



SPÓRT ÉIREANN
SPORT IRELAND

Balanced Leadership Framework

A guide to assist sport organisations in
achieving gender equality in their leadership.

#WomenInSportIRE



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Executive Summary

This Balanced Leadership Framework is a toolkit for sporting organisations, outlining methods and guidelines to assist them in achieving gender equality in and through their approach to leadership across the organisation. The framework is intended to be used by Chairs of the board, CEO's, senior managers, board and committee members.

The Balanced Leadership Framework builds on the previous Gender Balance on Boards Toolkit and is updated to reflect the changes that have taken place across the sector over the last five years including the implementation of the National Sports Policy 2018-2027 and the Governance Code for Sport.

In 2024, research undertaken by Sport Ireland on the views and experiences of female and male leaders from across the sport sector, emphasised the need for ongoing consideration to be given to the area of gender equality to ensure supportive, inclusive and balanced leadership. The research recommended four themes for future work: Allyship & Support, Inclusive Culture, Work-Life Balance and Confidence & Self-Belief. It particularly emphasised the importance of culture at board and leadership level in building inclusive, ethical, and effective leadership.

This framework is designed to support organisations (professional/volunteer led), boards and management, in strengthening their leadership practices and outlines nine key focus areas that guide meaningful, sustainable development. Importantly:

- These areas are not sequential.
- Organisations can focus on any area, depending on their unique context and priorities.
- All the focus areas are designed to be continuous and iterative, encouraging ongoing reflection, adaptation, and improvement.
- Progress is not linear – organisations may revisit and refine each area over time.

Rather than a rigid checklist, this framework provides a flexible roadmap of methods, guidelines and actions that encourage organisations to engage in a way that is both strategic and responsive. The cumulative effect of implementing more actions across all areas will lead to more positive systemic change. The following nine focus areas make up the Balanced Leadership Framework.



Cultural

1. Culture
2. Allyship
3. Psychological Safety in Leadership



Structural

4. Governance, Policy & Procedures
5. Recruitment
6. Progression Pathways



Behavioural

7. Ways of Working
8. Transparency & Accountability
9. Training, Education & Retention

1. Culture	Board and executive team culture can be complex, requiring openness, a clear strategic plan, values, and consistent behaviours. Diverse, respectful and inclusive leadership behaviours can set a positive tone for the organisation.
2. Allyship	Harness the influence of leaders (both male and female) in supporting and advocating for gender equality by empowering women, advocating for inclusivity across the sport more broadly, and strengthening pathways to leadership in Irish sport.
3. Psychological Safety in Leadership'	When members of a team or board experience psychological safety, they feel empowered to share ideas, challenge existing practices, including those proposed by leadership, seek support, acknowledge mistakes, and raise concerns. Via this honesty and openness, everyone feels included, risks are reduced, new ideas are generated, and the team/board/organisation can deliver on those ideas.
4. Governance, Policy & Procedures	Align governance with culture by following the Governance Code for Sport, regularly reviewing key documents, and ensuring these are reflected in leadership and board training/activity to promote accountability and equity.
5. Recruitment	Build a diverse board (and workforce where applicable) through equitable, transparent, bias-free recruitment and nomination processes that aim for balanced representation.
6. Progression Pathways	Support sustainable governance by enabling upward mobility from local (i.e. club/county/province/regional) to national (including sub-committees) and international levels, while ensuring gender-balanced nominations and inclusive practices at all levels.
7. Ways of Working	Create the conditions for fair and inclusive participation through effective board and employee practices that value flexibility, understand and respect caring responsibilities, and amplify all voices, ensuring equitable contributions to decision-making. Inclusive practices rely on flexible schedules, timely papers, considerations for parental leave, and a values-based environment that amplifies all voices.
8. Transparency & Accountability	Foster trust in organisations through openness, clear communication, regular reporting and public sharing of progress, reinforcing a commitment to equity and good governance.
9. Training, Education & Retention	Promote strong and sustainable leadership through ongoing induction, tailored professional development, mentorship, and training that ensure role clarity, engagement, and long-term retention and progression of talent.



The framework also outlines activities undertaken within several National Governing Bodies (NGBs) and Local Sports Partnerships (LSPs) and presents these as case studies. These case studies are designed to offer clear, positive examples that support sporting organisations in implementing the steps and actions outlined in the framework.

This framework is designed to guide organisations in developing inclusive practices. It also serves as an ongoing support for creating a positive environment for board members, staff, and volunteers in leadership roles.

Introduction

Sport Ireland's Policy on Women in Sport (first launched in 2019) highlighted the organisation's commitment to women in sport and provided a blueprint for Sport Ireland's future work. The policy outlined four themes where current gaps or future opportunities exist. The policy was refreshed and relaunched in 2023. The updated Women in Sport Policy continues to have four key pillars – Leadership and Governance, Coaching and Officiating, Active Participation, and Visibility.

As part of Sport Ireland's work under Leadership and Governance, the organisation undertook several projects in the last six years focusing on supporting the sport sector to increase the number of women on boards. That work included the Business Case and Context for Gender Diversity on Boards – a piece of research conducted within the sector in 2020, which explored the barriers preventing gender diversity on boards and the resulting Gender Diversity on Boards Toolkit, designed to overcome those barriers. The toolkit outlined a ten-step approach to building gender diversity, broken down into the three areas of Tactical, Structural, and Cultural.

Since the Gender Diversity on Boards Toolkit was published in 2020, a lot of progress has been made, significantly aided by the following actions:

- Introduction and embedding of the Governance Code for Sport (2019-2021+)
- Updating of the [Sport Ireland Policy on Women in Sport](#) (2023)
- Introduction of the annual Women in Sport Leadership Snapshots (from 2020)
- Minimum targets included in the National Sports Policy Action Plans published by the Government in 2021 and 2024, supporting the implementation of the 2018-2027 National Sports Policy, (i.e. the introduction of the target of a minimum of 40% representation of each gender in the membership of boards).
- A new [Annex on Gender Balance, Diversity, and Inclusion](#) to supplement the existing Code of Practice for the Governance of State Bodies was published in September 2020 introducing requirements for state boards to achieve 40% gender balance.

