

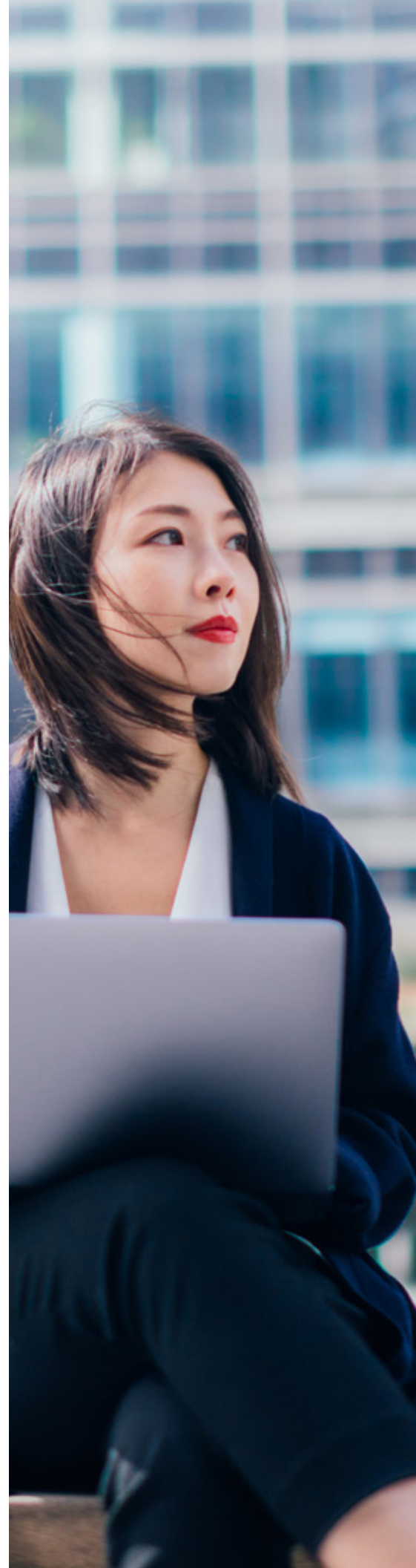
## Accelerating Women through the Leadership Pipeline: What Really Works

The chief HR and talent leaders of five companies in Asia share the approaches their organizations use to increase the number of women in top leadership roles.

The last 10 years have seen significant strides made by employers to promote gender diversity and equality in the workplace, most with the goal of increasing the representation of women at senior levels. The Bloomberg Gender Equality Index (GEI) announced a record 20 percent year-over-year increase in the number of companies disclosing their gender diversity practices and data in 2022. At the same time, LinkedIn research showed the number of people with “head of diversity” or equivalent titles more than doubled worldwide between 2015 and 2020.

While actual progress made in gender diversity at the senior-most levels is slow, the most progressive organizations have gained ground by refining their policies and practices over the years to understand what truly makes a difference in increasing the representation of women. Spencer Stuart drew insights from conversations with chief HR and talent officers who described their organizations’ most successful initiatives for reaching their gender diversity goals, including:

- » Mentoring driven by intrinsic motivation
- » An inclusive culture
- » Curated sponsorship from the top
- » A meritocracy that works
- » Contextualized initiatives



## Mentoring driven by intrinsic motivation: OCBC Bank



**We have a deliberately arduous application process for our MentorMe program. Once mentors and mentees sign up, we sift through the applications to make sure they are serious and committed. We decided to power our program with autonomy and intrinsic motivation, not with force or obligation.”**

**YAP AYE WEE**  
HEAD OF LEARNING & DEVELOPMENT,  
ORGANIZATION DEVELOPMENT, OCBC BANK

OCBC Bank is the second-largest financial services group in Southeast Asia by assets, and the longest established Singapore bank. OCBC started collecting data on gender diversity in 2018, which dramatically influenced its approach to gender diversity. There was a realization that, while their system had been designed to be merit- and performance-based, the numbers told a different story. Thirty-nine percent of leaders at vice president levels and above were women, but of concern was the sudden drop of women leaders at senior vice president levels and above.

“It’s not about promoting women to fill a quota,” says Jacinta Low, the head of talent management at OCBC Bank. “It’s about how can we get more capable women into leadership positions. And one of the things we’ve found extremely valuable is to provide these women with mentors to help prepare them for the next level up in their careers.”

MentorMe, OCBC Bank’s mentoring program for junior to mid-career women, has been a runaway success since its inception five years ago. Developed thoughtfully based on important learning from past mentoring programs, MentorMe helps women build deliberate relationships with experienced mentors. A cornerstone of the program is its non-negotiable demand for commitment and passion from both mentors and mentees, and its core tenets are autonomy and intrinsic motivation.

