

**Why women are not progressing  
in your organisation ...**

**... and what you can do about it.**

**The TALLWALL**

# Introduction

Since 2017, The Tall Wall has been working closely with high-performing organisations who want to answer a simple question:

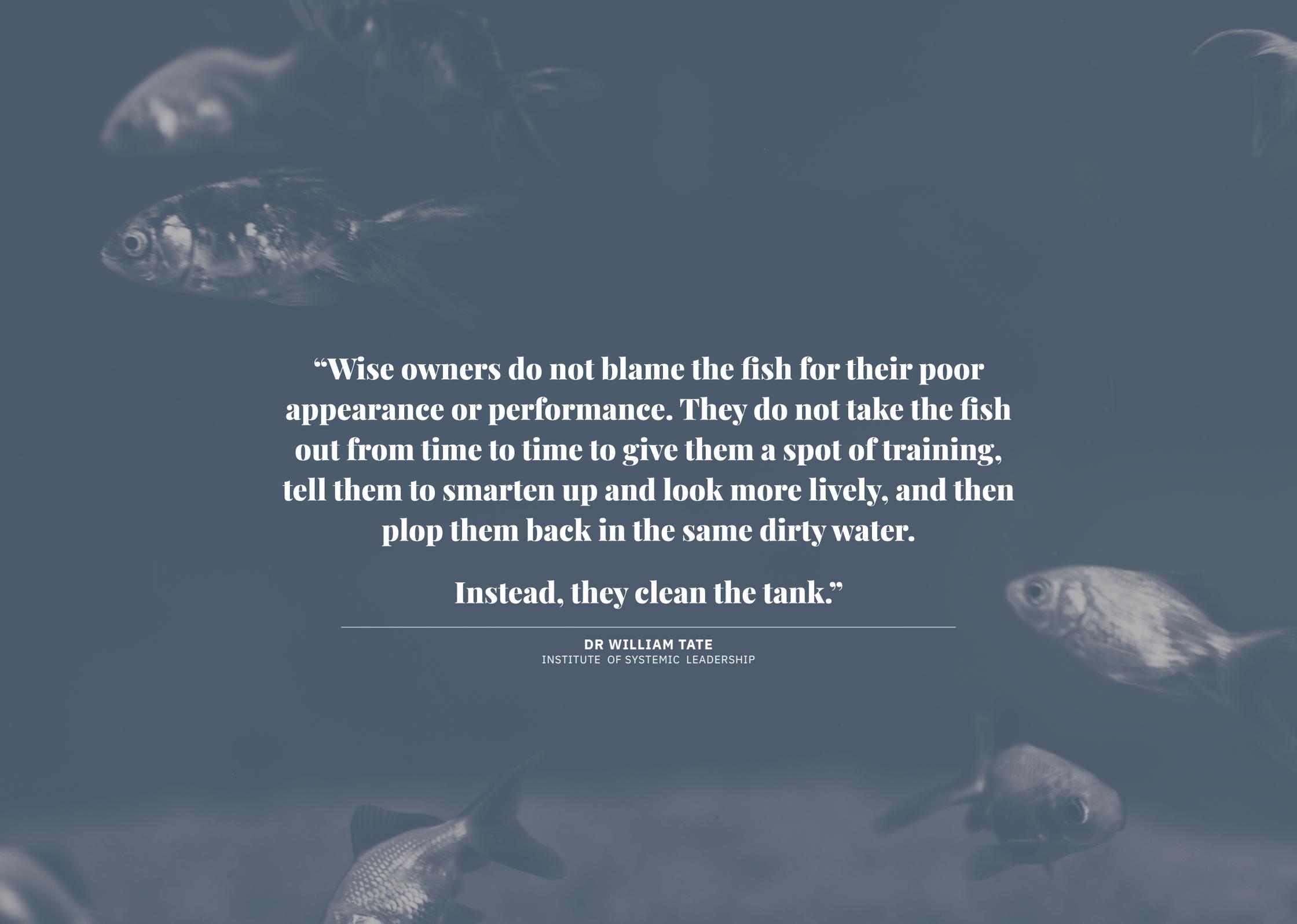
## “Why are women still not progressing here?”

