How to set effective targets

5 steps for setting effective targets for gender representation and equality

A guide for leaders of organisations, HR and Diversity and Inclusion leads

This guide is part of the 'How to improve gender equality' toolkit

THE BEHAVIOURAL INSIGHTS TEAM

The recommendations we provide are based on the best available evidence and the latest thinking from practitioners and experts in organisational behaviour and behavioural economics.

This guide is one of five in the 'How to improve gender equality' series:

- How to set effective targets
- How to establish diversity leads and diversity task forces
- How to run structured interviews
- How to use skill-based assessment tasks
- How to increase transparency of progression, pay and reward processes

To understand other approaches which are effective at improving equality, see our summary of evidence-based actions for employers.

For more information see the sources listed in the bibliography or contact gabiprogramme@bi.team.

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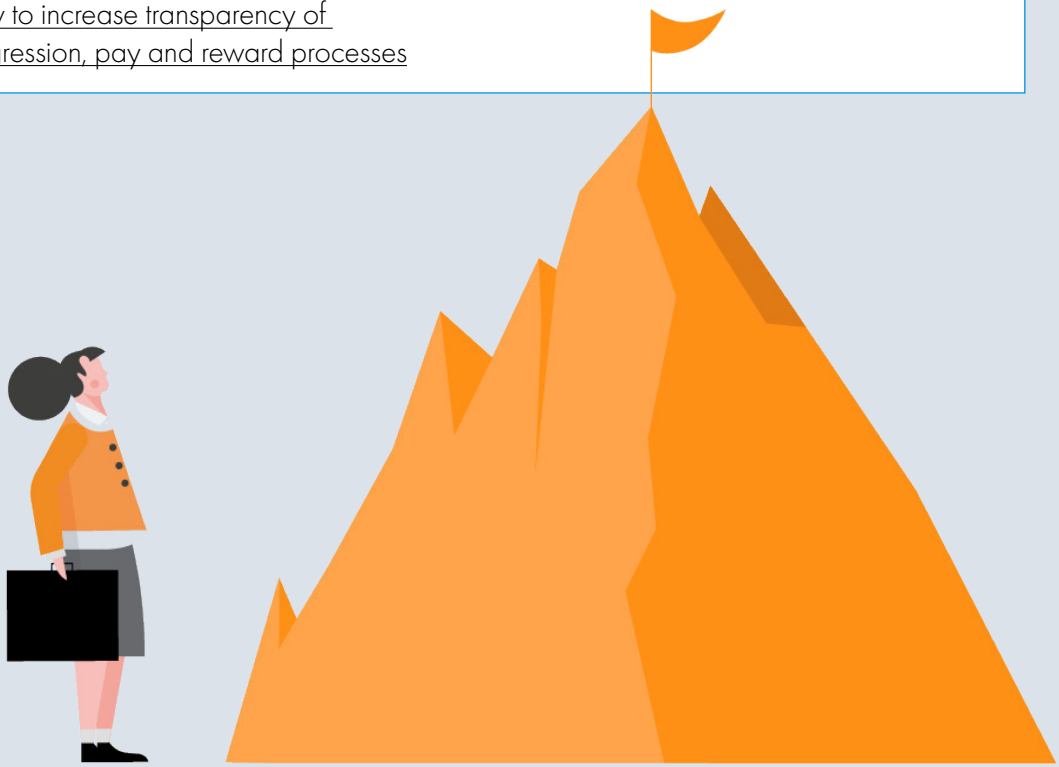


Checklist

1. Set clear, specific targets for named individuals to deliver
2. Set deadlines for their achievement
3. Make targets challenging but realistic
4. Publish and share targets
5. Monitor progress

Setting the right targets matters

Organisations across the UK have been setting targets to achieve greater gender representation and equality. Meeting those targets is a key element in reducing gender pay gaps.

Targets can change behaviour in a number of ways. They focus attention on activities which will help to achieve the target and away from those that will not. Targets are also motivational. They highlight the tension between the current situation and the target which has been set. By having a target, people feel encouraged to problem-solve until they reach it.[1]

Evidence suggests that companies that set targets are more likely to improve gender diversity, and at a faster pace, than those that do not.[2] But the design of the target matters.

General goals such as "we will increase the number of women in leadership positions" are not effective unless they are accompanied by specific targets. High-level goals are important for the bigger picture, but they need to be accompanied by more specific details if they are to spur action and create change.

This guide provides employers with a summary of the evidence on how gender equality targets should be designed so that they are more likely to work.

How to set effective targets for gender representation and equality

The following steps can help make setting targets for gender representation and equality more effective.

