

Speech to the NATO Parliamentary Assembly S&T Committee Warsaw 2018

Presentation: Improving Gender Diversity in the UK's Defence Science and Technology Laboratory

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Good morning/afternoon ladies and gentlemen. My name is Jennifer Henderson and I am here to talk to you about the work I led in the UK's defence science and technology laboratory (dstl) to improve our gender diversity.

Now you may have spotted from my current job title that I have changed role and moved to another organisation within the UK Civil Service, one which in fact has an excellent gender balance – but I remain passionately committed to the importance of achieving a good gender balance in every organisation – and I am delighted to have been invited to speak to you today and share the approach we used successfully in Dstl.

So what am I going to talk to you about? I thought it would be useful to just start by explaining who Dstl are, then explain why we want to improve gender diversity; what we have done; whether it is working and then there should be some time for questions at the end.

So let me start by telling you a little about who Dstl are. Dstl is part of the UK Ministry of Defence. It exists to deliver high-impact science and technology for the UK's defence, security and prosperity. It covers the full breadth of military capabilities and technologies and employs over 3000 scientists, engineers, analysts, mathematicians and other disciplines to deliver its work. It also works in partnership with a wide range of academic and industrial organisations. Its annual budget is just over £600 million and around half of that is spent with external organisations.

Let me illustrate some of the recent situations where Dstl has been involved and had an impact.

Most obviously Dstl provides support to our troops who are involved in conflicts. Dstl helps MOD find solutions for threats by finding counter measures, equipping our troops with battle-winning kit and providing data and information to help make decisions. We also deploy scientists into theatre to enable the provision of rapid and timely scientific advice on the ground.

In 2012 Dstl was involved in the London Olympics and in 2014 the Glasgow 2014 Commonwealth Games, supporting the safe and secure delivery of these important events.

Dstl is also here because there are times when other countries are in need of measured support from the UK MOD. Dstl supported the UK government's effort to tackle Ebola both at home and abroad. Dstl was initially called upon to provide advice to MOD to help plan protective measures for UK troops being sent to the area. However, the involvement soon escalated and teams of expert microbiologists from Dstl also deployed to Sierra Leone to work out of the PHE-run diagnostic field facilities, the deployed scientists were testing blood samples from people suspected of having Ebola.

And of course nothing stands still the military equipment and nature of military operations that Dstl is being called on to support is constantly changing and Dstl as an organisation needs to be able to change and adapt to provide the support required.

So why did we want to improve gender diversity in Dstl? I suppose the obvious place to start is to understand if we have a problem with gender diversity. As an organisation that places a lot of store in the use of evidence to support decision making we wanted to understand if we had a problem and if so, how did that problem look. Before we started our work, our statistics were: 31% of our staff were women (across 9 different grades – 1 most junior to 9 most senior) in an organisation of circa 3800 people.

At level 3 and below women are well represented; but above this grade the picture gets increasingly bleak. Each more senior grade had a smaller percentage of women. And these numbers really weren't changing year on year. It was a lonely place to be a level 9 in Dstl – for a period of time I was the only level 9 woman! So based on these numbers we could safely say we had a problem. And if you looked at the gender balance in the different scientific disciplines you found an even more challenging problem – our physical sciences and computer science disciplines had less than 20% female representation working in them.

So we have established that Dstl doesn't have a good gender balance but why bother to fix it? Does it matter? We believe it does for the following reasons. You can always make a morale argument for trying to address gender balance issues – of course it is right that people of any gender should have equal opportunities to progress in an organisation. But we also wanted to articulate the business reasons for addressing the problem – why would Dstl be a better more effective organisation if we had a better gender balance?

Dstl is operating in an increasingly challenging environment as we strive to meet the continued strong demand for high-impact S&T, against the backdrop of an increasingly competitive recruitment environment and a climate of austerity. Many studies have shown

that businesses with greater diversity are more resilient and perform better across a wide range of metrics, which is why need to achieve greater gender diversity throughout Dstl. We want to serve our military colleagues as effectively as possible and we therefore want excellent delivery and improved business performance. We support a diverse customer and therefore need diverse thinking. S&T talent is scarce and we want to be an organisation that attracts talent – we want women to want to come and work for us. A more diverse organisation is more resilient, able to deal with challenging times more effectively. And as an organisation that wants more innovation we believe this will be support by more diverse thinking.