Answering this paints a picture that is complex, and for many senior leaders, unsettling. Addressing gender imbalance takes more than implementing some well-intentioned policies and initiatives, it is about looking at what it is like, on the ground, day-to-day in your organisation. It is inevitably about culture.

In this report we share five of the common themes that are holding women (and often men) back from thriving. These have emerged from our work with FTSE 100 companies, management consultancies and a wide range of accounting, legal and private equity firms. They are by no means the full picture – far from it. What is going on in your organisation will likely be far more nuanced, and so our intention in this report is to offer a small window on some common themes we see time and again.

In reading this report you might nod sagely but dismiss them as not being true for your organisation. Are you sure? When was the last time you properly looked at who is thriving and who is not – and the reasons for this?





**“Wise owners do not blame the fish for their poor appearance or performance. They do not take the fish out from time to time to give them a spot of training, tell them to smarten up and look more lively, and then plop them back in the same dirty water.**

**Instead, they clean the tank.”**

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**DR WILLIAM TATE**  
INSTITUTE OF SYSTEMIC LEADERSHIP

The image features a dark blue background with several overlapping, semi-transparent circles in various shades of blue. The circles are arranged in a way that they appear to be part of a larger, abstract composition. The text is centered within one of the lighter blue circles.

**Five common  
themes**

A blurred photograph of several business professionals in a modern office hallway. The scene is captured with a shallow depth of field and motion blur, suggesting a fast-paced environment. In the center, a man in a light blue shirt and striped tie walks towards the camera. To his left, a woman in a dark suit is also walking. To his right, another man in a dark suit is walking. The background shows a glass-walled elevator and office doors. The overall color palette is cool, with blues and greys.

“

**“You are what you tolerate. I’ve seen rainmakers get away with appalling behaviours and still they seem to effortlessly move up the ladder.”**”



## THEME ONE

# What is valued in theory, is not valued in practice

### —○ What we see

- When it comes to rainmakers and other ‘big-hitters’ bad behaviours, counter to the organisation’s stated values, go unchecked.
- Individual ‘wins’ are highly-prized, spotlighted and rewarded, even in what is meant to be a collaborative culture. There is a language of “I” not “We”.
- Supervision of juniors, day-to-day operational matters, client care and broader ‘corporate housework’ are undervalued and under-rewarded, with women taking on much of this load.



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**“The ‘in-club’ share work with each other, introduce each other and open their contact books. They reinforce and amplify each other. There are very few women – if any – in the in-club around here.”**

