

# No loose change

BY HELEN HAWKES PHOTOGRAPHY STEVE BACCON

Administering A\$9 billion of funds under management for a leading financial institution and baking scones for the staff morning tea aren't actions that usually go together. But Jen Dalitz – business consultant, farmer and mother – is full of contradictions. >

< A country girl who grew up without brothers, she has excelled at the senior level in all-male domains. That's despite finding the way men thought or operated "something of a mystery" at first. (No longer, by the way.) She says she's experienced sexism only once in her career, yet she is at the forefront of the fight for equal female representation at management level.

As "SheEO" of her own company, Sphinxx ([www.sphinxx.com.au](http://www.sphinxx.com.au)), Dalitz consults, writes and speaks on topics relating to women in business, but she can also be found at her farm in the Australian state of New South Wales, managing herds of sheep, donkeys, alpacas and belted galloway cattle.

Perhaps it's this versatility that has contributed to her success; Dalitz is a recognised change agent, having implemented high-profile strategic change programs with multimillion-dollar budgets in a number of Fortune 500 companies.

Dalitz, for her part, credits it to naivety. "I didn't know what boundaries existed so I was willing to give anything a shot," she says.

Well, maybe. But those she has worked for would list the 37 year old's analytical approach to problem solving, her networking skills and record of delivering as among her strengths.

Raised in Victor Harbor in South Australia, Dalitz began her working life as a CPA with Mobil Refining Australia. She learned even more with National Australia Bank (NAB), eventually working as sales support manager of retail financial services, which put her in charge of the budget for 180 branches and 3000 staff.

After a stint as head of client relations for BT Margin Lending, she landed at Andersen Business Consulting as a manager of Customer and Channel Solutions. There she redesigned customer service activities and developed a banking and financial services strategy for a public sector agency.

"In recent years I have realised that I'm a 'change' person, not a 'maintenance' person ... so I need to move on once the challenge of the change is gone," she says.

Her next move, setting up her own consultancy in 2002, taught her about building relationships. In 2005, after completing an MBA, she was hired by a leading financial institution to administer its business and superannuation product suite, and was put in charge of A\$9 billion funds under management and 200 staff.

As Dalitz tells it: "There was a six-month backlog of applications and a large file of complaints from financial advisers. The staff turnover rate was almost 50 per cent because the burnout levels were so high. Most of the staff didn't know each others' names, or what job they did, and if they promised to do something for a customer, often they didn't call. Operating systems were also

## Girls' own strategies

"Men hold 90 per cent of the executive roles. To succeed as a woman in business you don't have to be like men but you do have to understand how they operate," says Dalitz.

A woman should not expect men "to read your mind about what job you want, what pay, or what hours," she says. If you want something, say so.

Dalitz also advises women to achieve a balance between giving and receiving. "Female employees tend to give a lot more than they receive and accept that."

### ... and how does Dalitz relax?

"Mainly by walking and talking with my beagles, TJ and Millie. They are my greatest love after my human family. They're also very good training for learning to manage with non-verbal cues."

outdated ... but the way to overcome that was with more communication."

Instinctively, Dalitz "focused on practicality above everything else". Out came whiteboards with flow charts to show her staff how they were going to manage the backlog. In came weekly reports to stakeholders on key success indicators and more direct forms of internal communication. Dalitz moved her office to the centre of the floor – and started the Friday morning teas.

"The idea was to improve interpersonal relationships and, therefore, work flow," she says. "Instead of sending 50 emails that people didn't read, I would talk them through. Staff were also encouraged to get to know others with whom they had previously had no contact."

She adds that: "There was heaps of resistance from staff initially, who insisted they were too busy to come to a morning tea, so to encourage them I started baking scones with jam and cream, and my very famous apple custard cake! Eventually, it became something everyone participated in; a way to humanise a high-pressure environment."

Service standards improved by 30 per cent, administration turnarounds were reduced from up to 120 days to one to five days, and staff turnover was down by 21 per cent.

Fast-forward to 2010 and Dalitz is using her straight-talking style to raise her one-year-old son with partner, Ric, as well as running a farm ... and battling to advance women in management.

"The vision of Sphinxx [formed in 2008] is to see women equally represented in leadership roles in business and in our communities," she says. "Everything we do, including workshops and networking functions, is about giving women the confidence and the competence to realise their full potential."

It includes educating and advising employers on how to attract and retain their female talent. Despite a recent development requiring companies listed on the ASX to publish a gender breakdown of directors and senior staff and set targets for gender diversity, Dalitz believes there will be no real change without legislation.

A 2008 survey by the Australian government's Equal Opportunity for Women in the Workplace agency found only 8.3 per cent of the directors of the ASX 200 listed companies were female (125 women out of 1504 directors), a drop from 8.7 per cent in 2006. The number of women in

Flexible arrangements benefit employers as well as staff, says Dalitz. (Working in your slippers is optional, of course.)

## Getting women to the top

- Role models matter. Establish mentoring programs and encourage women to find a champion who can assist them in scaling the heights.
- Be flexible. Open your mind to the possibilities, and the benefits, of more flexible work arrangements to help women maintain a career when they have a family.
- Share the success stories. Engineers Australia ran a “Year of Women in Engineering” initiative which saw its number of female full members grow by 15 per cent in 12 months, and it’s still reaping the rewards.
- Use external forces where you can to drive change. Several professional services firms have been influenced by clients who requested diversity disclosure in the tender process.
- Beware the unconscious bias. It’s often the unintended actions that cause the most damage.
- Create a forum for women. Giving them a chance to come together, learn from each other and realise they are not alone in the challenges they face can mean the difference between a woman handling the road bumps or simply handing in her notice.

**Jen Dalitz, [www.sphinx.com.au](http://www.sphinx.com.au)**

line management was 5.9 per cent, down from 7.4 per cent two years earlier. In 2008 in Norway, where a quota is in force, 39 per cent of company directors were female. (See “Will quotas be the gender mender?” on page 50.)

Dalitz supports quotas. “In effect they mandate that a certain percentage or number of board positions must be held by the minority gender, which is almost always women, whereas targets are simply a goal to pursue among all other company goals,” she says.

Significantly, the Australian government’s Corporations and Markets Advisory Committee (CAMAC) released its own report on diversity in boards of directors last year. It did not support any moves to impose quotas on private sector companies, stating that this would cut across the responsibility of shareholders for appointing directors to be accountable to them.

Dalitz counters that getting more women into top roles isn’t just about equal opportunity, it’s about profits. “We need women in key decision-making roles in these organisations because the studies show the more diverse a board, the better the bottom line.”

And while they may not have to bake their way there, it’s a sure bet that being willing to do whatever it takes – even get into the kitchen – is a formula for success. ■

### MORE ON THE WEB

Jen Dalitz will present “7 steps to achieving what you want in your career” in SA, NSW, QLD, TAS and WA throughout June and July. Visit [www.cpaaustralia.com.au/intouch](http://www.cpaaustralia.com.au/intouch) to learn more.