The reaction from sporting organisations in response to increased focus on gender balance on boards, for the most part, has been positive, with a number of organisations making administrative arrangements, and constitutional and structural changes to enable them to meet the 40% target. Leadership snapshots published by Sport Ireland in 2023 and 2024 showed significant improvement in gender balance at board level.

To further understand the environment for leaders, Sport Ireland commissioned a research report at the end of 2024 to explore the views and lived experiences of women and men working and volunteering in sport at a leadership level across Ireland. These consultations highlighted valuable opportunities to strengthen support for current and future leaders through practical and impactful solutions.

Building on these developments and insights, the Gender Diversity on Boards Toolkit and Business Case has evolved into the Balanced Leadership Framework. Maintaining gender balance, ensuring effective succession planning, and supporting leaders remain key priorities – helping to optimise the leadership journey and experience for everyone involved.

Where possible, this revised framework is expanded to include balanced leadership across the organisation. This framework, and most of the actions within, can be taken to apply to the multiple leadership levels an organisation can have, e.g., the board, management team, sub-committees, and any provincial/regional/local level structures. The framework has been created with all sport organisations in mind, i.e. NGBs, LSPs, other funded bodies. However, at times, some information/actions may be better suited to one type of organisation over another. Similarly, the size of one's organisation may make some information/actions more realistic or achievable than others. Whatever the sport organisation set up, the common requirement to enable success of the framework is for senior leadership to lead and champion the changes relevant in their organisation.

The Balanced Leadership Framework reflects changes since 2019, and the recent insights, incorporating refreshed focus areas such as:

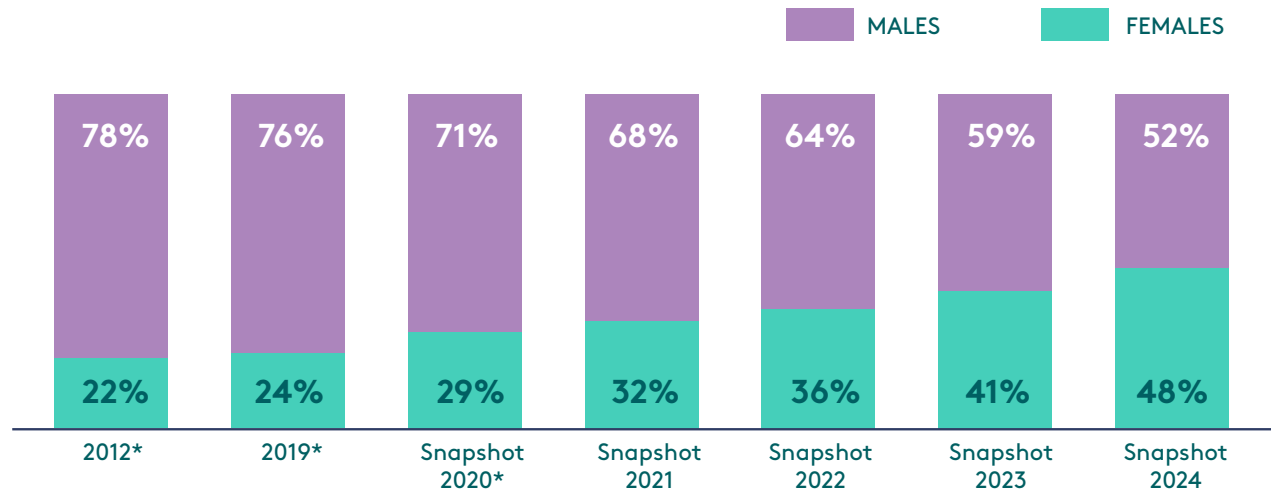
- The difference independent board members can make.
- The case studies and mechanisms for maintaining women in leadership roles.
- The use of committees as an entrance point into leadership roles.

The framework is designed to support sport and organisations as they evolve on their leadership journey and grow in sophistication. It serves as a practical tool to help organisations recruit, progress and retain women in leadership roles while also guiding those seeking to strengthen gender balance and inclusive leadership further.

The framework also compliments and supports the [Values Charter for Sport in Ireland](#) which was developed as a collaboration between Sport Ireland and National Governing Bodies of Sport. The Charter sets out the core values for sport in Ireland, what sport in Ireland stands for and encapsulates how the Irish population feel and think about sport as a sporting nation. These values - Inclusion, Integrity, Respect, Excellence and Accountability, are evident and shine through in the Balanced Leadership Framework and help to instil the core values for sport in Ireland.

Changes over the Years

Board Composition Figures of Sporting Bodies



*Earlier snapshots did not contain LSP data.

The Benefits of Balanced Leadership

The benefits of diversity on boards include:

- Improved board experience for those involved
- Better decision-making outcomes
- Better reflection of society and stakeholders
- Better representation of the organisation to the outside world
- Better financial returns
- Better board accountability
- Improved corporate governance
- Making the organisation better equipped for the future

Most importantly, evidence shows a strong correlation between gender diversity in leadership and financial performance. It highlights that companies with more than 30% women in executive roles are significantly more likely to outperform financially compared to those with fewer women in leadership.

Barriers to Female Leadership

Systemic and cultural issues such as gender bias, stereotypes, and unequal opportunities, alongside organisational challenges such as a lack of mentorship, lack of fairness, limited access to professional networks and logistics like timing of meetings, are all barriers for women in leadership. Personal factors, such as the disproportionate burden of family responsibilities and self-doubt also contribute to the underrepresentation of women in leadership.