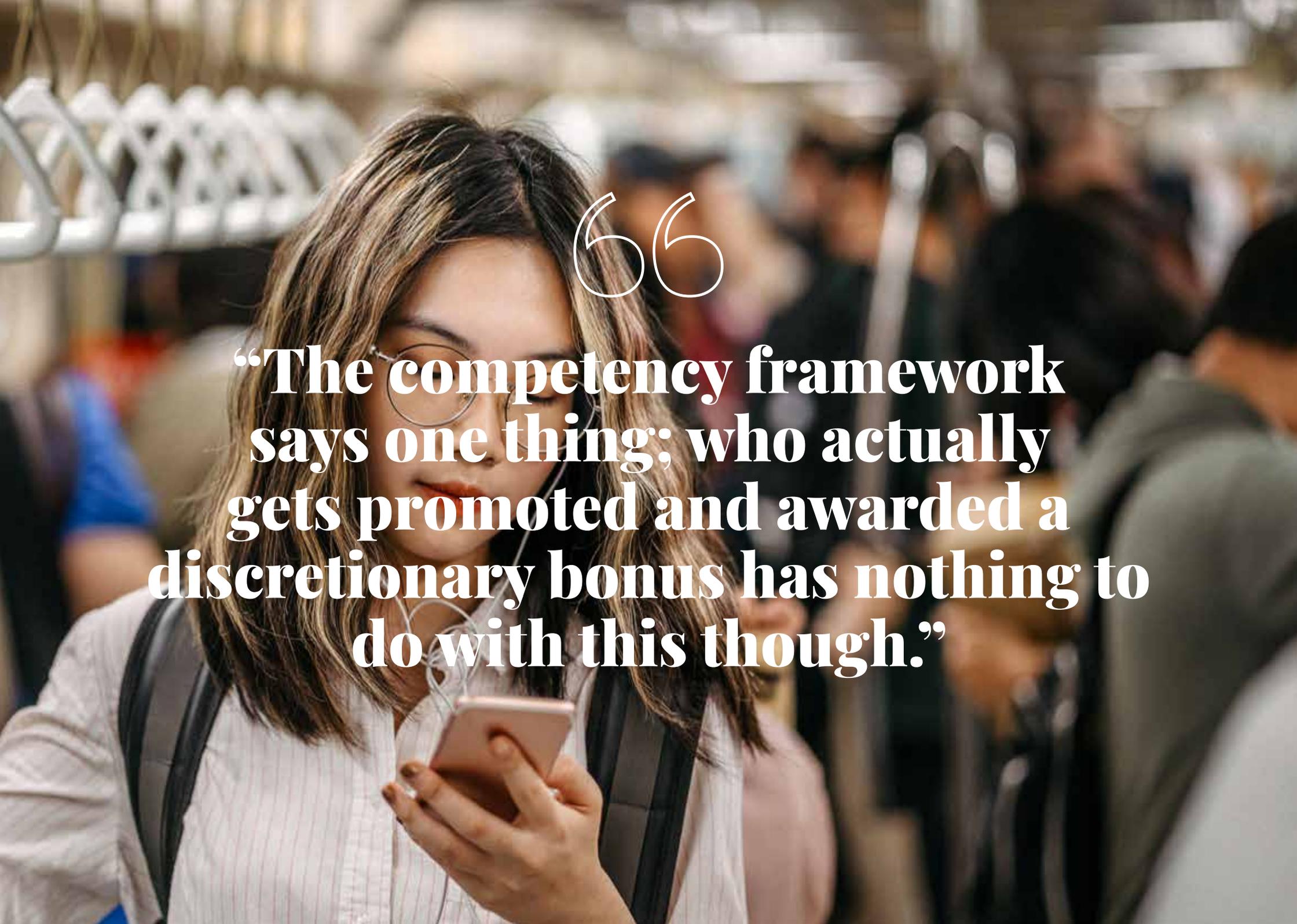
## THEME TWO

# The culture is heavily relationship- and network-led

### —○ What we see

- There is an unspoken 'in-club'; a select group of individuals who give work to each other, share information and contacts. They shout for and reinforce each other. This is not publicly-stated but is well-understood and goes unchallenged.
- Critical business decisions are frequently taken outside of formal settings, either during out-of-hours social settings or in select 'huddles' pre- or post- a meeting.
- Who you know and the relationships you have access to internally have a significant impact on your career success, disproportionate to your actual performance on the job.



A young woman with long, wavy brown hair and round glasses is looking down at her smartphone. She is wearing a white, vertically striped button-down shirt and a black backpack. The background is a blurred crowd of people, suggesting a busy public transit station or train car. The lighting is soft and natural, typical of an indoor public space.

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**“The competency framework says one thing; who actually gets promoted and awarded a discretionary bonus has nothing to do with this though.”**”