Articulating the size and scale of the problem is the easy bit – the difficult bit is deciding what to do about it!

Having determined we had a problem and articulated why we wanted to solve it, we wanted to be clear on our ambition. I should say at this point that I am a keen cyclist – and at the time I was developing our approach I was also watching the Tour de France. Hence I am going to use a ‘who is in the race’ metaphor to explain our ambition!

It is easy to articulate the ultimate goal - in the long term we want to have equal numbers of men and women in all levels and all roles. Imagine looking at a field of the most experienced performers and seeing equal numbers of men and women on the road.

But it was important to also articulate a medium term goal and a short term goal. Our analysis of the detail behind the headline numbers identified two clear issues that, if we could solve them, would be stepping stones to achieving our long term goal.

We identified that we had a number of senior types of role in various disciplines that did not have any women in them and far too many roles where women are under-represented at senior levels. This means there are no role models for other women in the organisation to look at – to encourage them to aspire to these roles. So in the medium term we aspired to have at least one woman in every role to act as a role model and inspiration for other women. Imagine looking at a cycle race and seeing that a woman was fulfilling each of the roles on the road, team leader, sprint specialist, mountain specialist, time trial specialist etc.

We also identified that part of the reason we didn't have women represented in all the roles was we had far too many job opportunities that very few (if any) women even put themselves forward for. If no women are applying for certain roles then there won't be any women in those roles! So in the short term we wanted to ensure that every job opportunity had at least one women applying - one woman in the race for every position on the team. Of course we want promotions and appointments to roles to continue to be made entirely on merit, but we

believe action is needed to encourage women to be confident to throw their hat in the ring to be considered for opportunities.

Interestingly our analysis of the data showed that when women do apply for promotion they are more likely to be successful, but behind this is the data that shows women take longer (2 years plus) than their male peers to decide to apply.

Achieving greater gender diversity in Dstl will be accelerated by supporting, enabling and encouraging Dstl's women to reach their full potential. We believe that this requires our women to have three key ingredients: the aspiration to progress to more senior roles; the belief that they have the capability to progress; a climate in which they can thrive as they progress.

To support improving the aspiration, belief and climate – to enable more of our women to progress to senior roles - we did lots of different things which supported one or more of the elements of creating aspiration, creating belief and creating the right climate. I am going to illustrate some of these in a moment but I would be very happy to talk in more detail about anything we did when I take questions at the end.

Here are some of things we did: we ran seminars on topics that our women have identified as barriers and challenge (e.g. speaking with confidence, being willing to take risks, networking skills); we engaged with other organisations to understand how they are addressing these challenges (e.g. Accenture); to create aspiration we organised inspiring talks by senior women (from defence and for the S&T community) to make it real for our women to see it can be done; we worked towards Athena Swan external accreditation to benchmark ourselves against other employees of women in S&T; we engaged with the Women in Science and Engineering initiative to help us identify how to bring more women into our science professions; we publicised the career profiles of all our senior women so they can be more visible roles models for our junior women to aspire to; we reviewed and updated our policies to increase their female friendliness (e.g. we launched a formal job sharing policy).

But the lynchpin at the heart of our strategy – something that supported all three aims (create ambition, create belief and create the right climate) was a concept called mentoring circles.

There is a lot of evidence that providing a supportive female environment for women to discuss their ambitions and their personal barriers that are holding them back makes a really valuable contribution to creating both the aspiration to progress and the belief that they have the capability to progress, hence Dstl established 'female mentoring circles'.

I am going to explain in a little more detail how they operated.

The idea is that a small group (typically 4-6) of women at the same career level get together every few weeks for an hour, supported by a woman and a man at the next level up, to discuss their career aspirations and the barriers to achieving them. The group will support each other in identifying possible solutions to the challenges and encouraging members to be confident in developing towards their aspirations.