Systemic & Cultural Barriers

- **Gender Bias & Stereotypes** – either the underestimation of women’s leadership skills or the perception of assertive behaviour as negative (while the same traits in men are seen positively).
- **Homologous reproduction** – when leaders select successors who resemble themselves, (e.g. if an organisation is male dominated, selecting men with similar backgrounds, values, and experiences for roles).
- **Societal Expectations** – where domestic responsibilities are assigned disproportionately to women, creating a struggle for work-life balance.
- **Lack of Allyship** – where a lack of support can create a ‘glass ceiling’ barrier to succeed.

Organisational Barriers

- **Lack of Mentorship** – where there may be limited access to essential mentors and no obvious progression pathways for women.
- **Workplace Environments** – ways of working can act as an obstacle for women pursuing leadership positions, including logistical elements such as format and timing of meetings, lack of flexibility or working from home policies, or unreasonable travel asks.

Personal & Interpersonal Barriers

- **Imposter Syndrome** – self-doubt or feeling incompetent or not good enough can affect women’s confidence and hinder their career progress.
- **Lack of Role Models** – scarcity of visible female leaders makes it harder for aspiring women to envision their own leadership paths.

The Role of the Governance Code for Sport

The Governance Code for Sport plays a foundational role in shaping how leadership and governance are approached across Irish sport. The Government's National Sports Policy 2018-2027, tasked Sport Ireland with ensuring all National Governing Bodies (NGBs) and Local Sports Partnerships (LSPs) adopted the Code by the end of 2021. Since then, Sport Ireland has supported the sector in embedding the Code's principles through tailored guidance, training, and resources.

The Code is a principles-based framework built around several key pillars including:

1. Leading the organisation
2. Exercising control over the organisation
3. Being transparent and accountable
4. Working effectively
5. Behaving with integrity

These principles align strongly with the goals of the Balanced Leadership Framework, which seeks to foster inclusive, ethical, and effective leadership cultures. While the Code does not prescribe specific targets around gender balance, its emphasis on transparency, accountability, and leadership effectiveness supports a governance environment where equity, diversity, and inclusion can thrive.

Organisations are categorised within the Code based on their size and staff capacity, ensuring the expectations are proportionate. Through Sport Ireland's Gov-Enhance programme, funded bodies receive targeted governance supports, helping them strengthen governance practices and evolve their leadership structures in line with best practice.

Looking ahead, Action 38 of the National Sports Policy Action Plan 2024-2027 calls for a full review and update of the Governance Code to reflect emerging governance trends. Sport Ireland initiated this review process in 2025, with a particular focus on enhancing supports for diversity, inclusion, and organisational culture—further aligning with the ambitions of this Balanced Leadership Framework.

By embedding the values of the Governance Code within this framework, we reinforce the message that good governance is not only about compliance, but also about culture, equity, fairness and leadership that reflects the society sport serves.



Gender Balance in Leadership and Governance - Context

The Sport Ireland Policy on Women in Sport has three objectives within the area of Leadership and Governance.

- 1 Ensure gender balance on boards is recognised as best practice with all sporting bodies aspiring to achieve this.
- 2 Increase the number of women in governance and leadership roles.
- 3 Ensure the culture within sporting organisations values women's contribution to leadership and governance and sees it as central to the growth and development of their sport.

Across sporting organisations in Ireland, at year-end 2024 and as outlined in the Women in Leadership Snapshot, women represented approximately 48% of board members, reflecting a monumental shift (from approx. 24%) since the launch of the Sport Ireland Policy on Women in Sport in 2019. This progress shows what is possible when gender balance is treated as a priority. The roles of women on boards, however, still seems to be gender stereotyped in some cases with women less likely to be the Chairperson. Evidence also suggests that more women also take on a role as Secretary or Safeguarding Officer. Achieving true balance, means ensuring women are not only present but equally empowered to lead across all areas.

As of 2024, the International Olympic Committee (IOC) had achieved 40.6% female membership, 30% representation on its Executive Board, and 50% female participation across its 33 commissions, with 42% of those chaired by women. These outcomes reflect the implementation of the IOC's Gender Equality Review Project and Olympic Agenda 2020+5, which together set out structural goals and cultural strategies to embed gender inclusion.

At a European level, progress has been slower. A joint EU-Council of Europe project published in February 2025 entitled, All In Plus: Promoting greater gender equality in sport, highlights that women remain significantly underrepresented in decision-making roles. It notes that:

- Only 12% of sports federations have a female President, and just 29% have a female Vice-President or board member.
- While 59% of sports organisations have taken action to increase women's representation, disparities remain stark.

A recent report from the European Institute for Gender Equality (EIGE) echoes this picture in the wider business world, showing that women remain underrepresented in senior executives and high-authority roles across major EU companies.

Target 5.5 of the United Nations Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) is focused on ensuring women's full and effective participation and equal opportunities for leadership at all levels of decision-making in political, economic and public life.

For Ireland, gender equality in sport at an international level is significant due to the following points:

- Most Irish sporting bodies are members of European and international federations and are directly influenced by their rules and cultures. Strong and balanced decision making at this level is critical for the growth and credibility of sport in Ireland.
- The National Sport Policy Action Plan (Action 36) calls on national sporting organisations to seek representation in their international federations. This provides Ireland with a unique opportunity: to promote its female leadership talent for positions on the European and global stage, broadening gender balance internationally while also positioning Ireland as a leader in equality-driven governance.

There is an opportunity for Ireland to take a leadership role in the area of gender equality in sport in Europe. The sport sector in Ireland supports the advancement of women in leadership roles and the advancement of its leadership to positions in international federations. Irish sporting organisations can promote their female leadership talent in particular for European and international positions, thereby both broadening gender balance at that level, whilst also showing Ireland to be a leader in this area.

Finally, it is essential that all efforts to meet gender balance in leadership are grounded in Ireland's equality laws. Any appointments should be done in line with the Equal Status Act.