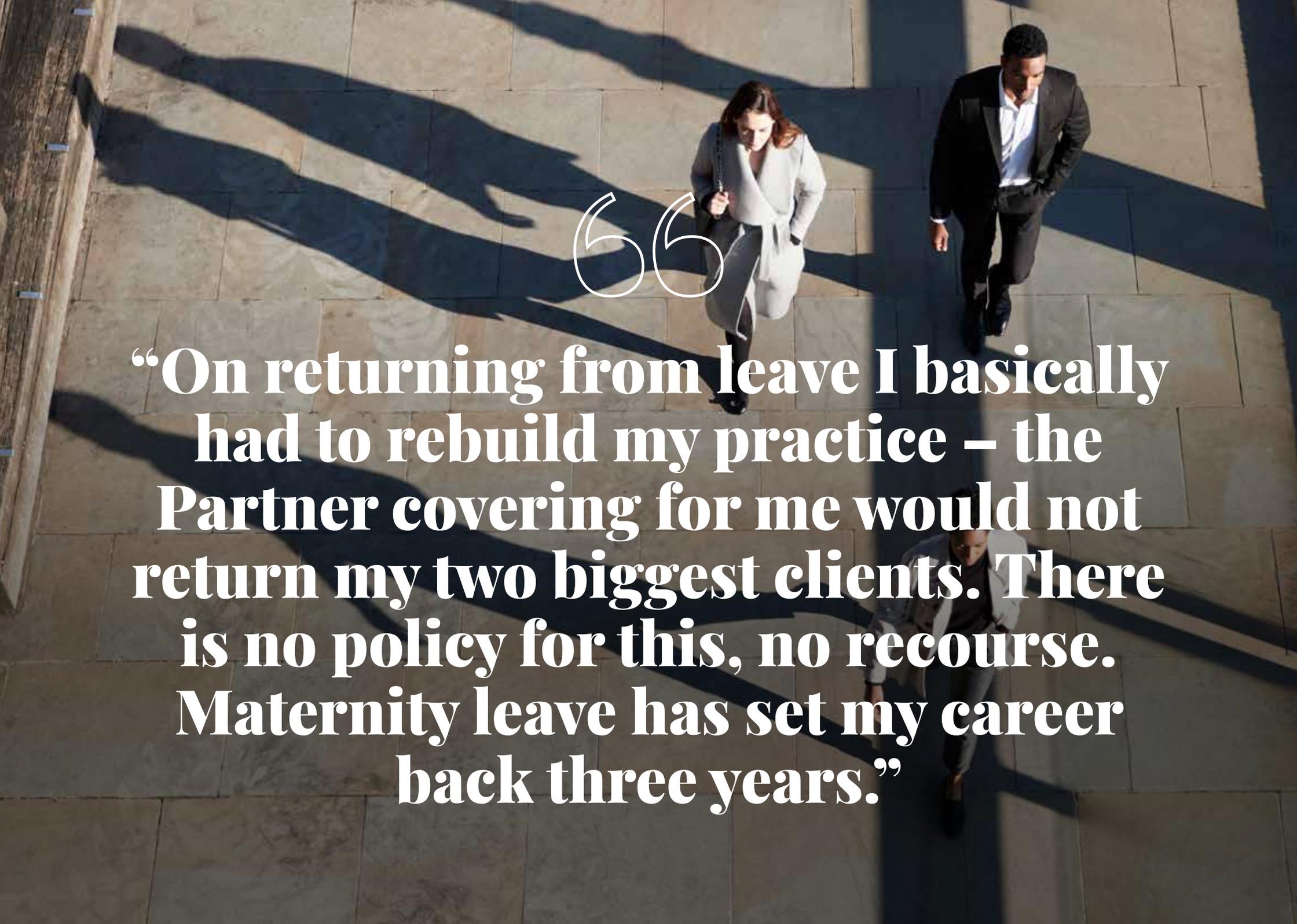


## THEME THREE

# A lack of transparency around promotions and 'getting ahead'

### —○ What we see

- The criteria for promotion and performance reviews are unclear.
- The criteria for promotion and performance reviews are clear but not adhered to in decision-making forums.
- Line manager quality is mixed, with limited training.
- There is no 'second pen' in performance discussions and decisions.
- Women tend to be mentored in the organisation; men tend to be sponsored.



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**“On returning from leave I basically had to rebuild my practice – the Partner covering for me would not return my two biggest clients. There is no policy for this, no recourse. Maternity leave has set my career back three years.”**

## THEME FOUR

# Mismanagement & missed opportunities of parental leave

### —○ What we see

- Little support is offered to those returning from parental leave, with the experience being wholly-dependent on the quality of the individual's line manager.
- A competitive culture means there is no mechanism to hand over – and crucially get back – client relationship post parental leave.
- Parenting is seen as something women lead on; very few men take parental leave.
- Flexible working options are not widely understood.
- Continuity of service is valued.
- Parental leave policies are non-progressive.



