

Don't get ruffled, don't have tantrums. Let's face it — if a nuclear bomb went off outside, is panicking going to make things better? No.”

*“You end up having a two-dimensional life...” “I’ve only achieved what I’ve achieved with the support of my husband...” “I never wanted to be kept...” “I don’t feel like a woman when I’m thinking...” Here, four of Australia’s most powerful women discuss what it takes to make it to the top of the corporate ladder. Interviews by Libbi Gorr.*

# POWER

women

**M**argaret Jackson, 51, has held the chairman’s position at Qantas since August 2000. Nicknamed “The Dame”, she was touted as a candidate for governor-general last year. Married with two children, Jackson is also, among other appointments, chairman of Methodist Ladies College in Melbourne, director and deputy chairman of Southcorp Ltd and a director of ANZ Bank.

## Who taught you how to be on boards?

The first organisation I was very involved with was a not-for-profit organisation. I served on a number of committees, which taught me how to sit around a table with a group of people in a meeting. It was all very confusing – what the chairman did, what the secretary did, what the treasurer did, how you worked the agendas, how you had conversations that came to a conclusion, how you made resolutions and how you referred them up to a higher body. How do you learn anything? It’s all about human interaction. Sitting at board tables is no different. When you first turn up, you don’t make much of a contribution – you observe and learn. You look at some people and you think, “That’s a better way, that’s a better model.” And you pick up points and develop skills along the way.

## Has gender played a part in your quest to be involved in change?

Well, I’ve only ever been a woman so it’s a bit hard to comment. I have feminine attributes but I’m also quite tough. But, then, women can be tough, men can be tough, men can be soft. We’re all unique humans. I don’t think I’ve ever tried to ram femininity down people’s throats. To progress in business, you must build skills for tomorrow, recognise people are important. Sometimes you’ve got to be aggressive about change. But mostly change happens incrementally. It’s grindingly slow and takes

perseverance and survival skills, determination, energy, people skills and time management.

## What skills do you need to be on a board?

You’ve got to earn the right, irrespective of gender or background or race. You’ve got to have the intellect for analysing circumstances. The art of listening is really important. If you have a meeting, you’ve got to listen as well as speak. You’ve got to have the ability to ask questions and keep asking questions. Often around a boardroom table people will ask five questions. If they’d asked the sixth question, you might get to the nub of the issue. What I learned early on is that often you’ll ask what seems like a dumb, obvious question. But it’s the question that’s in the back of most people’s heads. So probe, question, listen, think, analyse, re-analyse, think differently. Keep going until you are satisfied.

The wonderful thing about a board is that it’s the collection of experience of the people around the table that’s important. Every director around the table at Qantas has a different background. The alchemy between them is what all boards are. And everyone is throwing in their experience, their wit, their intellect. Then you’ve got to be brave enough to allow management to try things. If it doesn’t work, we’ll try something else. Everyone learns from lessons, as long as they’re learned. They’re mistakes if you don’t learn from them.

## How do you achieve balance in such a full life?

The only person who has time that is their own is somebody who is not married, has no children, has no parents, brothers or sisters and doesn’t work. We all have to juggle issues that call on our time – male and female, young and old. The trick is to keep reminding yourself what your priorities are.

## And yours are?

Well, today is my daughter’s birthday. Birthdays are important. So you change your day so you can be

there for your daughter’s birthday. I have found people extraordinarily flexible. If you’re looking at your diary and there’s a whole heap of things to do and you think, “I don’t know how I’m ever going to get through this day,” it’s perfectly acceptable to say, “No, I can’t” and don’t. As you would the washing or the ironing. **Is this an insight that comes from being a mother?** I don’t think enough people in the workplace acknowledge the importance of family and friends. We’re a whole person. We’ve got all sorts of bits and pieces of our lives that contribute to us as a whole person. Often people walk through the door in the morning and leave two-thirds of the person behind.

