CONFER PROGRAMME OUTCOMES

What leaders did differently

The changes senior leaders made during and after the CONFER programme – in the day-to-day, not only at the promotion round

Every example here is real – a change made by a senior leader who attended one of our programmes.

REAL CONFER PROGRAMME OUTCOMES, ANONYMISED

SUMMARY

On completion of the CONFER programme – in fact after the first three hours of it – 100% of participants reported changing their behaviour. That is a self-reported number, and self-reported numbers are easy to discount. So this document sets out what they actually changed.

Each example below is a change made by a senior leader who attended one of our programmes, gathered in the months during and afterwards. The changes were easy to enact and made a big difference to their female colleagues.

Names and identifying details have been removed; nothing else has been changed.

WHO GETS THE OPPORTUNITY

The small, career-enhancing boosts – the stretch task, the client-facing slot, the piece of work that gets seen – are allocated informally and at speed, dozens of times a quarter. They are rarely recorded, and almost never reviewed or taken into account during performance reviews, yet they can change the trajectory of people's careers.

A senior leader (male) found he was boosting the same few people

He had never looked at the pattern across his team as a whole. Once he did, it was unmistakable: the same small group (mostly male) was receiving almost all of the small but impactful stretch opportunities – we call them **microboosts**. He changed how he allocated them, deliberately and consistently. The outcome surprised him.

NOBODY LOST, EVERYONE GAINED

The colleagues who had been receiving the **microboosts** (mostly male) were relieved – they had been carrying the additional work and feeling the pressure of it. The colleagues who had not been receiving them (mostly female) were delighted to be asked, and stepped up. Overall, the capacity and capability of the team increased.

Concentration of opportunity is not only a recognition problem. It is a resourcing inefficiency, and correcting it releases capacity that the business was already paying for.

This leader reported that by intentionally giving **microboosts** to more of his team members, his own job became easier: “I no longer have to be across so many things – my team take more responsibility, and I get to focus on the things I uniquely bring. So it’s not entirely selfless.”

A senior leader (male) offered to sponsor – not mentor – two female colleagues

Both were delighted to be asked. Informal sponsorship is one of the widest gaps the research shows between men and women, and one of the easiest for a senior leader to close directly.

CONFERRING AUTHORITY

A senior leader (male) realised that, as he is often the most senior person in the room, decisions are routed to him when he may not be the most expert on any given topic

He made a deliberate shift in how he responds in these situations – routing the question back to the person who is most expert, often one of his two female direct reports, making it clear that they are the authority on a given topic, not him.

A senior leader (male) appointed a second pair of eyes

He appointed a second pair of eyes to see whether he was behaving in the right way, for example in chairing meetings. The counterparty told him he was chairing quite differently after having been through the programme, bringing quieter female voices into the discussion and affirming what they said, and looking out for women being interrupted or talked over.

Several leaders changed how they introduce their teams to clients

They now introduce colleagues in a way that states plainly what the female (and male) members of the team bring and why they are there – conferring authority from the outset. An introduction sets the terms on which someone is heard for the rest of the meeting, and it is entirely in the gift of the person making it.

BEING HEARD

Around half of the **authority gap moments** we collect in the diagnostic interviews relate, in some form, to women saying they are not heard or listened to. The second workshop, Boosts & Blockers, does not tell participants that this matters; it shows them. We run a short exercise in which they experience the mental and physical effects of not being listened to, and then equip them with techniques to address it.

Two of the changes that followed are among the most telling in the set, because in neither case was the leader told what their own pattern was; they discovered it themselves, with what the programme had given them.

A senior leader (male) realised his listening style was being misread

He realised that his natural manner and listening style might have been giving the impression that he was not engaged, when he really was. He raised it with his team, who laughed in recognition. He has since adopted a different listening technique. He reported that his team – and more importantly, he said, his wife and children – had noticed and were appreciating the change.

A senior leader (female) realised that, when listening, she was not fully listening but judging and preparing her reply

She used one of the techniques the programme offered to change her default behaviour, resulting in her listening more intently and more effectively.

NOTICING, NOT FOLLOWING A RULE

Neither of these is a rule that was taught and then followed. Each is a leader noticing their own pattern and correcting it – which is the difference between following a rule and changing a judgement, and the reason the change carries beyond the examples used to teach it.

INTERVENING IN THE MOMENT

Noticing an **authority gap moment** and doing something useful about it are separate skills. Most of us fall back on the same one way of stepping in, if we do so at all – and the first method we reach for is not always the most effective.

The CONFER programme provides a **ladder of intervention** – a graduated set of ways to intervene, from the lightest touch upwards – and participants practise using it.

- A senior leader (male) used the ladder to experiment with interventions other than the one he would naturally have reverted to, and reported positive results.

- Several participants intervened in the moment on seeing an **authority gap moment** occur, changing outcomes there and then.

  A senior leader (male) had to chair a grievance meeting where he used what he'd learned in the programme to deal with a man who'd made inappropriate comments. The man claimed it was banter and the leader helped him reflect on the fact that he was a senior man, which led to a power imbalance.

  > "That was incredibly useful," said the leader concerned. "The other person I did that grievance with hadn't gone through the training and his response was, 'I'd never have thought of that.'"

- A senior leader (male) challenged, in the moment, assumptions that were shaping a performance and promotion review discussion about a female consultant. That intervention changed the outcome, and several others followed from it.

  That last example is set out in full in the companion case study, *The Promotion Shortlist Decision* – one decision that had a pivotal effect on a woman's progression.

Teaching the people who were not in the room

A senior leader (male) took what he had learned into meetings and talked colleagues through it, which prompted discussion and resulted in them agreeing some new ways of working. Several leaders talked to their teams about what they had learned, building trust and demonstrating strong leadership that their teams appreciated.

This matters commercially: work aimed at the individual has to be repeated with every cohort, whereas leaders who have recalibrated their own judgement go on to teach the colleagues who never attended. The effect reaches well beyond the people who were trained. Typically, participant groups decide that the learning should be cascaded to all people managers in the organisation.

WHAT THIS SHOWS

None of these changes required a policy change, a quota or a new process. Each is a senior leader who now sees something they previously did not, and who has the tools and the motivation to act on it – in the allocation of opportunity, in how a meeting runs, in how a colleague is introduced to a client, in the building of an evidence base that supports promotion, and in the promotion decision when it comes. Individually they look small. That is the point: they happen constantly, they compound, they are material – and nothing until now has been highlighting their importance.

ON COMPLETION OF OUR PROGRAMME

100% of participants reported changing their behaviour

Self-reported, participant survey. Anonymised programme cohort.

FIVE QUESTIONS WORTH ASKING

1 Who in your organisation receives the small career-enhancing **microboosts** – and has anyone ever looked at the pattern across a whole team?

2 How often are leaders not noticing **authority gap moments** – or perhaps unintentionally creating them?

3 If one of your leaders noticed an **authority gap moment** in a meeting tomorrow, would they know how to intervene – and would they have more than one way of doing it?

4 What is currently equipping your leaders to spot any of this in the moment it happens?

5 How often are leaders in your organisation taking action in the ways described above? What effect would it have had if all of them had been behaving like this for the last three years?

KEY TERMS

authority gap moments

Something that was said or done that typically happens more to women than men, e.g. being interrupted, not being credited for a contribution, not being offered microboosts.

ladder of intervention

A graduated set of ways to intervene, from the lightest touch upwards.

microboosts

Small but material opportunities to develop, build experience, build profile.