A dimly lit office at night. Two people are seated at desks, working on computers. The room is dark, with light coming from the computer monitors and some ambient office lighting. The background shows glass partitions and office furniture.

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**“It is a culture where being seen to work into the early hours is, frankly, still a badge of honour.”**”

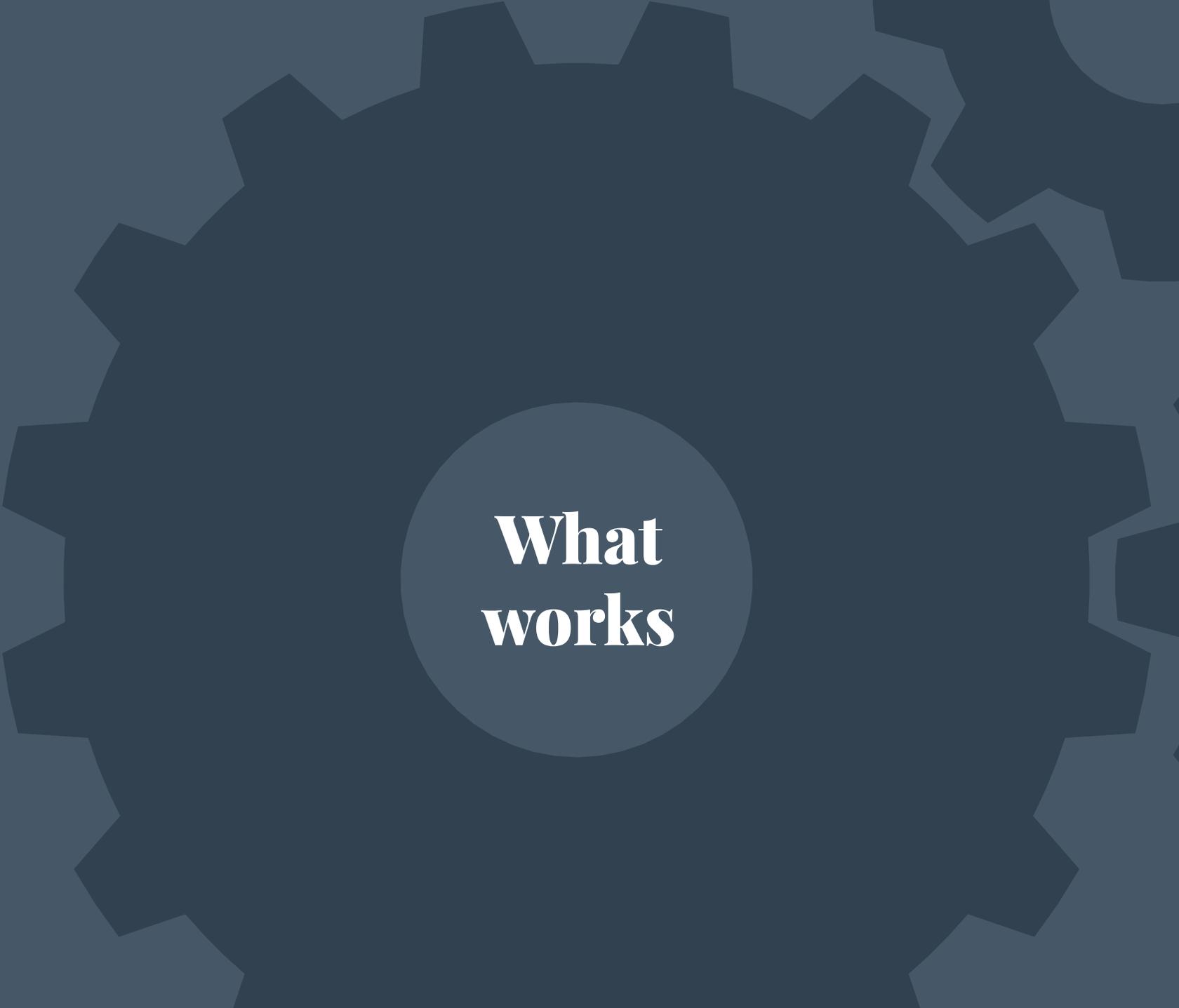
A person wearing glasses and a dark jacket is sitting at a desk in a dimly lit office, working on a computer. The office has several other desks and computers in the background, and the lighting is low, suggesting it is nighttime.

