents long-term; or the two mothers who are job-sharing and supporting each other as they balance motherhood and their careers.

There are thousands of stories like these right across our organisation and in a very real way they are at the heart of who we are as a company, the lived experience of our diversity policies and codes of conduct.

Bold ideas and action

Creating change is about bold ideas and it is about action. That idea was central to a panel discussion I recently participated in, as part of my commitment to the Male Champions of Change.

The panel included Australia’s former Sex Discrimination Commissioner Liz Broderick. Liz calls gender equality the unfinished business of the 21st century and I completely agree with her.

Liz served as Australia’s Sex Discrimination Commissioner from 2007 to 2015 and among her many activities she is global co-chair of the Women’s Empowerment Principles Leadership Group, a member of the World Bank’s Advisory Council on Gender and Development and a partner co-director with NATO on Women, Peace and Security.

We both spoke at an internal Telstra networking event run under the banner of Brilliantly Connected Women. It is an event to connect women and men in Telstra who champion gender equality.

In a real sense Liz has been an innovator and a disruptor for diversity balance, as determined and passionate as any of the digital disruptors that are changing our world.

Like any disruptor, she has been undeterred by the scale of the challenge:

- undeterred by the fact that women continue to be terribly under-represented in leadership positions (women account for just three per cent of CEOs of Australia’s top 200 companies);
- undeterred by the fact women in Australia are paid on average 25 per cent less than men for performing the same work; and
- undeterred by the fact that so many companies seemingly ignore the research that shows more women in leadership fundamentally leads to higher shareholder returns.

Liz says relying on women alone to create change is never going to work because the levers of power are largely held by men. Men need to be bold, courageous and visible in standing with women to create the change we need to see in gender equality. She can count me in.

Don’t get comfortable

At the end of the day, there are no universal or easy answers to the challenge of creating. In a world where change comes from a bias for action and bold ideas, one thing we cannot do is get comfortable.

And that might be my take away: if you ever feel comfortable with the work you are doing on gender diversity you should start to worry, because you are not trying hard enough.

This is an excerpt of an article that was first published on LinkedIn on 28 September 2015 (www.linkedin.com/pulse/disrupting-diversity-andrew-penn). Telstra was one of 76 organisations named an ‘Employer of Choice for Gender Equality’ in November 2014 by the Workplace Gender Equality Agency.
Lessons learned as a woman scientist.

Marguerite (Maggie) Evans-Galea is one of several women pursuing research science as a profession. She graduated from the University of Queensland with a Bachelor of Music, a Bachelor of Science and a Postgraduate Diploma of Science, and then completed her PhD at the University of New South Wales.

Developing an international profile is critical for scientists, so Maggie accepted a postdoctoral fellowship in Utah, in the US. Her husband Charles, also a scientist, became the ‘trailing spouse’ and agreed with enthusiasm to the move.

Within the first week of starting her fellowship, Maggie recalls being surprised by a question from her new supervisor about whether she was hoping to start a family. She recalls he said ‘I don’t recommend it; it kills careers for women’. She was shocked to hear someone express this view but, as it turned out, the comment was not too far off the mark. When part-way through her contract Maggie received the exciting news that she was pregnant and eagerly told her boss, he replied with: ‘I think it’s time for you to finish up, Maggie.’ She was gobsmacked.

She sought legal advice about her options, negotiated a severance package and left the team. Maggie then started job hunting while pregnant.

Charles accepted a position at St. Jude Children’s Research Hospital in Memphis and they offered to assist with partners finding a position, so the family moved. Maggie accepted a postdoctoral fellowship with two senior clinician researchers. They both understood her needs as primary carer for her daughter and gave Maggie the necessary flexibility around work hours, provided she met her performance outcomes and deadlines. For Maggie, this meant she could totally focus on work during the day and avoid facing a ‘guilt trip’ when she had to leave early for well-baby visits or to beat the child care centre’s closing time. This made her feel valued. She was more productive and engaged, with greater wellbeing and reduced absenteeism – she could effectively maintain her work–life balance.