“We have a deliberately arduous application process for our MentorMe program,” explains Yap Aye Wee, head of learning and development and organization development for OCBC Bank. “Once mentors and mentees sign up, we sift through the applications to make sure they are serious and committed. We decided to power our program with autonomy and intrinsic motivation, not with force or obligation.”

OCBC BANK

Firstly, they made MentorMe completely voluntary, which was a huge departure from past — and typical — mentoring programs. Secondly, both mentors and mentees complete a detailed 10-page questionnaire describing their objectives, motivations and aspirations. Those who are clearly not ready to commit are not selected. Thirdly, mentors and mentees can choose whom they want to pair with, subject to certain practical conditions.

Most importantly, the MentorMe program is not just for “high potentials,” it is for all emerging women leaders. Aye Wee emphasizes how essential this was to gaining early support for the program: “In the beginning, the mentees asked me questions like, ‘Don’t I have to be a hi-po?’ ‘You mean I can just be myself and

you will invest in me?’ They found that very special. And we were able to unlock that self-affirmation, especially among the younger group.”

In the end, MentorMe has achieved what it had set out to do: remove upstream impediments for women leaders so they realize their potential and progress in the organization. For the bank, the most important KPI for MentorMe is positive word of mouth and feedback, which has been the driving force of a steady and sustained pipeline of highly motivated, engaged and energetic pool of mentors and mentees, and with 40 percent of mentors returning year after year, continued high demand for a program that has started to generate its own momentum.



## An inclusive culture supported by policies: EcoWorld



**Culture is everything. It shapes our thinking and how we feel at work every day. It's about how our women feel coming to work and giving their best to the company."**

ANGELIN LOW  
DIVISIONAL MANAGER GROUP  
TALENT MANAGEMENT, ECOWORLD

EcoWorld is a leading Malaysia property developer with growing international operations, innumerable industry awards and continued "best employer" accolades. EcoWorld's board has increased the representation of women from 8 percent in 2017 to 33 percent in 2022. The company has also poured significant effort into developing a pipeline of women leaders, who now serve in half of senior management roles. More than half of promoted staff over the past three years were women, increasing the share of women promoted into senior manager roles and above — from 49 percent in 2017 to 61 percent today.

What has contributed to EcoWorld's success? Angelin Low, divisional manager group talent management, argues unequivocally that culture is key. "Culture is everything. It shapes our thinking and how we feel at work every day. It's about how our women feel coming to work and giving their best to the company. If top management consistently delivers the message through promotion outcomes that only men will lead, the belief will arise that opportunities are limited and good female talent will start leaving."

Thus, an inclusive culture is not just a nice-sounding principle. At EcoWorld, cultural ideals are supported by matching policies that walk the talk. Policies establishing equal pay for performance, efforts to remove bias and stereotyping from promotion processes, and acceptance of the many hats women wear in their work and home lives help ensure the pipeline is not broken and prevent the premature departure of strong women talent.

There is still work to be done, admits Angelin. While the company has strong female leaders in the pipeline, they tend to be concentrated in sales or service functions, with few female leaders in technical fields. But as EcoWorld consciously strives to give women more exposure to technical and business areas, they know this in itself sends a strong message about the opportunities for women, which in turn creates a virtuous cycle encouraging more women to step forward for such roles.

"At the end of the day, creating the best employee experience for any demographic to excel with the company is very much ingrained in our culture. Top management, facilitated by group talent management, drives the gender balance agenda which is cascaded throughout the organization by C-suite and C-1 leaders, embraced by all," Low says.

EcoWorld

## Curated sponsorship from the top: Maybank



**It wasn't about the development of the woman leader followed by sponsoring. There's a gap between where the leader is competent but is still not ready to put her hand up. We thankfully were filling that particular gap by actively searching for these women. And that had to be done top-down."**

**DATUK NORA ABD MANAF**  
GROUP CHIEF HUMAN  
CAPITAL OFFICER, MAYBANK

Maybank was the first Malaysian company included in Bloomberg's Gender Equality Index in 2018. Since 2010, it has also managed to advance all its diversity indicators — including the representation of women in senior roles. Women currently make up 37 percent of senior management and 33 percent of group board composition. At management levels, women make up 48 percent. In 2009, female representation was 20 percent in senior management and 32 percent in management.

Datuk Nora Abd Manaf, group chief human capital officer at Maybank, links the progress made to the visibility and awareness of the women leadership agenda, as well as the broader DE&I agenda across the group, which is accomplished through the support and sponsorship from the highest leaders. "By having the chairman and my chief strategy officer as the executive sponsors of my Women Mentor Women Council, for example, people naturally came to support it. I also created visibility by making sure the council appears in all the board and EXCO reports. So physical forums and formal reporting were key, and the council became an official part of the bank's infrastructure."