Leadership Insight from the Sport Sector

In late 2024, Sport Ireland commissioned a research report exploring the views and lived experiences of women and men working and volunteering in sport at a leadership level across Ireland. Following an analysis of findings from survey responses and focus groups, there were several emerging themes from this work: Allyship & Support, Inclusive Culture, Work Life Balance and Confidence & Self-Belief. The research showed that these are the themes for sporting organisations to consider in supporting and maintaining balanced leadership in their organisations.

Ensuring an aligned approach across Sport Ireland's work, these themes and the recommendations from the report have helped shape the actions outlined in this framework. The following provides a brief overview of each theme while readers can explore the full research report for more information.

1. Allyship & Support

In the context of the research, allyship may be defined as the impact of male and female leaders supporting and advocating for gender equality, the empowerment of women, and the inclusion of women in leadership roles within Irish sport. As most sport has grown from a place where the majority of those in leadership were men, male allyship is still important whereby men recognise their power and privilege and use this to support and advocate for women and gender equality in sport. Equally, as female leaders become more frequent, their presence as role models and active support for those females coming through, is vital.

Research underscores the value of joint leadership efforts and the necessity of robust support networks to enable leaders, regardless of gender, to thrive and reach their full potential. Effective leadership is reinforced by strong peer and mentor support, both within and beyond one's organisation. Cross-organisational networks and guidance from experienced mentors can support career progression and resilience.

2. Inclusive Culture

An inclusive culture in sport leadership promotes diversity and equity, while fostering an environment at senior management and board/committee level where all individuals feel valued, respected and empowered, enabling them to achieve their full potential. In the context of the current research, an inclusive culture may signify a shared belief that leadership roles are accessible to all, with systems in place to support both female and male leaders and ensure everyone has an equal say and contribution. While inclusivity is often promoted, research reveals that women are more than twice as likely as men to face barriers to leadership. Organisations must move beyond rhetoric to actively dismantle these barriers and ensure equitable access to leadership and inclusive and welcoming environments for those in the roles.

3. Work-Life Balance

Work-life balance remains a significant challenge in sport leadership, marked by irregular hours, travel demands, and performance pressures. While both genders face these challenges, women often encounter additional societal and organisational expectations around caregiving, contributing to leadership attrition and isolation.

4. Confidence & Self-Belief

Confidence and self-belief are fundamental qualities for leaders in sport, enabling them to navigate challenges, and make decisive choices in high-pressure environments. For female leaders, cultivating these traits is particularly significant, as they often operate in historically male-dominated spaces. The overwhelming majority of female and male survey participants agreed that they have the skills and experience to be in their leadership role. However, even though both genders previously rated their experience and skill level highly, women were more likely to report reduced confidence (feeling like they don't belong or have the don't have the experience) when in the company of other leaders.

As the landscape of sport continues to evolve, providing robust support for leaders has become increasingly critical to ensure the growth, inclusivity, and sustainability of organisations. The input from survey and focus group participants in the research has provided several strategies and suggestions where future support for leaders in Irish sport could be enhanced and so serve as the foundation of the Balanced Leadership Framework.



Understanding Culture and its Role in Leadership

The Sport Ireland Governance Code for Sport states that principles-based governance is most effective when it operates in an ethical culture environment – an environment that is consciously nurtured by its leadership. Governance provides the structures and policies; culture determines how they are interpreted, enacted, and sustained in day-to-day practice.

The Balanced Leadership Framework emphasises culture as key to organisational development and ensuring volunteers and staff feel safe, included, and that they belong.

Culture is often intangible and subjective. People may experience the same culture differently depending on their role, background, and personal values. There are multiple different ways and approaches in which organisational culture might be described, measured or impacted. An approach adopted in this framework and one which organisations may find useful, is that of Edgar Schein.

Schein's three-level theoretical model provides a useful visual of breaking out organisational culture into artefacts (rites, rituals, symbols and stories) at **Level 1**, values/beliefs at **Level 2** and assumptions at **Level 3**, with it moving from the visible to the unconscious as highlighted in Figure 1.

