

Qantas' Alan Joyce: Women flying the airline to new heights



Qantas executives Lesley Grant, Olivia Wirth and Jayne Hrdlicka. Picture: Nick Cubbin

GLENDIA KORPORAAL THE AUSTRALIAN 12:00AM November 18, 2016

“Sometimes I just feel like one of the girls,” Qantas chief executive Alan Joyce joked at the Chief Executive Women annual dinner at the Westin Hotel in Sydney in August.

The Irish-born Joyce had just highlighted the work of three women in his executive team who had helped the Qantas turnaround — Jetstar chief executive Jayne Hrdlicka, Qantas Loyalty chief Lesley Grant and brand, marketing and public affairs chief Olivia Wirth.

His remark had an additional wry dimension, given that Joyce is gay. It’s the kind of comment that wouldn’t have been made in public in corporate Australia a few years ago.

Yet the hard-headed Joyce has brought a different leadership style to running Qantas since he took over eight years ago. He has transformed a once very blokey senior management team into one with diverse backgrounds, which has been critical in helping to turn around the airline from the dark days in 2011 when he grounded the fleet and reported its biggest loss in 2014 to its largest ever profit this year.

The Deal magazine, in today’s *Australian*, talks to the three women who report directly to Joyce, about their role in the Qantas turnaround. (Hrdlicka has already been mentioned as a potential successor to the 50-year-old Joyce when he decides to step down from the job.)

[*Read The Deal magazine, out today in The Australian.*](#)

The interviews give an insight into a team []s been put together by a chief executive with a very different leadership style to the traditional Australian “command and control” CEOs.

While it is still predominantly male-dominated at the top (there are another eight men in the Qantas management committee reporting to the CEO), Joyce has deliberately sought executives from diverse backgrounds.

“One of the reasons we sponsor Chief Executive Women and I am a Male Champion of Change is that, as a company, we believe in diversity and we do believe it makes a difference,” Joyce said in an interview with *The Australian*.

“The case for diversity is really clear. We can see the difference that a diverse group of people have made in our transformation.

“I am not just talking about the three females on the team (but also) the make-up of our leadership team in terms of ethnic diversity, sexual orientation and having people from different backgrounds. It has helped us through the toughest period of our history.

“By having good debates, good discussion and a diversity of thought, you are identifying a better and bigger strategy — you can identify the risks around your strategy better.”

He also argues that promoting diversity allows access to a broader talent pool.

“Good talent is hard to get. So if you are seen as a diverse company which is attracting the best people, whatever their gender or sexual orientation or racial background, you are fishing in a bigger pool than other businesses.”

He says that being seen to be a promoter of diversity is also more inspiring for the new generation of workers.

“There’s a great piece of research around Gen Y in particular. They want to be part of a company which has a social conscience. Eighty per cent of people surveyed said they wanted to work for companies with a social conscience.

“There is a strong business case, not only for the strategy and its implementation but in attracting good talent, and also what it means for your customer base and your brand.”

Joyce says he has deliberately adopted a strategy in running Qantas which is not command and control.

“There are a lot of companies — and we came from it a bit — where it is command and control, where the chief executive has his ideas on what he is going to do and wants people around him with very similar views.

“We have been changing the culture at Qantas over a long period of time. We believe we have the right style of management and the right culture.

“If you look at the style of the top team from where it was seven or eight years ago to where it is today, the transition has been phenomenal.”

The three women at the top of Qantas also come from different backgrounds. New Zealand-born Grant was an air hostess who worked her way up the ranks of Air New Zealand, including its takeover of Ansett, before joining Qantas in 2002.

US-born Hrdlicka is a former management consultant who has worked around the world.

Australian-born Wirth had worked in public relations in Australia and London and was executive director of the Tourism and Transport Forum before joining Qantas in 2009.

Joyce says Grant, whom he appointed to run Qantas Loyalty in 2012, has brought an “entrepreneurial flavour” to her job “with a very good focus on the customer”.

He also cites her role in developing Qantas Loyalty as a centre for more data analytics for the airline, including being involved in the establishment of internet advertising agency Red Planet.

Wirth has helped to bolster the Qantas brand, including launching the airline’s Feels Like Home advertising campaign and built up “one of the more capable social media teams in the country”.

He says Hrdlicka has been expanding Jetstar’s business in Asia and has been instrumental in turning it around. “Jetstar is in a great position when you compare it with Virgin or Tiger in the price sensitive end of the market.

“Qantas is now in the unique space where it has the two best brands in each of the segments — the best premium airline and the best low-cost airline — which are very complementary.”