Conceived in 2014, the Women Mentor Women (WMW) Council of Maybank aims to increase the representation of women in middle, senior and top management through curated sponsorship and mentorship by senior women role models.

"It wasn't about the development of the woman leader followed by sponsoring. There's a gap between when the leader is competent but is still not ready to put her hand up. We thankfully were filling that particular gap by actively searching for these women. And that has to be done top-down," Datuk Nora explains.

The women in the council were told from the beginning their job was not to replace the existing talent review committee but to complement it. They were to hunt for the diamonds in the rough. Council members were given the blessing and budgets to meet as many women as possible, especially those who excelled at what they did but had somehow remained "invisible."

Maybank





“I tell everybody we have to be inclusive and not have people in exclusive clubs. Every year we have programs for high potentials, what about the rest?”

Datuk Nora recounts one of council’s more memorable successes: finding a highly talented woman for a country head posting. The woman had not come up through any of the traditional sources and had never been labelled a “high potential.” However, she caught the attention of a council member who happened to see her operating in her element.

“While this individual was fully competent and confident, she was not the type of person to step out of her

circle or put her hand up, especially for a role which had thus far been filled by men. In fact, when the role was first suggested to her, her first reaction was, ‘I don’t think I can.’”

Despite competing for the role against strong succession candidates, her competence and potential shone through, and she was selected for the role based on her drive, knowledge of customers, sharp commercial acumen and ability to drive growth in a business which had stagnated. For Datuk Nora, this was the most tangible proof that the WMW Council and their efforts to hunt for those diamonds in the rough really pays off.

## Meritocracy that works: Singtel



**It doesn't matter how many programs you have, at the end of the day, the true measure of success is when people look at the top and they see a diverse leadership team."**

**AILEEN TAN**  
GROUP CHIEF PEOPLE AND  
SUSTAINABILITY OFFICER, SINGTEL

For many organizations, meritocracy alone has not helped them attain the desired level of diversity at the top. At Singtel, one of Asia's leading communications technology groups, meritocracy is the foundation of its diversity and inclusion agenda. This means that a candidate will not be selected for a role unless they are the best fit for it, regardless of gender, ethnicity or any other demographic factor. Singtel leaders, however, are acutely aware that achieving gender diversity doesn't automatically happen. Rather, deliberate effort is required.

For instance, Singtel trains its people to recognize unconscious bias and how to develop an inclusion mindset. It also has created employee networks to provide support for its women and is working to progressively increase female representation in technology roles through efforts such as the creation of the Singtel-Singapore University of Technology and Design (SUTD) Women in Tech Scholarship.

Its efforts have paid off. In Singapore where Singtel is headquartered, more than 30 percent of Singtel's board and 40 percent of its management are women, compared to an industry average of 12 percent and 24 percent, respectively. This has been recognized both externally and internally: Singtel made Bloomberg's Gender-Equality Index for the fourth consecutive year, and more than 80 percent of its employees rate its DE&I efforts positively.

Aileen Tan, group chief people and sustainability officer for Singtel, explains the company's successful approach towards diversity: "We work on the basic premise that diversity is good for business. Then ensuring you have a representative pool for selection and promotion as a starting point is key. But when we get to shortlisting, it's based purely on meritocracy. It's about the impact and value the person brings to the table. As much as I want to have more women, or men for that matter, on a specific team, I will pick the best person for the job but also ensure this individual is one who recognizes the importance of diversity when leading a team."

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Building on this base, Singtel ensures it treats its people like holistic individuals and applies fair practices across the board to achieve the desired outcome — a diverse workforce with a diverse leadership which reflect the communities they operate in. For example, Singtel not only provides maternity benefits to mothers in the organization, but also to the wives of the fathers in its employ. In addition, both men and women are given identical privileges when it comes to taking unpaid leave. If there are coaching and mentoring programs for women, so too will there be for men. If there are employee resource groups for women, the men can join in the conversation. And so on.

“[But] it doesn’t matter how many programs you have, at the end of the day, the true measure of success is when people look at the top and they see a diverse leadership team. The presence of strong women leaders naturally attracts other capable women leaders from the outside. At the same time, it makes it clear to women on the inside that diversity matters and inspires them to make their careers with us.”

And while they see differences in how men and women respond to specific career choices such as overseas postings — some women may still prioritize family over work commitments, for example — it is certainly not a challenge to be managed, but an empowered choice to be respected and celebrated!





## It's all about context: IHH Healthcare



**There's no silver bullet on this one, it's highly nuanced. Industry, country and organizational culture all come into play. On top of that, every woman comes into the workplace as the outcome of her own culture, upbringing, life stage and personal aspirations, so our ambition is to create the space so that every woman can reach her desired potential."**

ANGELA RYAN  
GROUP CHRO, IHH HEALTHCARE

There is certainly no shortage of women in the healthcare industry. According to recent research by the World Health Organization, women make up an estimated 65-70 percent of the healthcare services workforce. Like most other industries, however, it faces a dearth of women near the top. What that equates to is a bigger funnel but a steep drop-off at higher leadership levels.