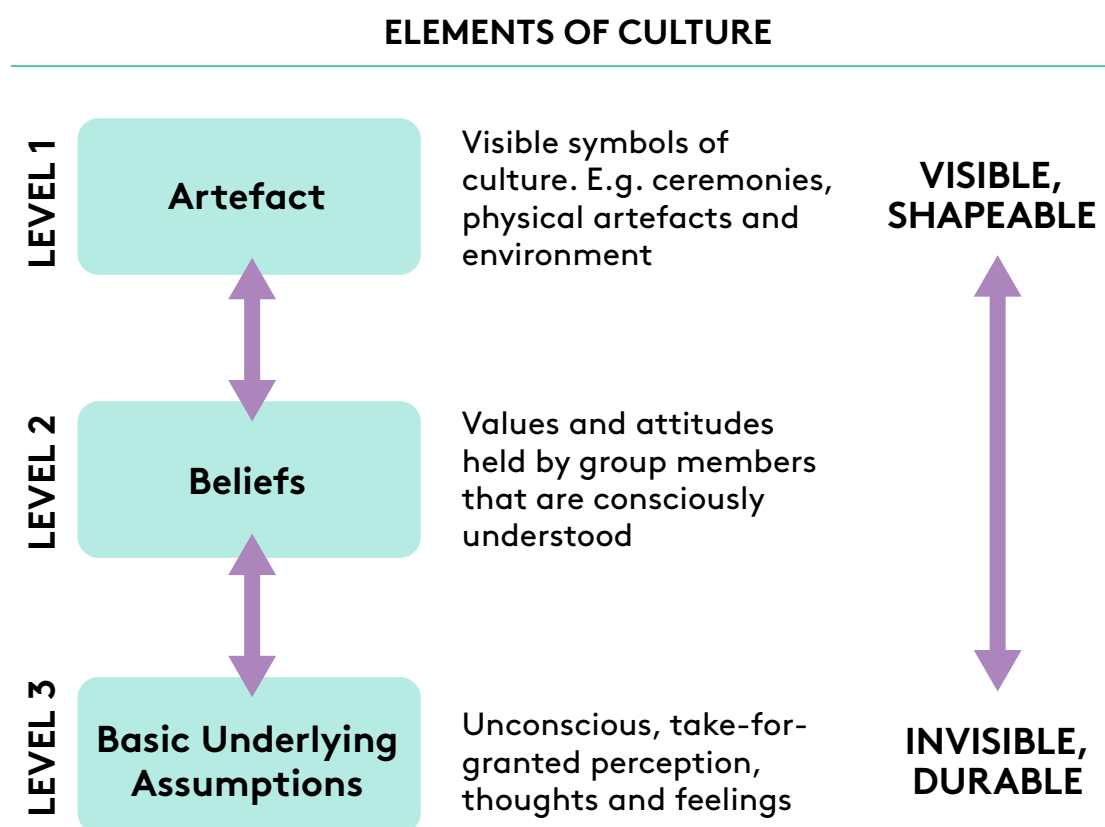


Figure 1 - Theoretical Model of Organisational Culture (Schein, 2010)

LEVEL 1 - ARTIFACTS (What is seen)

This level holds assumptions about visible structures and processes. It also contains observed behaviours. This level is the outcome of Levels 2 and 3. It's how they play out in reality. It's how NGB and LSP members are served, and how complaints are handled. It's how colleagues are treated and how managers motivate. It's how board members are listened to and how volunteers are included. It's how ideas are fostered, and innovation and change is embraced. It's how the interactions of the organisation with staff and volunteers are truly experienced.

LEVEL 2 - ESPOUSED BELIEFS & VALUES (What is said)

This is where assumptions about ideals, goals, values and aspirations sit. It's how the organisation rationalises and communicates its ambitions. It is normally where and how the organisation outlines its vision, mission and values. It might be the organisation's strategy, board induction pack, employee handbook, pictures of its values hanging on the walls. It's what the organisation claims.

LEVEL 3 - BASIC UNDERLYING ASSUMPTIONS (What is believed)

Within this level are unconscious, often taken-for-granted beliefs and values that are not usually expressed. These unwritten rules often drive behaviour, perception, thought and feeling. These assumptions might be whispered between colleagues or just innately known amongst the membership population. They are often shaped by the decisions of leadership in the past, the passing over of new ideas and the beliefs and principles of decision makers.

Leadership has a central position in organisational culture, with Schein (2004) perceiving leadership as so central to organisational culture that he referred to them as "two sides of the same coin", suggesting that the culture can manifest itself unconsciously, based on the values, behaviours and actions of senior leadership.

Governance is influenced by culture, especially the tone set by boards and leaders, but culture also shapes governance. A culture that encourages open communication and respectful challenge supports psychological safety and better decision making, while a passive or hierarchical culture might lead to unchecked assumptions, weaker oversight and poorer outcomes. Through clear articulation of organisational values, and by modelling those values consistently in communication, representation, and decisions, leaders can actively influence culture for the better.

Values are an essential component of culture in terms of defining behaviour. The strategic plan of the organisation will normally identify and define the values of the organisation, as well as what concrete actions are taken to deliver those values. Healthy organisational cultures are consistent throughout all levels of the organisation e.g., at coaching, grassroots, development etc.

Assessing culture is a useful exercise with multiple ways of doing so. See the Framework for further ideas on how to assess and monitor board culture.

Understanding the Balanced Leadership Framework

The Balanced Leadership Framework is developed using research conducted internationally, and from within Ireland, and is designed to provide examples and suggested actions that can be utilised by organisations to help create or maintain balanced leadership.

Rather than being a rigid sequence, the Balanced Leadership Framework identifies nine interconnected focus areas or levers for change that collectively guide meaningful and sustainable progress. These areas highlight the cultural, structural, and behavioural dimensions of leadership, and demonstrate that balance is achieved not through a single intervention but through ongoing attention across multiple aspects of governance and organisational practice.



Cultural

1. Culture
2. Allyship
3. Psychological Safety in Leadership



Structural

4. Governance, Policy & Procedures
5. Recruitment
6. Progression Pathways



Behavioural

7. Ways of Working
8. Transparency & Accountability
9. Training, Education & Retention



The Framework in Detail

Achieving and maintaining gender balance, as well as further forms of diversity at leadership level, is an ongoing journey. It is about ensuring inclusivity and psychological safety at all leadership levels in the organisation, ensuring people feel their voice is heard and respected, and they can speak openly about their ideas and thoughts. There are nine key areas where progress can be made. These are not sequential, and progress is not linear, but are all important.

The nine areas are explained in this section.

1. Culture

As already explained in detail in this document, culture gives organisations a sense of identity and determines, through the organisation's legends, rituals, beliefs, values, norms and language, the way in which things are done. A key role for the board and senior management is in establishing, promoting, assessing and monitoring the desired corporate culture within the board and across the wider organisation.

Leadership from the top and board relationships are crucial and set the tone for the culture in the organisation. The tone set from the whole board is vital in contributing to, monitoring and assessing culture.

Actions to undertake:

- Develop a Board Culture Statement or Charter. This statement commits to defined priority behaviours for the board, that match the values in the strategic plan and is a statement of culture. The board should also satisfy itself that culture and strategy are aligned, and if not aligned, identify what actions need to be taken.
- Assess organisational culture, varying from:
 - Internal perspectives (e.g., conduct board evaluations, performance appraisals, self-reflections, staff turnover KPI, utilise a tool such as the Organisation Culture Assessment Instrument (OCAI)).
 - External perspectives (e.g., internal auditor/regulator reports, corporate benchmarking).
 - And indeed, tools applicable either internally or externally (e.g., club/member surveys/questionnaires, net promoter scoring matrix, focus groups, etc.).
- The board should reflect on the message and tone it sets with regard to the culture of inclusivity. For example, is inclusivity a core value and how is the organisation embedding that value in their work and decision making? Some ideas in this regard include:
 - Publishing, stating and referring to values as a part of 'business as usual'.
 - Including values and behaviours in onboarding of new board members.
 - Using values as a decision-making criterion for the board.
 - Including questions relating to culture, inclusivity and feeling respected on annual board membership feedback/evaluation surveys.
- Ensure board KPIs and metrics are in place to monitor and evaluate the culture in the organisation. For example,
 - Satisfaction surveys
 - Focus groups and qualitative assessments
 - Turnover and retention rates (staff/board members/volunteers on committees)
 - Absenteeism rate (from meetings, staff in the workplace)
- Monitor participation and influence, not just presence, from board members.