Years ago I had a CEO who said he couldn’t make a meeting with me because it was his son’s birthday and he was going to the kindergarten to cut up the fruit and do the morning tea. He said, “I’m going to say I’ve got an outside meeting.” I said, “You should be brave enough to say that one of your priorities is to go to your son’s kindergarten and cut up the fruit. Because if you don’t talk about it, then your next level of direct reports won’t talk about it and neither will the next level.” We use all the experiences of our entire life in dealing with other humans in the workplace.

## What qualities do you look for in a CEO?

Different industries, different attributes. But they need wisdom, integrity and energy to be good with people. They need to be open, not a head-kicker. They’ve got to inspire, lead. Sometimes that means they’ve got to deal quite harshly with people who aren’t performing or don’t fit.

## When you have to make tough decisions, do you have different outfits that you wear?

No, no, I don’t think about what I’m wearing in relation to what I’ve got to do. The only thing I’d say about tough decisions is to make them sooner rather than later. →



“I think you’ve got to find your own way. That’s probably the best advice. Be true to yourself, fight your own way. I can’t give you advice on how to do it.”

**Carmen Lawrence**, PhD (psychology), 56, became a professional politician when she won the West Australian Legislative Assembly seat of Subiaco for the Australian Labor Party in 1986 after a solid academic career. In the early '80s, she was course controller in behavioural science applied to medicine at the University of Western Australia from where she graduated with a bachelor of psychology with first-class honours in 1968 and gained her doctorate of philosophy in 1983. She grew up in a family of seven in the small wheat-belt town of Morawa, WA, joined the Labor Party and went on to become Australia's first woman premier in 1990. In 1994, Lawrence made the jump to federal politics. This year she began her term as the first popularly elected president of the ALP and continues to campaign for peace and compassionate refugee policies.

**Do you feel like a woman when you're working?**

An impossible question! I don't think we can ever really free ourselves of our gender, our appearance, the way people respond to us, our voices, our position in society. But I've always had, I suppose intellectually, a gender-free approach. I remember getting to the end of university and thinking, "What's all this stuff about differences between men and women?" I never had to confront it in my chosen field. It was only outside university that I realised there were a lot of assumptions about you as a woman that had nothing to do with your ability. So I guess I've always lived with that slight split. On the one hand I'm always a woman but on the other hand, I don't feel like a woman when I'm thinking.

**Is it still relevant to be speaking about gender?**

Yes, it is. There are still lots of places where women are either in such a small minority that they're seen

as freaks or they're just starting to participate in something approximating equal numbers. And the question has to be why – especially in the corporate sector – are there so few women? And I guess, does it make any difference when there are women? I've always held the view that women aren't repositories of virtue and we shouldn't be asked to be, either.

A lot of feminists would have said women are uniquely placed to change the political discourse, improve corporate behaviour and reduce violence, that they're likely to be consultative rather than ego driven – all that stuff. I was never entirely convinced of that. It's not fair to ask women to carry the "God's police" tag around with them. If you want to improve political behaviour, you have to set out to do it. You don't do it by just turning up and saying, "I'm a woman." Because of their nurturing role and the fact that they've been in relatively subservient positions, women have adopted a polite demeanour. But given half a chance, some of them are just as bad as the guys, let me tell you.

**Do you meet them in your game?**

Certainly do. Women get swept up in the same sort of combative style in politics unless they explicitly set an alternative agenda, develop strategies to do it differently and embrace men and women alike.

Women's wages are considerably lower on average, women are more in part-time and casual work, support for mothers is poor. That's all still relevant and on the political agenda. But are we going to change political discourse and the way businesses conduct affairs just by having more women there? The answer is conclusively no. You have to ask the question about the issues, not about gender.

**Have you ever succumbed to the call of power?**

Oh yes, absolutely. You do get caught up in the

day-to-day exercise of power. If the media come knocking on your door and ask difficult questions, you answer them in ways that are going to protect your position. So transparency and clarity in political discussion are not common. We all fall for that. We have people paid to do it for us. That's a pity, ultimately. I think the Australian political debate is a degraded beast because of that.

**How can you fix it?**

I don't know that there's any one solution but having a wide variety of people involved in the political process is a good start. And what worries me about both major political parties is that they're recruiting from a narrower base than should be the case. Often we're recruiting people who've been in members' offices, ministers' offices, union executives – a small political class who get involved in student politics and stay in the political stream, and never get out and have different experiences. We suffer, I think, from a certain homogeneity.