What's happening? It's possible, says Angela Ryan, group CHRO of IHH Healthcare, that many men and women join the industry to fulfill an innate sense of purpose or calling toward caring for others, but may be much less inclined to take on corporate leadership roles that are further away from day-to-day patient care. "In healthcare, we often hear from our clinicians that their desired career pathing is aimed more at those clinical pathways than corporate roles. So, if one were to look at all senior leadership positions, nursing leadership for example, the numbers of women are actually far higher. What we are now exploring is job and organizational design to see how we can encourage more women to aspire to shift into general management roles and how we need to evolve our systems to support this."

Nonetheless, women in healthcare face similar constraints as women in other industries. Firstly, there's no consistent view of what a leader is supposed to look like, and certain cultures in Asia, especially Southeast Asia, still have certain expectations as to how a woman is supposed to behave. And that is why at IHH, it is seen as a "wicked" problem with no easy resolution.

"There's no silver bullet on this one, it's highly nuanced. Industry, country and organizational culture all come into play. On top of that, every woman comes into the workplace as the outcome of her own upbringing, life stage and personal aspirations, so our ambition is to create the space so that every woman can reach her desired potential."

IHH Healthcare



IHH's approach has been to determine groupwide diversity, equity, inclusion and belonging (DEIB) targets, having announced in September 2022 a sustainability metric of a gender-balanced leadership cohort by end of 2025. This is then contextualized with a deep understanding of the local context and culture, with the outcome of a localized DEIB strategy and targets. Interestingly, the contexts of certain Southeast Asia countries deemed to have similar local cultures can also be very different once this additional analysis is completed. For example, within IHH the DEIB strategies for Singapore, Malaysia and Brunei are very different.

Perhaps another reason why IHH is becoming more successful in getting women into broader senior leadership positions is the fact they also believe that all interventions must be humanized/individualized to

cater to what every employee says is important to them. To this extent, talent management is supported by a rigorous and in-depth three-stage exploratory system for aspiring leaders. This approach allows a discovery of skills, attributes and potential the person has, together with their career aspirations and preferred timeframes. This is then anchored by a bespoke development plan and mapped to the succession plans for roles. IHH talent management is, at heart, a long-term partnership with their people rather than an organization directive, designed to balance both people and company needs. Where IHH is concerned, there is certainly no short cut to getting more women leaders into general senior leadership positions and they have set out a very ambitious goal to create space for more female leaders across the group.

## Where we are headed: “Flex economy” and beyond

One thing that these experienced HR practitioners agree on is the fact that while much progress has been made around how women in the workplace are viewed and what we can do to maximize their leadership potential, we still have a long way to go. The reality that there’s no silver bullet; that shouldn’t discourage us but inspire us to find what truly works in our context, just like these organizations have done.

Mentoring, culture, sponsorship, meritocracy and contextualized initiatives are just a few practices, which, when applied thoughtfully, can effectively address different aspects of a complex issue. Other important long-range trends which could eventually help even out the gender imbalance at the top (or at least keep women engaged in the workplace) is the so-called “flex economy.” Unlike the gig economy, which is about contract or freelance work, the flex economy is all about being truly but reasonably flexible with where, when and how individuals choose to work. This was only possible after a global pandemic taught us that it was!

As squarely put by Theresa Soikkeli, a CHRO who has been in both the financial services and social enterprise worlds, “Women in Asia are still playing the dominant homemaker role, so flexibility is important to them.” Indeed, based on Soikkeli’s experience, whether they were retirees or mid-career mothers, offering flex

made it work and kept them highly engaged and contributing their talents in the workforce. This is, however, easier said than done, given that “flexibility” means different things to different people, and may be harder to provide in certain industries. “The key to the equation is in organizations allowing flexibility with no judgment on how each woman does it.”

Even with more organizations and societies starting to contemplate what the future of work looks like, we are not naïve enough to think that having a robust flex economy or even a four-day work week could dramatically change the leadership landscape for women. If it were an easy solve, we would not still be looking at the dismal numbers of women CEOs in Fortune 500 companies more than 50 years post the women’s liberation movement.

And while we did not have a chance to discuss gender bias here, multiple studies show that they do and still exist which implies women need to jump over higher hurdles and will take a longer time to get into the corner office than men. The good news is that organizations and leaders are working harder now than ever before to create conditions for reduced bias to accelerate the progress for women. We hope that as more great stories like the ones here are shared, the more positive momentum we have to bolster those efforts.



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