## THEME FIVE

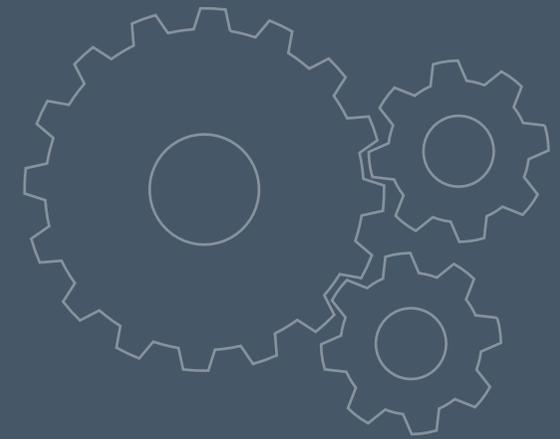
# Workaholism is valued over balance

### —○ What we see

- Presenteeism is rife; hybrid working is permitted but in practice frowned upon.
- Holidays and weekends are routinely sacrificed, and this is (quietly) applauded.
- There is a culture of being hyper-on at all times day and night.
- It is common knowledge that flexible working and/or parental leave is 'career suicide'.

The image features a large, dark blue gear with a central circle. Inside the central circle, the words "What works" are written in a white, serif font. The gear is surrounded by other smaller gears of varying sizes and colors (light blue and dark blue) in the background, creating a mechanical theme.

**What  
works**



If you are reading this document, the chances are that you might already know some of the key challenges that are holding women back. So what is the solution?

In the second half of this report we share some examples of what we have seen to work. Not all will be relevant to every business – the recommendations we make as part of our work are highly client-specific and influenced by a range of factors relating to the organisation’s culture, people, business model and ways of working.

Broadly speaking however, and for the purposes of this report, we are sharing the following suggestions as powerful steps for change.

# Scrutinise the data

## ○ Knock down the sacred cows

Rigorously and forensically explore how people get ahead and are rewarded and valued in your organisation. Do not assume. Look at what is happening on the ground. You can't implement a solution without knowing the problem.

## ○ Ask clients and investors what they want – and look at what competitors are doing

Client and investor needs are often the only language understood by those who don't see a need to change. What do your external stakeholders expect in terms of ED&I, and how might competitors be stealing a march on you? Share this data with the doubters.





# Be open about the challenges

## ○ Be honest

Be clear internally about the challenges and what needs to change in the organisation. The leader delivers these messages, not HR, not L&D, not ED&I. Don't mask the problems – people on the ground know anyway. Be upfront about how change won't happen overnight but that the commitment and intent is there.

## ○ The currency of hope only goes so far – keep talking

At what point do women give up the battle and try elsewhere? Keep reporting on progress – real progress, not lip service – and keep checking on the lived experience on the ground. Do not rely on the currency of hope.



# Be brave

## ○ Weed out the bad apples

That rainmaker who everyone knows is counterculture, does not support difference, is not progressive... exit them from the organisation.

## ○ Utilise the leader's long shadow

Ensure senior, respected leaders are overtly, robustly and publicly challenging non-inclusive behaviour. How they behave sets the tone for everyone else.





# Culture, not another initiative



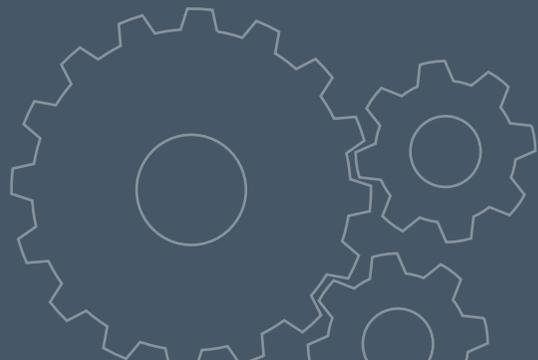
## —○ The slow death of initiatives

Policy changes, programmes and networks are needed and are to be applauded. They may not be enough on their own to drive change quickly. Look at your day-to-day culture – don't simply add to the list of initiatives in the hope they will all work in unison to change what is happening on the ground.