We believe that having only female mentees in the circle is important. There are lots of anecdotal examples of our women in mixed gender group events finding it difficult to break in to the conversation, as they find more confident men are dominating the discussion. We wanted to ensure that this was not something which would happen during mentoring, hence creating female-only mentoring circles and thinking carefully about who to put in which circles to create a positive supportive dynamic.

The concept of a mentoring circle (as opposed to one-on-one mentoring) means people can get support from a wider group than just a single mentor (so their mentoring is itself diverse), but the involvement of more senior mentors in the group means that advice from people who have been there and done it can be easily accessed. Participation in the circles isn't necessarily about achieving promotion, it might be about moving sideways into other opportunities to broaden a woman's development and career enrichment.

A mentoring circle also enables us to meet another need that a number of our women have expressed. They want to have access to a female mentor, as they feel that a woman will bring a unique perspective on overcoming the challenges of being a working woman and particularly one working in a male-dominated environment. However with the small number of women currently in the more senior levels, it would be impossible for us to provide every woman at a more junior level with a more senior female mentor; unless our more senior women were to spend a disproportionate amount of their time undertaking mentoring. A mentoring circle allows a senior woman to simultaneously mentor several more junior women; and therefore allows all the junior women that want to, to have access to a more senior female mentor.

One of the key features of the mentoring circles was the involvement of a senior male mentor, alongside the senior female mentor. This was a very important aspect so I just want to take a moment to explain why male mentors are important?

We believe that achieving greater gender diversity is not a 'women-only' issue and believe that male colleagues should also care about creating a diverse and inclusive environment that allows everyone to achieve their full potential. Hence we were actively seeking to

generate greater male support for the gender diversity agenda. The involvement of a male mentor in the circles therefore served two purposes. Firstly our male mentors will have different perspectives and experiences to share and this will benefit the female mentees; but in addition, through their involvement, the male mentors will get a better understanding of the challenges for women in Dstl and can act as champions to other male colleagues about why we are taking action on gender diversity. This was the probably the thing that surprised us the most – consistently male colleagues, so of whom has been sceptical that there was a real problem and not just something that a bit more time would mean got sorted out by itself, would give feedback that they had had their eyes opened to the challenges of being a working woman in a male dominated environment. I think for some of them it caused them to reflect very hard on whether their behaviour had sometimes, inadvertently, created a more difficult climate for female colleagues to operate in.

The mentoring circles run at all levels in the organisation. The level 6, 7 and 8 circles were centrally set-up and co-ordinated. The take-up rate was excellent and continues to grow as women achieving promotion or returning from maternity leave join the scheme. Over 75% of our woman at these levels took the opportunity to be involved. At levels 5 and below, local initiatives, modelled on the same concept, were implemented across the business.

And the mentoring circles do influence our other gender diversity activities. Feedback from the circles was discussed regularly at the steering group and shapes the design and implementation of additional activities (e.g. seminars) that would benefit the women in Dstl. For example, early discussions in the mentoring circles identified that not being able to speak with confidence in meetings was something that was holding women back, as a result, two of our senior women ran a lunchtime seminar on this topic.

So I have described a lot of hard work – but it is making a difference? Does Dstl have better gender equality than before we started?

We were monitoring the data each year and we were delighted to see that the percentage of women at each grade in the organisation increased year on year after we started this work. We do not believe this would have happened without taking positive action.

And in terms of our ambition to get more woman applying for senior roles and more role model women in the range of senior disciplines, this also looks positive as the number of women applying and being appointed increased in the 3 years after we started this work...and continues to increase.

I am very proud that after 3 years of hard work we had increased the number of women in the most senior technical roles to 11 - versus 1 in 2013. I am also very proud that by 2016

the number of women applying for the most senior technical roles was equal to the number of men.

I hope the numbers provide sound evidence that our approach is working. I was very honoured to receive external recognition of the work last year when I received the Women in Defence UK award for promotion of gender balance. It was an absolute privilege to collect my award alongside women from the military and civilian defence spheres who were being recognised for their contributions.

So that brings me to the end of my talk. I hope I have inspired you to take action to improve gender diversity in your organisations and convinced you that it can be done.

Thank you very much for your attention.

I would be delighted to provide more information to anyone who wants to contact me afterwards.