2. Allyship

The active support and advocacy of both female and male leaders for gender equality, women's empowerment, and the inclusion of women in leadership roles within Irish sport can generate significant positive outcomes.

As most sport has grown from a place where the majority of those in leadership were men, male allyship is still important whereby men recognise their power and privilege and use this to support and advocate for women and gender equality. Just as important is the support of female leaders to other females, which sends a powerful message of allyship both to the recipient and to others in the sector.

Actions to undertake:

- Educate male leaders to understand what being a male ally means and what actions they can take.
- Seek to highlight female leaders and administrative role models within your own sport. NGBs and LSPs can highlight female role models in their own organisation through promoting their board/committee, profiling role models on the organisation website, etc.
- Nominate and put women forward for governance or leadership roles within European and international federation and/or organisations via nomination processes.
- Look at developing a mentorship programme within your own sport, or across sports, where up and coming female leaders are linked with more senior mentors of either gender – this can be developed on a formal or informal basis. Women mentoring men can help to challenge the view of some males regarding women's ability to lead.
- Speak to Sport Ireland and/or your international federation about mentorship programmes in sport and options available on existing courses across sport.
- Establish networks within areas of the organisation and ensure women and men are valued and treated equally. For example, Chairperson networks for provincial/county/regional committees.

3. Psychological Safety in Leadership

Psychological safety in leadership is about creating the understanding that ideas can be expressed, questions asked, mistakes admitted, and appropriate risks taken without fear of punishment, humiliation, or negative consequences. It fosters an environment of open communication, trust, and collaboration, leading to greater innovation, improved performance, and increased job satisfaction and retention. It isn't just being nice, or avoiding tough conversations, or a lack of accountability – it's about an environment where mistakes are learnings and people feel confident that their thoughts and concerns will not be met with judgement.

Actions to undertake:

- Rather than rushing into an elaborately designed process built to establish psychological safety, take it one step at a time. The leadership can begin by sharing information about themselves, then welcome disclosures from others on the team. This exercise will instil confidence in others and allow them to share naturally.
- Show appreciation frequently – people that feel appreciated are more communicative, creative and productive. Cultivate an environment where people feel that their ideas are valued and thank people for their contributions. Reflect on your language within the board and how you welcome others onto the board – in a healthy board/organisation culture all views are equal.
- Leaders can set an example for others by sharing their failures and what they've learned from them. Discussing mistakes that were made and what lessons came from them means others are more likely to communicate their need for assistance.
- Communication is the key to psychological safety. Allowing others to communicate feedback in more than one way increases the likelihood of receiving feedback and promotes psychological safety. Some people may feel comfortable sharing their feedback publicly, while others may prefer to do so in a private setting or in writing. Acknowledge feedback in an email (or schedule a meeting) and if the feedback is worth acting on, inform them of how you intend to implement the feedback.
- Monitor participation and influence, not just presence, from board members, and if needed prompt involvement from female members.

4. Governance, Policy & Procedures

Robust and up-to-date governance documentation is fundamental to aligning organisational practice with the values of equity, transparency and accountability. The Governance Code for Sport sets the expectation that all funded bodies adopt appropriate governance documentation based on their size and structure. While a Constitution provides the legal foundation, a suite of living governance documents ensures that the organisation operates with clarity, consistency, and ethical leadership.

Importantly, these documents should not be static. Regular review and meaningful application help embed governance in day-to-day decision making and culture building.

Governance documents also provide a shared reference point to support board cohesion, clarify roles and responsibilities, and uphold high standards of integrity and inclusivity. They should be consistently reflected in training for board members, senior staff, and chairs to ensure alignment between written policy and lived experience.

Actions to undertake:

- Review and update the organisation's Constitution to ensure gender balance on the board is included, this could include quotas.
- Develop gender equality policies for other areas of the organisation, such as sub-committees, nomination processes, and working groups.
- Ensure alignment with the Governance Code for Sport, with governance documentation tailored appropriate for your organisations size and structure.
- Review key documents annually, including the Board Terms of Reference, committee structures, and Diversity and Inclusion Policy to ensure they remain current and reflective of evolving organisational values and best practice.
- Ensure documentation such as an organisation's Gender Equality Policy, or Diversity and Inclusion Policy, are integrated into recruitment, leadership development and performance evaluation, etc.
- Include the Balanced Leadership Framework into the handbook and/or training for board members, chairs and senior staff.

5. Recruitment

Understanding barriers to recruitment (to boards/management) for women and for women in minority groups (i.e. based on race, disability, socio-economic status, etc.) can then help organisations put measures in place to overcome or remove these barriers.

Organisations should also be mindful of the Equal Status Act in their recruitment process.

Actions to undertake:

- Use various methods to advertise roles to attract independent members to the board or those from outside your sport/organisation for employment, including:
 - In creating role/job descriptions, ensure information provided is succinct and sufficient. For example, avoid too narrow a specification for the role, or too detailed a specification with jargon.
 - Using inclusive language in board role advertisements and job descriptions.
 - Consider partnering with executive search firms that specialise in diverse candidate pools. Engage with networks and mentoring schemes that prepare women for board roles.
 - Ensure board charters and nomination committee terms of reference reflect gender representation commitment and gender diversity plans.
- Promote inclusive and transparent recruitment practices
 - Ensure diverse panels for board appointments.
 - Use transparent, skills-based selection criteria.
 - Require gender-balanced shortlists for governance/management roles.
 - Advertise vacant positions publicly and provide details on selection procedures for suitable candidates.
 - Allow sufficient time and use data to inform succession planning and recruitment strategies.
- Recognise and support different pathways into governance/management (e.g., athlete, volunteer, coach). Consider appointing women to advisory boards or committees as a stepping stone. In the case of a representative board, require diverse shortlists for all board appointments.
- Review commitment required for board membership and consider those who hold positions on multiple committees, i.e. is the person being asked to commit too much e.g., a member of both the board and a committee.
- For those organisation's yet to have a female CEO, Chair or President, examine why women are not progressing through the leadership pathway, or by other means, to those roles.