# Make it everyone's problem

## ○ Women fixing women is not the answer

Enabling an environment where all talent thrives involves everyone. Build an action-orientated group of big hitters – men and women – who are publicly tasked with delivering clearly defined, time bound changes. Ensure everyone in the organisation has an inclusion KPI – not a tick box on a goal-setting form.





# Rethink the employee lifecycle

## Be bold in accessing a diverse talent pool

No tokenism! Look harder for diverse talent. *The Return Hub*, for example, is a search firm that specialises in diverse candidates.

## Radically rethink parental leave

Review policies and systems to promote shared leave; support parents returning from leave – and their line managers – and introduce progressive policies for this transition. Pay particular attention to the challenges faced by senior talent with investment/client responsibilities when returning from leave.

## Bring objectivity to promotion decisions

How subjective are your promotion decisions? Who and what decides? Where are the checks and balances? Make this a more objective, evidence-based process with robust challenge built in at every step.

## Offer proactive retention conversations

Identify your talent – male and female. Who is looking out for them, asking them about their longer-term career direction and what they might want or need to get there? Instigate these quality conversations outside of the standard performance review process.

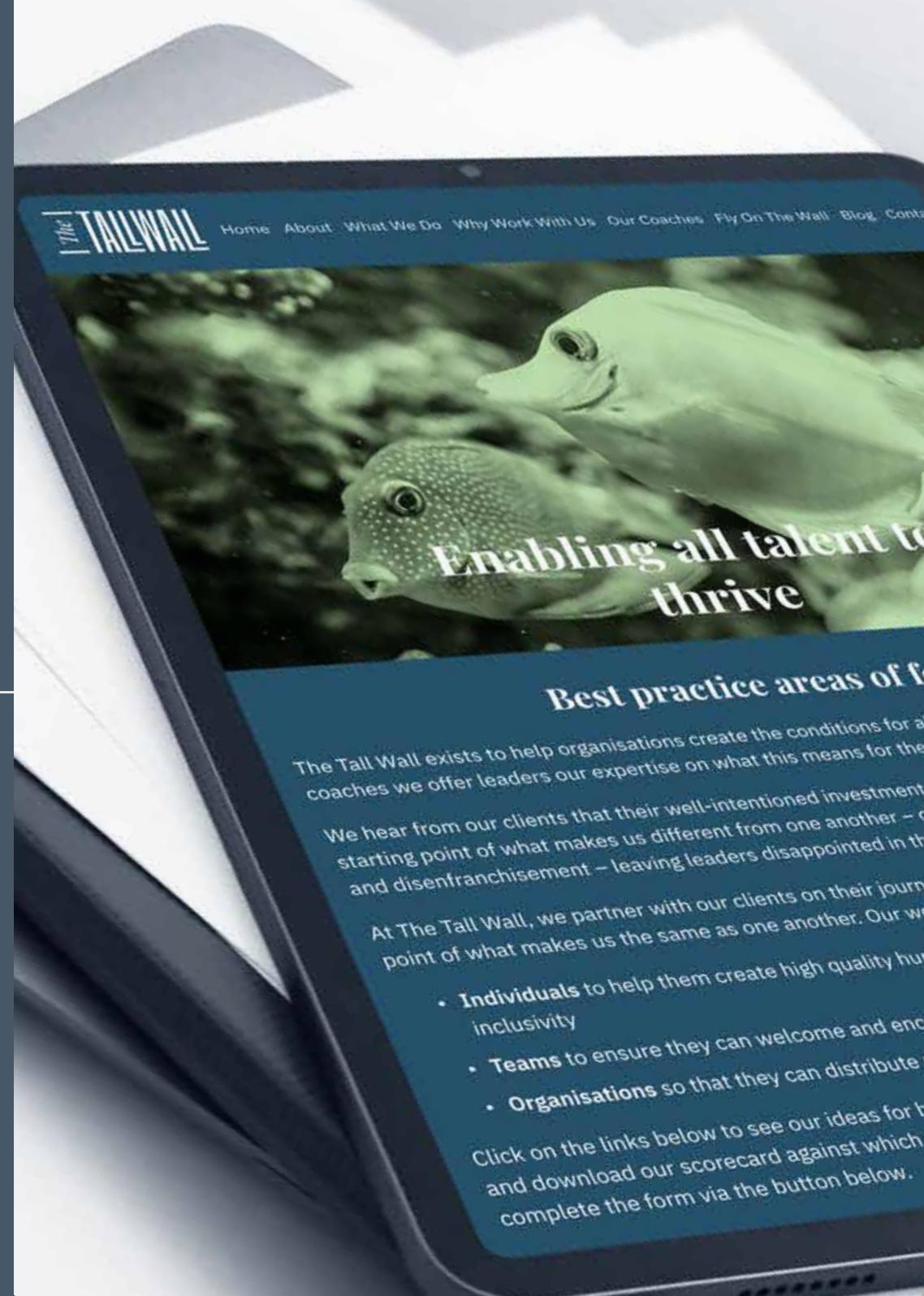
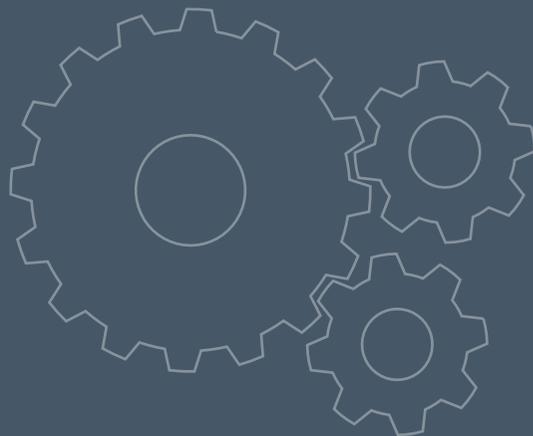
## Introduce a formal sponsorship programme