Step 1: Set clear, specific targets for named individuals to deliver

Leadership teams should set specific targets. Specific targets are more likely to motivate change compared to "do your best" instructions or general goals.[3]

Specify what it is you are aiming to change, and by how much. For targets to truly shift the dial, they should be informed by a data exercise which diagnoses the drivers of inequality in an organisation. For instance, you are unlikely to see meaningful change if you set a target for recruitment, when your representation of women is low due to issues with retention. See Eight ways to understand your organisation's gender pay gap for guidance on using data to understand the causes of your gender pay gap.

"For targets to truly shift the dial, they should be informed by a data exercise which diagnoses the drivers of inequality in an organisation"

Break down bigger-picture, higher-level targets into a small number of clear sub-targets across a range of relevant activities.[4] For example, as well as specifying an overall target to 'achieve a 50:50 ratio of women to men in senior positions by 2025' add sub-targets across internal processes, such as:

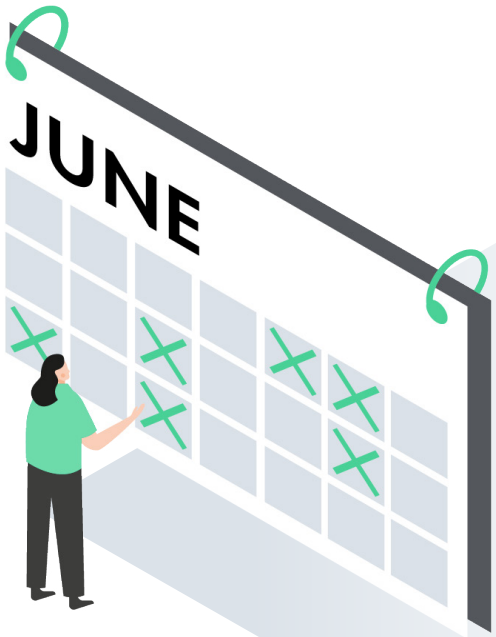
- 'achieve 45% representation of women by 2023'
- 'ensure there is no reduction in the current proportion of women in grades 3 and 4'
- 'equalise retention rates for women and men'.

Make sure sub-targets also follow the recommendations in this guide.

Consult department leads on appropriate targets for their business area and explain the importance of working to achieve them. Diversity leads and diversity task forces can also advise at this stage. See the guide on How to establish diversity leads and diversity task forces for more information.

Assign department level targets to named managers in different parts of the business to promote a coordinated effort and accountability.

Some evidence suggests that communicating targets face-to-face in discussion with the people who will be involved in achieving them may be particularly effective at driving change.[5]



Step 2: Set deadlines for achieving targets

Targets with a deadline are more likely to be achieved.[6] We would expect to make progress more quickly towards a target to 'achieve a ratio of 50:50 of women to men in senior positions by 2025' than the same target without a deadline. Even if the deadline is missed, progress will be better than if no deadline had been set at all.

Deadlines have to be realistic to remain motivational.

The longer a timeline, the more difficult it is to accurately predict whether something will be accomplished by a deadline. This means it is important to include intermediate deadlines or milestones within longer-term targets.[7] This will keep you on track to achieve those bigger targets.

Remind teams of targets at timely moments, for example just before large recruitment rounds. This will make it more likely that the target is impactful.

Step 3: Set challenging but realistic targets

For targets to shift the dial without being demotivating, make them as challenging as possible while still being realistic.[8]

Set targets using the following approaches[9]:

- Base targets on current performance, to achieve over and above the usual levels that are currently delivered (this could mean different teams or departments have different targets); and
- Consider setting targets in line with an external standard. For example, committing to appointing Boards with 33% women members by 2020, in line with Hampton Alexander targets.[10]

Step 4: Make targets public

A public commitment (that is, a commitment that is visible externally to the general public) makes it more likely that the target will be achieved and sends signals both internally and externally that the organisation is serious about achieving it.[11] The full details of a strategy do not need to be disclosed.

Include targets in published action plans.

Where targets are not made visible to the general public, they should as a minimum be made visible internally to the employees of the organisation itself, and relevant partners – for instance recruitment agencies.

Step 5: Monitor targets

Track and review progress towards targets on a planned, regular basis.

When setting the target, make it clear that progress will be monitored and managers held responsible for achieving that progress. This promotes accountability.[12]

See the guide on How to establish diversity leads and diversity task forces for more information about who to involve in monitoring targets. A wider group can also be asked to look out for any unintended consequences of targets.