**Are you satisfied doing what you do?**

I'm frustrated by the extent to which people often complain and then don't want to change. Part of my optimism about politics is that I think change is always possible. Or explore the possibilities at least. People ask me, "Why did you get involved in politics?" And I say, "In a moment of weakness." That's a bit flippant but I don't know that I was that thoughtful initially. Part of the problem is that when you first get involved, you don't necessarily know what you're doing.

**Were there nuns involved in your upbringing, Carmen?**

More than a few, darling. And they were very influential. The idea of the "perfectibility" of human nature is what it's all about.

**What does that mean?**

It means that we're always capable of doing better. I suppose I've translated the idea of life ever-after into, "We are all essentially God's creatures, equal in merit and worth, and to the extent that our society doesn't reflect that, then it should be changed." That's the very strong Catholic in me, if you like.

**Is that what you believe?**

Yeah. But I don't believe "God's creatures" because I don't believe in God. But we are all human beings of equal merit and worth and deserving of attention and respect.

**You preside over boardroom tables. Can you ever look at a seating plan of a dining-room table the same way again?**

No, but I like chaos. Most people when they go into a first cabinet meeting or the first committee meeting will take a seat. And you go back the next time and there's the same [seat], whether it's been formally allocated or not. I have always made it my business to go and sit in someone else's seat. I don't know what that says about me but I hate people behaving in those predictable ways so I always try to break it up. You can sometimes see the discomfort when they head for their seat and someone is sitting in it. Silly, really, but it's one of my things.

Shirley In't Veld, the recently appointed vice-president South Asia business development, Alcoa Primary Development, came to the male-dominated engineering, mining and manufacturing environment from a legal background. Thrice-divorced and a mother of four, the 50-year-old is now happily partnered but vows she will never marry again.

**Does your life mirror those of the men in the same position as you?**

I would say, throughout my career, at least 90 per cent of all the males I've worked with have had wives at home, looking after their children and home. I've been gobsmacked by just how much it hasn't changed. A lawyer working for me had a wife at home looking after their two very young children. I used to tease him because she would cut his lunch for him and peel his oranges. A bit of it's envy on my part because I think, "I'm getting up at 5am to make my lunch and the kids' lunches; isn't he lucky to have somebody doing this for him?" If guys are going up the corporate ladder, there are two of them pushing.

**“My mother had no career, she had no income. And I can remember thinking I am never, ever going to be in that situation where I am financially dependent on a male. So that drove me. Even if I had maternity leave, I don't know that I would have taken it.”**

**And the girls?**

A lot of the younger women in the organisations I've worked for take their husband's name when they marry. I could not have imagined taking my husband's name. They take maternity leave but my situation was a bit different because it just wasn't there. You took three weeks out of your annual leave, hit the deck running and pretended you didn't have children. But now there's so much more support for women. Quite a few decide it's too hard and don't come back at all.

**What does that mean?**

They're smarter. We in the baby-boomers' generation were just so determined to fulfill our ambitions and have a career and to be financially independent.

**Do you blame them?**

No, no. It's not easy. You end up having a two-dimensional life. Your focus is on looking after the children and getting to the job and that means getting enough sleep. So no television, no going to movies, no going out to dinner – it's basically all children and work. Even though I had a reasonably supportive partner at that time, there's still the expectation that as the female you will keep the show running.

**So you experience this clash?**

Yes. That's part of the difficulty I have with relationships. You get more and more desolate about how you're doing everything, paying for everything and working your heart out. And you realise it is going to be easier without them. I'm not good at marriage.

**Have you noticed a difference between women and men at your level in business?**

Women tend to cut and chase a bit more in meetings. We're here, there's a time factor, let's get through it. If the meeting drags on, I'm thinking about what I have to pick up at the supermarket to cook for dinner. Whereas the guys are just, "Oh, who cares what time it is." And that's why I've always worked an eight-hour day. You can only work effectively so many hours in a day in terms of thinking clearly.