6. Progression Pathways

Within NGBs, good governance should cascade down from national to regional/provincial to county/club levels. National governing bodies could then make efforts to support progression upwards to European and international federations. Organisations should equally ensure support for regions/provinces to embed good practices, and that in turn there is support below that for county/club level governance.

The progression pathway in an LSP may look slightly different with often representatives nominated to the board based on their role within stakeholder groups.

Actions to undertake:

- Develop a Governance Pathway Framework
 - Set minimum representation goals for women in governance roles at all levels.
 - Map out clear steps from entry-level roles (e.g., club committees) to senior board positions.
 - Include timelines, competencies, and support mechanisms at each stage.
- Establish Talent Identification and Succession Planning
 - Identify emerging female leaders early within clubs, regional bodies, or volunteer networks.
 - Use succession planning to ensure women are considered for future governance/management roles.
 - Recognise and support different pathways into governance/management (e.g., athlete, volunteer, coach).
- Build Visibility and Networks
 - Highlight female role models in governance through media, events, and internal communications.
 - Support women's networking groups within the sport to share experiences and opportunities.
- The board could examine how to progress women into positions at European and international level – with the advantage of being native English speakers, Ireland has every opportunity to be a leader in this regard in promoting women to these roles and be an example to other nations.
- Take action to build mentorship, education and club development programmes within your sport that will strengthen and promote diversity. Clubs/regions are looking at the national leadership, so it is essential to lead with actions as well as word to influence clubs to follow what happens at national level.

7. Ways Of Working

Practical details around board set-up and ways of working can often be barriers to the greater involvement of women. Putting in place simple logistical practices can help facilitate a broader representation of people on the board. Importantly, this also sets the tone for what the board values, and what the board values becomes its culture. The following actions can also be applied down through organisations for the benefit of employees.

Actions to undertake:

- Ensure introductory meetings between the Chair of the board and all new board members takes place individually prior to their first meeting. This can be an opportunity to emphasise 'ways of working' for new members.
- Ways of working can include:
 - Looking at the timing and calendar of meetings to ensure any barriers to attendance are alleviated, for example, scheduling more lunchtime meetings or avoiding dinner time or bedtime routines, being mindful of school holidays, and bank holidays where people may be tied up with family responsibilities.
 - Aspiring to set out the schedule of meeting dates for the full year in advance where possible, allowing members to plan and make arrangements for other responsibilities.
 - Facilitating online meetings as the norm (where possible), rather than the exception so as to curb travel and time related barriers.
 - Considering coordinating meetings with other occasions/major events so board members can attend both more easily.
 - Respecting people's time and outline the meeting duration (e.g., 2 hours max) in advance. Be consistent with this duration at each meeting as it's best to assume someone may have other things planned post meeting.
 - Ensuring that papers are circulated in a timely fashion in advance of the meeting to allow time to prepare.
 - Ensuring that the practicalities around ways of working, as suggested above, are documented and agreed by all.
- Establish guidance on parental leave for board members and incorporate it into board induction processes. Board members should be able to choose whether to temporarily step back from their duties or to remain active, with both options being accommodated.
- Examine the roles that women have on the board. Ensuring roles are skillset based and not affected by unconscious bias decisions. E.g., in the past, most secretary board roles would have been occupied by women simply because it was assumed that's the most appropriate role for a woman.
- Examine if all voices are heard equally at board level across all agenda items – this should be regularly checked.

8. Transparency & Accountability

Building and maintaining trust and confidence amongst its membership and other stakeholders is an important function of the leadership of an organisation. The way in which this is achieved is by being transparent and accountable.

Sporting organisations that openly communicate about their targets, policies and practices around women in the sport or organisation, tend to be well regarded by their membership and the public.

Actions to undertake:

- Be open and transparent about actions and measures the organisation has in place around women in the sport/organisation, gender equality targets, policies and practices. Monitor remuneration to ensure a gender pay gap doesn't exist amongst employees.
- Conduct and publish research and data analysis on the gender breakdown across all layers of the organisation. E.g., board, staff, provincial/county/regional committees, club committees.
- Establish measurable goals for gender representation (e.g., 40:40:20 – 40% women, 40% men, 20% open). Make these targets public to increase accountability. Be consistently open and transparent about gender balance targets to influence other levels of governance and leadership down through the organisation.
- Ensure equal gender representation in all communication from the organisation, e.g., newsletter content.
- Many national federations are also accountable to their international or European federation – Irish governing bodies could also in turn hold their international federation to account and ensure that good practices at national level are also in place at that level.

9. Training, Education & Retention

The availability of training and education is a useful tool that aids the progression and retention of leaders within an organisation. Tailored training and education can also support other areas such as the culture of the board and member behaviours that encourage an inclusive board environment.

As is now the norm across most organisations, the induction of all new board members and employees is essential to help them understand their role and responsibilities. Induction should include awareness of the values, aims and processes of the organisation, board effectiveness training, as well as practical information.