Bring informal sponsorship out into the open, give minority talent access to it, ensuring a bigger and more diverse population benefit from the opportunities and exposure sponsorship can provide.



# Employ multiple nudges to change habits

- Review our *Enabling all talent to thrive* scorecard to get ideas on multiple systemic and cultural shifts you can make.





# About The Tall Wall

We exist to support organisations to create the environment for all talent to thrive. In working with The Tall Wall, you will find us to be insightful, refreshingly candid, grounded, and highly business-focused. We aim to consistently deliver results that align with your commercial objectives.

We are passionate about making a difference and have high expectations for ourselves and our clients. This means we say what we think and value pragmatism and action over intellectual theorising; there really is only so much talking one can and should do.

Our guiding principle is to do what is right, not just what is easy, and we measure our success by the achievements of our clients. Our focus is on nurturing enduring professional relationships, emphasising mutual growth – never merely transactional interventions.

If you would like to find out more about The Tall Wall, please get in touch – either to simply discuss what we do or to think through a specific challenge. We will gladly spend time connecting and thinking with you on the vital topic of gender equity, even if it ultimately means no direct work for The Tall Wall. We are, after all, a relationship-led business.

# What we do

The Tall Wall's approach is different because we are different – we are all qualified coaches and experienced consultants – and we blend these two skillsets to identify the untapped opportunities and blind spots for a more gender-balanced workplace. We bring what was formerly invisible and unconscious into clear view and provide practical recommendations for a more equitable organisational system.

## ① Diagnose & recommend

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- Using qualitative and quantitative tools, we understand what the hidden barriers are to gender progression in your firm.
- We recommend the steps required to address these barriers.

## ② Design & implement

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We design with you specific interventions to move the dial on gender diversity, including:

- Leadership development programmes
- Executive coaching
- Parental support
- Consulting on wider system support.

## ③ Evaluate & report

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Depending on the interventions and the level of reporting required, we can provide:

- An evaluation framework
- Thematic and qualitative reporting
- Quantitative data.





**“We exist to help firms create the conditions for all talent to thrive and have a positive impact on families and society.”**

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If you would like to find out how we can enable your talent to maximise their full potential for your firm, please get in touch.

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