**Have you trained male colleagues in "female" as a second language?**

I'll tell you a story. There were about 10 guys here once at the table. At five to six, I piped up quite innocently, "Excuse me. I have to leave in five minutes," and there was a deathly silence. Silence. And I said, "Well, I don't have a wife." To his credit, one of the PR guys

said, "Well, do you want one?" Then another guy said, "If I don't get home soon, I won't have my wife either." So two of them came in behind me but it was not the done thing. To me, it encapsulated the issue.

**Who taught you how to manage people?**

If you've led a charmed life where nothing has ever gone wrong, it's harder to lead people. If you've had things go wrong, you are used to keeping things in perspective. I've experienced just about everything: miscarriages, abortions, divorces, parents' marriages breaking down, elder sister killed tragically, younger brother killed in another car accident. And though you just want to die at the time, it gives you a different perspective. Everybody will be losing their heads and my thinking is, "It's not going to change the course of the world." I'd like to think I can be compassionate, particularly with people who are having a rough trot. The best bosses are the ones who give you freedom to run your job the way you need to run it. If you want to go to the school and get in at 10 o'clock, do it. If you show confidence in somebody, they rise to the occasion. It's knowing the person and letting them know that you know that makes all the difference." →



## Tips from the powerbrokers

**1 Dawn Robertson, managing director, Myer**  
 “I am a firm believer that you can achieve anything with the right attitude, the right talent and the right focus. To achieve business success, a woman does not have to be more like a man but has to be herself.”

**2 Natalie Bloom, founder, Bloom Cosmetics**  
 “As your business grows, there are times when you become overwhelmed by opportunities. It is essential to stay focused on your core business rather than be distracted.”

**3 Heather Ridout, chief executive officer, Australian Industry Group**  
 “It’s very important for women to take every opportunity to stretch themselves ... [even] where they may not be entirely comfortable. They won’t get to the top in support positions.”

**4 Margaret Brumby, general manager, Walter and Eliza Hall Institute of Medical Research**  
 “To succeed, have self-belief and never doubt that you are as good as the men around you, even if they are noisier than you are. There is no correlation between male loudness and success.”

**5 Helen Nugent, non-executive director, Macquarie Bank, Origin Energy and Carter Holt Harvey**

“Working for organisations that appoint and promote on merit is key, as is working with people who value you and will support you.”

**6 Paula Dwyer, non-executive director, David Jones and Promina**  
 “Always ensure you’re the best qualified for the job so that gender is never the issue. Then, roll with the punches and don’t be deterred as there is no substitute for perseverance.”

**7 Anna McPhee, director, Equal Opportunity for Women in the Workplace Agency**  
 “The pathway into senior management positions is not always straight up. It is important that women gain broad business experience at all levels and this often means being prepared to move backwards or sideways.”

**8 Lisa Gray, chief executive officer, wealth protection, MLC**  
 “Be clear about your own brand of leadership – what you want to be known for and what you stand for. Recognise that a key sign of your team’s success is that the same choices get made whether you are in the room or not.”

**9 Diana Ryall, managing director, Xplore (a mentoring organisation for young women in business)**  
 “Many women focus on their current role so strongly that they don’t take time to connect with others both within and outside their organisation. Women need to establish networks.”

**10 Christine O’Reilly, chief executive officer, GasNet Australia Group**  
 “Strive for an excellent team around you. Give credit for others’ contributions and accept that leadership and seniority can at times be lonely.”

**11 Ruth Martin, chief financial officer, Sydney Airport Corporation**  
 “Balance enthusiasm with sound commercial and professional judgement. Most women are intuitive – don’t be afraid to develop this skill. And don’t be afraid of making the tough decisions.”



**“It’s very hard if both are in demanding, high-powered, 12-hours-a-day jobs when there are children. I think you can do that – you’ve got to work hard at your personal life but I think you can do it.”**

Elizabeth Proust, 54, is managing director of the ANZ subsidiary Esanda (Australia’s largest asset-based finance company). Married for 33 years with one child, Proust was awarded a Centenary Medal for “service to Australian society for business leadership” in 2003 and the *Australian Financial Review* 2003 True Leaders Award. She is also a member of the National Breast Cancer Foundation board of trustees and chairman of the Melbourne Symphony Orchestra board.

