



ACCELERATE EQUALITY

Better balanced boardrooms make for better businesses. But how to get there? Three business leaders share the why - and the how - of achieving greater gender balance in leadership roles

No great plan succeeds without preparation. Promoting gender balance at leadership level in your business is one such great plan, with benefits to be reaped on revenue lines right across to the culture of your company and its ability to attract transformational talent. Putting that plan into successful action may, however, require a little help.

Enter The Level Project, a practical initiative from Enterprise Ireland. The Level Project is designed to support companies to develop and implement a strategy that will help them improve gender balance in their senior leadership teams and on their boards. A core component of the project is an online Action Planning Toolkit, which is available for free to all companies and businesses in Ireland. By completing the online toolkit you will develop an Action Plan tailored to the specific needs and challenges of your company.

Research-driven and results-focused, The Level Project has attracted support from many inspirational Irish business leaders, among them Kevin Buckley of Spearline, who has become a Level Project Champion.

Skibbereen-based telecoms company Spearline has an international footprint, and its co-founder and CEO Kevin Buckley is a strong advocate for better balanced businesses. "The Level Project makes sense to Spearline because we believe in gender balance," he tells Irish Tatler. "Research shows that there is a consistent correlation between diverse leadership and stronger performance for companies."

Buckley contends that senior men ought to play an active part in moving the dial on gender balance. "Male leaders and founders should become particular advocates for the project because the message may travel further when it is promoted by both male and female leaders," he says, adding that the argument is an easy one to make. "It's been proven many times that the more diverse the workforce the greater the productivity and in turn the revenue."

Vivian Farrell, CEO of Modular Automation, is a fellow Level Project Champion. Farrell leads a team of 150 staff from Modular's Shannon headquarters, and says that seeing more women in leadership positions produces a host of business benefits. "I have always been passionate about females succeeding in their careers," Farrell says. "Having two teenage girls means the topic is close to my heart. When I joined Modular Automation in 2015 there were just two females in the business including myself, so it provided a



great opportunity to change the dynamics and make a real difference by encouraging more females to join a male-dominated business. I became CEO of the company in 2018. Today, many females who apply for roles at Modular tell me that my progression is what inspired them. I get great satisfaction from that."

"If you can see it, you can be it," agrees Evelyn O'Toole, the founder and CEO of Complete Laboratory Solutions (CLS) and a Level Project Champion. "It demonstrates good leadership when there is a greater gender balance and presents a level of harmony that will help progress business strategies and solve problems more successfully. Gender balance at leadership level visibly highlights an inclusive company and creates a top table that everyone can relate to."

Creating a culture of support is key, Kevin Buckley believes, and this can translate to company policies that directly accommodate family obligations. "There are many initiatives that Spearline has fostered to support employees with family commitments, such as paid maternity, paternity and adoptive leave. We also have flexible working hours, to accommodate school runs, and we offer career development opportunities through subsidised study. We encourage a work-life balance by allowing employees with family commitments to work on reduced or part-time hour and also grant parental leave as required throughout the year."

For Vivian Farrell, these brass tack supports make all the difference. "To encourage more women to join our team at Modular we needed to make lots of changes," she says, "including paid maternity leave as well as flexible working to allow parents balance home with work."

"THE LEVEL PROJECT is designed to support companies to DEVELOP AND IMPLEMENT A STRATEGY that will help them IMPROVE GENDER BALANCE in their senior leadership."

However you plan to promote gender balance in your company, the Level Project Action Planning Tool is the place to start. The process is simple: set up a free account at levelproject.ie; select the actions that best suit your company (drawn from six key themes), and then download your editable action plan. "Achieving gender balance at leadership level is challenging," says Vivian Farrell, "and that's why it's so great to see Enterprise Ireland invest in programs like the Level Project to create the awareness of the value that having gender balance at all levels of our businesses brings. But being aware is one element; Irish businesses then need support to create that balance by introducing initiatives. That's why it's important to see Enterprise Ireland follow through and support their clients in taking the necessary steps to make it happen." For Enterprise Ireland entrepreneurship manager Sheelagh Daly, the equation is simple. "Achieving gender equality is important in enterprise not only because it is 'fair', and the 'right thing to do', but because it also linked to a country's overall economic performance."

As business challenges multiply, a temptation to leave ambitious projects on the long finger can arise. For Vivian Farrell of Modular Automation, diversity and balance are strategic must-haves. "Having a diverse workforce enhances our ability to innovate and delivering that for our clients is at the core of our business," she says. "Having a good gender balance brings different perspectives and ideas that are so necessary to drive innovation. It also makes for a happier workplace, and that's what we all want for our teams."

At Spearline, gender balance is clearly linked to success. "Through our focus on achieving a gender balance we have already seen the benefit of constant growth," says Kevin Buckley. "We understand that a diverse workforce, supported by an equal and wholly inclusive culture can lead to significant benefits, including better decision-making, problem-solving, talent attraction and retention, enhanced employee engagement and much more."

As you consider the part gender balance can play in your company's future, Evelyn O'Toole offers the following advice. "Nurturing relationships across the company is essential, now more than ever," she says. "We have all been faced with challenges of separation in recent years, and with it the risk of our colleagues becoming detached, so making an effort and caring enough to make an effort is what's important now."

"That can mean refreshing our thinking and how we think, and this applies to challenging any biases we may have, and staying up to date as much as possible. It means encouraging your junior team members to have access to senior team members and vice versa; this can work really well. Not only does it support team members progressing their careers, but it also allows for new ways of thinking and learning, and this builds a better team across both genders. Ultimately, we need to know that any change is in our power to make happen." ●

For more information, supports and to access the free Action Planning Toolkit see levelproject.ie

The Level Project is an initiative of Enterprise Ireland's Women in Business action plan, a wide-ranging strategy to achieve greater representation of women in business and particularly in business leadership across Ireland. The Action Planning Toolkit comprises a series of questions and suggested actions that companies can select to incorporate into their own strategy for achieving gender balance in their senior teams. The output of the toolkit is an editable Action Plan which will provide the basis for companies starting on the journey for the first time, or enhance and advance the approach by companies already active in this space. Enterprise Ireland is also providing supports to companies to help them implement their plans. This includes the Part Time Key Manager grant, specifically designed to encourage companies to provide more flexible arrangements for senior managers, and a new Strategic Consultancy Grant.