Make feedback on achievement of targets across the organisation public.[13]

Celebrate when targets are achieved. For team members who delivered these objectives, consider how to reward them, particularly in terms of pay and promotion.

This is also the time to consider what your next set of targets should look like – you may want to set higher targets, based on your new baseline, or prioritise other areas (for instance, if you have been focused on recruitment, now considering retention).

"Check for any unforeseen consequences of targets."

Take action when targets are not met, or trajectories look poor:

- Regular monitoring means you may be able to tell in advance if it is unlikely you will meet a target, and adjust processes/plans before the deadline.
- If a target is not met, acknowledge this to the people who are accountable for delivering it and investigate why.
- Investigate processes as well as outcomes. Were processes in line with best practice but outcomes were slower to shift? Does this suggest that the processes implemented were the right ones to meet the overall target, or that the processes or sub-targets need to be reevaluated? Share what you learn with all teams involved so that they can continue to put effort into improvement.
- Check for any unforeseen consequences of targets. For example, does a focus on increasing recruitment of women crowd out efforts to recruit people with a wider range of protected characteristics?
- Adjust and invest in realistic future plans. Build on the tension that staff may be feeling between where they are today in terms of achieving the target and where they want to be in the future.[14] This tension can be a source of motivation.

What evidence have we used?

This guidance is based on the best available evidence currently. Where possible, we have used evidence based on randomised controlled trials that were conducted in the field and that measure objective outcomes.

It is important to acknowledge that high quality evidence on the issue of gender equality in the workplace is not as common as it is for many other issues. Researchers are endeavouring to generate high quality evidence of what works to improve equality.

The following list of sources informed this guide, though it is not exhaustive. The advice was also informed by practitioner and expert insight.

Endnotes

1 Locke, E.A. and Latham, G.P. (2006) New directions in goal-setting theory. Current Directions in Psychological Science. Vol 15, No 5. pp265–8.

2 McKinsey&Company and LeanIn.org (2015) Women in the Workplace.

3 Mento, A.J., Steel, R.P. & Karren, R.J. (1987). A meta-analytic study of the effects of goal setting on task performance: 1966–1984. Organizational Behaviour and Human Decision Processes, 39(1), 52-83

4 Kruglanski, A. W., Pierro, A., & Sheveland, A. (2011). How many roads lead to Rome? Equifinality set-size and commitment to goals and means. European Journal of Social Psychology, 41(3), 344-352.

5 Harkin, B., Webb, T.L., Chang, B.P., Prestwich, A., Conner, M., Kellar, I., Benn, Y. and Sheeran, P. (2016). Does monitoring goal progress promote goal attainment? A meta-analysis of the experimental evidence. *Psychological bulletin, 142*(2), 198.

6 Ariely, D., & Wertenbroch, K. (2002). Procrastination, deadlines, and performance: Self-control by precommitment. Psychological science, 13(3), 219-224

7 The Behavioural Insights Team (2017) A review of optimism bias, planning fallacy, sunk cost bias and groupthink in project delivery and organisational decision making.

8 CIPD (2016) Rapid evidence assessment of the research literature on the effect of goal setting on workplace performance.

9 Harkin, B., Webb, T.L., Chang, B.P., Prestwich, A., Conner, M., Kellar, I., Benn, Y. and Sheeran, P. (2016). Does monitoring goal progress promote goal attainment? A meta-analysis of the experimental evidence. *Psychological bulletin, 142*(2), 198.

10 https://ftsewomenleaders.com/targets-progress/

11 Epton, T., Currie, S. & Armitage, C.J. (2017). Unique effects of setting goals on behavior change: Systematic review and meta-analysis. Journal of Consulting and Clinical Psychology, 85(12), 1182-1198.

12 Ibid (Harkin et al, 2016); Dobbin, F., & Kalev, A. (2016). DIVERSITY why diversity programs fail and what works better. *Harvard Business Review, 94*(7-8), 52-60.

13 Mento, A.J., Steel, R.P. & Karren, R.J. (1987). A meta-analytic study of the effects of goal setting on task performance: 1966–1984. Organizational Behaviour and Human Decision Processes, 39(1), 52-83

14 CIPD (2016) Rapid evidence assessment of the research literature on the effect of goal setting on workplace performance.

Further reading

Gender & Behavioural Insights Programme
by The Behavioural Insights Team.

How to improve gender equality in the workplace

Locke, E.A. and Latham, G.P. (2002) Building a practically useful theory of goal setting and task motivation: a 35-year odyssey. American Psychologist. Vol 57, No 9. Pp705–17

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