

Shifting the System: How BOOST is Accelerating Gender Equity in the Water Industry

Paul Dore

Unitywater, Maroochydore, Queensland

ABSTRACT

The Australian water industry faces increasing pressure to attract, retain, and develop diverse talent capable of responding to complex operational and environmental challenges. However, many technical and operational industries continue to experience structural gender imbalance, particularly in leadership, trade, and frontline roles.

In 2024, Unitywater launched the Lead to Shape BOOST program as a strategic gender equity initiative designed to strengthen inclusive leadership capability, improve career development outcomes for women, and address systemic barriers influencing workforce participation and progression.

Developed in partnership with the Women in Leadership Development Accelerator (WILDA), the nine-month intervention engaged 17 women participants and 30 organisational leaders in a blended learning model incorporating leadership workshops, coaching, sponsorship, networking, and inclusive leadership development.

The program produced measurable organisational outcomes. Networking confidence increased by 47 per cent, career plan clarity by 55 per cent, and strengths awareness by 37 per cent. Within 12 months of completion, engagement among participants increased by 5 per cent, turnover was 7 per cent lower than the broader female workforce, and 24 per cent of participants secured promotions or secondments.

Alongside quantitative outcomes, participant experiences demonstrated the human impact of systemic intervention. The experience of participant Sarah Carter highlighted how sponsorship, visibility, coaching, and psychologically safe development environments can transform career confidence and progression pathways for women in operational industries.

BOOST demonstrated that meaningful progress in gender equity requires more than representation targets or standalone development initiatives. Sustainable change occurs when organisations simultaneously develop individual capability and organisational systems.

1. INTRODUCTION

The Australian water sector is undergoing significant transformation driven by population growth, climate variability, digital disruption, and increasing community expectations. These pressures require organisations to build workforces capable of innovation, adaptability, and collaborative problem solving.

At the same time, many operational industries continue to experience structural gender imbalance, particularly within technical and frontline workforces.

At Unitywater, workforce analysis conducted in 2023 identified several systemic challenges impacting women's workforce participation and progression:

- women represented 38 per cent of the workforce
- women represented only 19 per cent of technical and trade roles
- almost one-third of female employees under 35 resigned within their first year
- only 44 per cent of female leaders had completed leadership development programs, compared with 85 per cent of male leaders
- women reported significantly lower positive workplace experiences than men.

These findings suggested that barriers were influenced less by capability and more by organisational systems, sponsorship, leadership behaviours, and access to opportunity.

Rather than positioning gender equity as a compliance exercise or standalone women's development initiative, Unitywater sought to embed equity within broader organisational culture and leadership strategy.

The resulting initiative, BOOST, was intentionally designed not to "fix women," but to strengthen organisational systems, leadership capability, sponsorship behaviours, and career access pathways simultaneously.

2. PROGRAM DESIGN

BOOST was delivered as a nine-month blended learning intervention developed collaboratively between Unitywater and Women in Leadership Development Accelerator (WILDA).

The program engaged:

- 17 women participants
- 30 people leaders and sponsors

Participants undertook:

- career development workshops
- individual and group coaching
- peer networking
- sponsorship meetings
- strengths-based development.

The curriculum focused on:

- career clarity and planning
- visibility and networking
- communication and influence
- resilience and authenticity
- confidence and self-efficacy.

A defining feature of BOOST was the concurrent development stream for leaders and sponsors. Sponsors and people leaders participated in inclusive leadership workshops and sponsorship development focused on:

- creating visibility opportunities
- advocating for stretch assignments
- increasing career conversations
- understanding systemic organisational and societal bias and challenging assumptions
- actively supporting progression pathways.

This dual-stream model positioned leadership accountability as central to equity outcomes rather than supplementary to them.

BOOST was intentionally structured across nine months to support behavioural reinforcement, reflection, accountability, and the transfer of learning into workplace practice.

3. RESULTS AND IMPACT

Pre- and post-program survey analysis demonstrated positive movement across all measured self-efficacy and inclusion indicators.