After 10 years away, Maggie, Charles and Bre decided to return home to Australia. Maggie now works as a research scientist at the Murdoch Childrens Research Institute at the Royal Children’s Hospital in Melbourne. The Institute is fostering a new way of working that maximises the potential and productivity of its entire staff including those who opt for flexible work practices. It provides comprehensive information to managers and staff around planning parental leave. Managers are encouraged to commence discussions with their staff members who are planning parental leave, build strategies to keep in touch over the break and, if staff desire, ensure they are included and informed. This approach will help researchers such as Maggie better juggle family and work responsibilities.

So what’s the problem?

Girls are opting out of mathematics and science in their final years of secondary school in growing numbers, which is exacerbating the scarcity of women in science. The debate around reasons for the low uptake of women in science has been raging for some time. Of all the barriers that hold women back, embedded mindsets and biases about the capabilities of men and women are probably the most insidious – that men are implicitly better than women at science, mathematics and careers.

Of all the barriers that hold women back, embedded mindsets and biases about the capabilities of men and women are probably the most insidious.
whereas women are more naturally gifted in the arts, family and domesticity.

Yet the facts simply do not support these biases. Australian girls score higher in mathematics than the average for both genders compared with other OECD countries (although slightly lower than Australian boys). Yet few girls choose Year 12 mathematics and science subjects. In 2004 the ratio of boys to girls studying intermediate mathematics was one girl for every 19 boys. In 2004–06 the percentage of girls studying both physics and chemistry averaged 8.6 per cent.

Unfortunately, women’s representation at each step of the career ladder in science also markedly declines. In biomedical research, for instance, women are well represented at graduate, PhD and postdoctoral fellowship levels, occupying 50 to 60 per cent of positions. Yet only about 25 per cent of women fill team leader and group leader roles. The pipeline becomes a mere trickle at the upper echelons of leadership, where women hold a mere 15 per cent of leadership roles.

Why then do women scientists opt out of leadership roles? Part of the answer lies in the timing. The transition step to a leadership role is very important in a scientist’s career, but often coincides with the time when many women start families and so, for various reasons, women exit the career at this critical stage.

A second reason lies in the myth of a meritocracy – that objective selection processes will ensure the best person will be selected to a vacancy. There is a growing body of research that demonstrates that our selection processes are far from merit-based, but are often flawed, biased and subjective. In studies where identical resumes are assessed, with just the gender of the candidate changed, men are rated more favourably than identically experienced women. Men just have the advantage because of their gender.

Another reason why male leadership is so embedded relates to the pervasive power of stereotypes. Research suggests that the more we talk about these stereotypes, the more we may be unintentionally reinforcing them by legitimising the prejudice and condoning the status quo, which leads us to discriminate more – a vicious circle.

Beyond the issues

Maggie’s experience demonstrates the ongoing challenges of combining a successful professional career with personal fulfilment.

In Utah, she experienced firsthand negative biases and ‘stereotypes’ and the consequent scarcity of women in leadership positions. She then experienced a more inclusive organisational culture in Memphis, where her career developed and where women in leadership were more visible.

Reflecting back on that time, Maggie has four pieces of advice for women scientists facing bias, discrimination and/or a lack of support.

First, have a good support network and do not be afraid to ask for help. You need to be able to debrief with someone you can trust and who will unconditionally support you. You also need someone who can share the practicalities of parenting and assist if needed.

Secondly, seek a mentor. Mentors help give perspective, challenge your thinking and provide alternative approaches you may not have considered when facing obstacles or managing unexpected situations.

Thirdly, find the right employer and the right manager. Choose workplaces where part-time or flexible work and career breaks are not considered a career killer, and are routinely accessed by women and men, and work for leaders who understand the productivity and innovation spin-offs that diversity brings.

Lastly, challenge your internal critic and learn to believe in your own abilities. This is the start of shifting from the mindset of ‘I’m not ready’ to ‘I want to put my hand up for this’.

This excerpt is from an article that was originally published on Women in Science AUSTRALIA (http://womeninscienceaust.org). Read the original article (http://womeninscienceaust.org/2015/08/15/lessons-learned-as-a-woman-scientist). The article comes from Career Interrupted – How 14 Successful Women Navigate Career Breaks, Norah Breekveldt (Melbourne Books, 2015).