Actions to undertake:

- Ensure meaningful inductions take place for all new board members, and/or those new to senior management in the organisation. This could include:
 - Ensuring introductory meetings between the Chair of the board and all new board members takes place individually prior to their first meeting.
 - Supplying all relevant documentation as soon as possible that will support new board members (and employees) in getting up to speed more quickly.
 - Introducing peer mentors at board level whereby an existing board member provides the induction, onboarding and ongoing support of new board members. This could be part of a broader mentoring programme which includes mentoring and sponsorship from current board members or senior leaders to others on the board or within the organisation.
- Within Board Effectiveness Reviews, add questions relating to training and education that leaders would find useful and ensure meaningful follow-up. Similarly, utilise the board effectiveness processes to review and strengthen the work identified through this Balanced Leadership Framework.
- Consider insisting that all leaders (i.e. board members, senior staff, chairs of committees) attend 'Inclusive Leadership Training' to ensure all are cognisant of supporting an inclusive and welcoming environment around the board table or office.
- Provide commitment to ongoing training, CPD, support and development of board members and staff, including:
 - Bespoke leadership, diversity, inclusion training programmes
 - Sport Ireland programmes
 - International Federation programmes
 - Female specific leadership programmes

Case Studies



Case Study 1: Badminton Ireland – Taking steps to embed gender diversity in governance

Badminton Ireland has taken tangible steps to ensure that gender diversity is enshrined in its governance documentation. More recently, its Constitution and by-laws have been updated to support a greater gender balance on the NGBs board. For example, Branch (Provincial) representation positions on its board must rotate equally between male and female candidates as well as the target of a minimum 40% of either gender on the board.

Furthermore, the by-laws also state that national committees must be composed of the same percentage of either gender, whilst also having term limits. This echoes the actions under 'Progression Pathways' in the Balanced Leadership Framework. Future work will include the introduction of balanced gender quotas in its working groups. These requirements will be integrated within the Branch structures, and in so doing become day-to-day practice of the volunteers within the sport.

Badminton Ireland actively recognised the need to diversify the leadership and has proactively developed a female first succession plan, with the intention of embedding diversity within the organisation. The NGB has had a proactive approach to allyship, whereby female employees are supported and encouraged to take on more visible roles. The work of women is amplified across the organisation at all touchpoints, for example, female achievements are recognised in reports to the board. Badminton Ireland has taken care to ensure that the sport treats males and females equally, for example, in medals, prize money, talent, etc. Paid maternity leave has been introduced as a policy across the organisation, with top leadership taking on the tasks of those on maternity leave underpinning their support.

Badminton Ireland believes that ensuring the long-term sustainability of the sport requires fully developing and promoting all aspects of female participation. This combination of ongoing monitoring and active mentoring is proactive leadership, that sets the tone from the top and ensures a culture of inclusivity across the organisation.

Case Study 2: Cricket Ireland – The power of mentoring

Cricket Ireland built a mentorship programme to actively recruit women from within the sport. This has been a 'game-changer' in the words of one participant and has actively given the opportunity for women to progress from volunteer at club level, to club board, to provincial board and onto national level. The programme has offered opportunities for women within the sport to be seen, whilst also building a network of like-minded participants who support and encourage one another.

Case Study 3: Orienteering Ireland – Using change to bring balanced leadership

In its transition from fully volunteer led to an organisation with professional staff, Orienteering Ireland is a strong example of a growing organisation that has embedded best practice with regards to gender diversity. The NGB is currently implementing policies around its governance documentation, using the timing of becoming a Type B organisation to support this work. With the reconstruction of the board, the NGB undertook active recruitment to ensure a gender balanced board using job descriptions and the Federation of Irish Sport board recruitment service to support the onboarding of independent directors.

Ultimately Orienteering Ireland had best success in finding an independent candidate from within its own network. The organisations 5-year strategic plan includes specifics around mentoring programmes for women, a 50/50 gender balance in the governing body (both participants and administrators), and intentions around work/life balance. The intended outcome of this work is a cultural shift into a contemporary balanced organisation where all are welcome and enjoy their time involved in the sport.

Case Study 4: Clare Sports Partnership – Building a new culture

Government policy was the catalyst for 18 months of proactive work by Clare Sports Partnership (CSP) to implement changes around gender balance at board level resulting in a 50/50 gender split. This change management work positively impacted the organisation, building a culture of openness, inclusiveness, self-belief and active change, where all members now see they have the opportunity to contribute. Changes have been made to work practices to support the new culture, such as running meetings at lunchtime, and ensuring there is a blended option for attendance. Positive belief around making a difference has been generated by communicating and being transparent with staff and board/committee members about the actions taken to implement changes. This in turn has created a culture of collaboration and inclusivity.

Case Study 5: Kerry Sports Partnership – From ongoing monitoring to rewriting the handbook

Kerry Sports Partnership (KSP) has proactively focused on the ongoing monitoring of gender diversity in the organisation and keeping it on the agenda of board meetings. It has had a keen focus on governance and used the requirements from government around gender balance at board level and the impacts on funding to reshape its board. It has rewritten its board member handbook to reflect the wording from national level and now requires the make-up of the board to be gender balanced.

Kerry Sports Partnership has focused on proactive ways of working that are gender friendly, such as polling participants in advance about preferred time options for meetings, providing the schedule a year in advance, and providing in-person and remote options to attend. KSP also proactively promotes its female leadership, for example giving female leaders opportunities to speak at events and promoting specific opportunities during Women in Sport Week. In so doing it promotes a culture of gender balance and leads by example.

Case Study 6: Wicklow Sports Partnership – Setting the tone from the top

Progression pathways, allyship, psychological safety and ways of working are all areas that Wicklow Sports Partnership have worked on over the past number of years to ensure an inclusive environment at board level. Previous Chairs work to identify and support incoming Chairs. The Chair and Vice-Chair are noted as being important roles in setting the tone from the top and delivering leadership in driving the culture or the organisation. Papers are shared well in advance with enough time for board members to prepare, all are empowered to speak and contribute equally. Work-life balance is important with a blend of attendance options and meeting times made available to accommodate all. The external factors such as the Governance Code, as well as requirements around gender balance at local authority level, have also helped drive through the implementation of gender balance at the board.

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