Construct	% Change
Strengths awareness	+37%
Networking confidence	+47%
Career plan clarity	+55%
Negotiation efficacy	+37%
Confidence	+14%
Resilience	+16%
Authenticity	+22%
Job satisfaction	+12%

Organisational outcomes were also significant.

Within 12 months:

- women in leadership roles increased by 4 per cent
- engagement among BOOST participants was 5 per cent higher than the broader female workforce
- turnover among participants was 7 per cent lower
- 24 per cent of participants secured promotions or secondments
- sponsors reported a 20 per cent uplift in inclusive leadership behaviours.

Qualitative feedback also revealed strong improvements in confidence, self-awareness, career motivation, and willingness to pursue stretch opportunities.

4. LIVED EXPERIENCE: SARAH CARTER'S STORY

While organisational metrics demonstrated measurable movement across engagement, retention, and leadership outcomes, participant experiences provided insight into how systemic interventions translated into individual change.

Sarah Carter's experience illustrates this shift.

At the commencement of BOOST, Sarah was working in a frontline operational environment and questioned whether broader career opportunities were realistically accessible to her. Like many women in technical and field-based industries, she had unconsciously internalised assumptions about where she "fit" within the organisation and what pathways were available.

Initially, Sarah viewed the program as more relevant to office-based leadership roles than operational employees. However, through coaching, reflection, sponsor support and exposure to broader networks, her perspective shifted significantly.

Sarah described one of the most important realisations as recognising that the program "wasn't just about work - it was about me."

Through BOOST, she developed:

- stronger confidence and communication capability
- greater awareness of her strengths and transferable skills
- broader professional networks and visibility
- increased willingness to pursue stretch opportunities
- clearer career direction and long-term aspirations.

Following participation in BOOST, Sarah transitioned into multiple office-based and development opportunities aligned with her career goals. She described herself at program completion as "unstoppable" and "on fire".

Importantly, Sarah's experience was not solely the result of individual confidence-building. It reflected the interaction between personal development and systemic support - including sponsor advocacy, leadership encouragement, visibility opportunities and psychologically safe learning environments.

Her experience reinforced a key finding of BOOST: when organisations intentionally create inclusive systems and leaders actively sponsor talent, individuals are more likely to pursue opportunities they may previously have considered inaccessible.

5. CONCLUSION

BOOST demonstrated that gender equity initiatives can produce measurable operational and cultural outcomes when designed as systemic interventions rather than isolated development programs.

Several key learnings emerged:

- sustainable change occurs when leaders, sponsors, and participants learn together
- sponsorship and visibility play a critical role in career progression
- inclusive leadership behaviours directly influence engagement, retention, and confidence
- behavioural change requires sustained reinforcement over time
- equity initiatives strengthen workforce sustainability and organisational capability.

Importantly, BOOST demonstrated that behind every organisational metric is an individual experience. Sarah Carter's story illustrated how sponsorship, visibility, confidence and inclusive leadership can fundamentally reshape career trajectories within operational industries.

The continuation and expansion of BOOST into 2026 reflects both the measurable outcomes achieved and the growing recognition that diverse and inclusive organisations are better positioned to respond to the future challenges facing the Australian water industry.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

The authors acknowledge the commitment of Unitywater leaders, sponsors, and participants who contributed to the BOOST program and openly engaged in the learning process.

Special thanks are extended to Karen Rule and the WILDA team for their partnership, coaching expertise, and evidence-informed program design.

REFERENCES

- Caprara, G.V., Fida, R., Vecchione, M., Del Bove, G., Vecchio, G.M., & Barbaranelli, C. (2010). *Longitudinal analysis of the role of perceived self-efficacy for self-regulated learning in academic continuance and achievement*. *Learning and Individual Differences*, 20(5), 402–407.
- Reddy, S., Labutov, I., Banerjee, S., & Joachims, T. (2016). *Unbounded Human Learning: Optimal Scheduling for Spaced Repetition*. arXiv preprint arXiv:1602.07032.
- Zimmerman, B.J., & Schunk, D.H. (2017). *Self-regulated learning: Theories, measures, and outcomes*. Routledge.