**Is it still valid to see women in positions such as yours as trailblazers?**

I’d like to think that women on boards and as CEOs are becoming more common. But the pace of change is very slow and I think that’s sad. Something like 8.4 per cent of positions on boards are held by women and 8.8 per cent of the executive positions are held by women. At that pace, it’s estimated it will be about 177 years before you get equality. And it’s not just about women – people from different ethnic backgrounds, people who think differently.

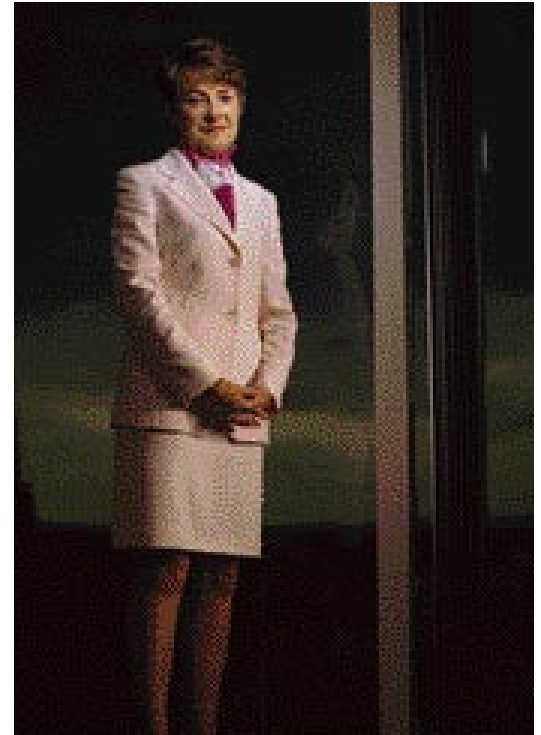
**What do you think has held it up?**

I think it’s corporate culture, which largely reflects the broader Australian culture. Women have responded by setting up their own businesses. I’ve only achieved what I’ve achieved with the support of my husband. And that means not just encouragement for me to take on these roles but active sharing of raising our daughter.

**What would you suggest to change the situation?**

You’ve got to actively think outside the square. When using a headhunter to find people, don’t accept a short list that doesn’t have a woman on it. It’s not about tokenism and it’s not about, “I must have a woman at any cost,” because I want to grow my business, which is my charter. But that means occasionally taking a punt on someone.

**Is work a major way in which you define yourself? Whether it’s good or bad, the answer is yes. It’s a big**



part of how I spend my day and my thinking time. Work gives me a lot of satisfaction. I never wanted to be kept. I like my own money and I value my independence. I also hope that I would define myself as a wife and as a mother as well.

**What compromises have you made along the way?**

I use the word compromise deliberately, rather than sacrifice. My life is regimented during the day and I work long hours. That means there are other things I don’t do – not enough time with friends, a sister makes sure I keep in touch with family. Along the way there’s probably not been enough time to smell the roses. Women can achieve anything that they want. But we can’t have everything.

**Is “male” a second language?**

There are certainly different ways men and women use words. In a meeting, women end sentences with a rising inflection that invites a response rather than stating something that doesn’t. I think there’s even something in the strength of male voices where women have to clamour to be heard sometimes. You can come across as being aggressive or strident when all you’re doing is fighting for the space in which to be heard.

**What are the common mistakes made by younger women coming up through the ranks?**

Assuming that discrimination in the workplace is something their mothers’ generation fought for and won. It often takes a while to see discrimination. It might be who goes to drinks after work – often a lot of the informal networking gets done there.

**Is there any solidarity between the “sisters”?**

For some women there’s an understanding that this has been hard to do and they have an obligation to mentor – many do just that. Others think they’ve made it by themselves and don’t. My view is that the struggle is hard. I didn’t get to where I am by myself and I have an obligation to help other women achieve what they want to achieve. ●

