

# CHRO PROFILE



**Sarah Fair**

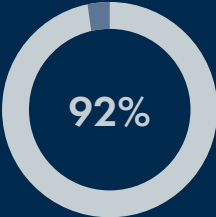
Executive General Manager People  
Australian Football League



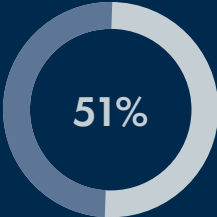
# Key Takeaways for CHROs

- 1. Partnership with the CEO**  
Partnering closely with the CEO and aligning on a shared vision is crucial.
- 2. Values-Based Leadership**  
Be uncompromising on behaviours misaligned with organisational values. Making hard calls in critical moments strengthens the organisation's culture.
- 3. Inclusive Approach to Gender Diversity**  
Adopt an inclusion-led approach from the outset to ensure the environment is safe and respectful and one in which diversity is valued.
- 4. Empowering Men in Gender Diversity**  
Actively engage men in the conversation, exploring different perspectives and shifting the focus to the benefits of gender equity for men and women.
- 5. The Power of Executive Sponsorship**  
Establish an approach to Executive Sponsorship to accelerate career progression for women. High-potential women are often over-mentored and under-sponsored in organisations.

## Achievements



Creation of a highly engaged workforce - 92% of people love working at the AFL.



Gender Equity - 51% women in senior leadership positions, up from just 16% in 2018.



Recorded a 0% average (median) pay gap in 2023 as part of the first public reporting of pay gaps for Australian employers.

In this feature, Janelle Leonard, the CEO of Chief HR Australia, delves into conversations with exceptional CHROs who are reshaping the landscape of human resources. These leaders go beyond the traditional scope of their roles, driving transformative initiatives that impact not just their organisations but the broader business community.

Through these insightful interviews, Janelle highlights the strategies, challenges, and visionary approaches of CHROs who are not only making a tangible difference in their workplaces but are also championing innovation and setting new benchmarks for HR leadership.

This series celebrates those whose influence extends far beyond the HR function, making them key architects of organisational success and catalysts for industry-wide change.

## Contents

- 4** Interview with Sarah Fair
- 5** About the AFL
- 6** Transformation of the AFL
- 7** Women at the AFL
- 10** AFLW
- 11** Founding Board Member of Chief HR



## Interview with Sarah Fair

Executive General Manager People  
reporting directly to the Chief Executive Officer

Responsible for a workforce of 4000 AFL and  
Marvel Stadium permanent and casual team members

This morning, as I met Sarah Fair, she appeared composed but clearly had her mind occupied. “How’s your morning so far?” I asked. She responded that she had just come out of a discussion on an approach to listening and learning from incidents of historical racism within the industry. This was one of many moments throughout our discussion that highlighted this role was far from your typical Chief HR Officer.

Sarah has held the top HR position at the AFL for seven years, and despite being one of the organisation’s most influential

executives, she keeps a low profile. When I asked her about this, she responded with characteristic humility: “It’s not about me.” In an organisation with such a high media profile, Sarah avoids the spotlight. Her focus is on making a meaningful impact, and her track record of results speak for themselves.

In partnership with the CEO and Executive, Sarah has led the workforce and cultural transformation at the AFL, creating a high performing, values-based team that has achieved double digit growth over the past decade.

## About the AFL

The AFL is one of the most well-known brands around the country and what happens off the field captures almost as much attention as on field. What's perhaps less obvious is the scale, complexity and reach of the organisation.

The AFL is an extraordinary force in Australia's sporting, social and entertainment landscape. Operationally, it is responsible for every aspect of the game, from Auskick, grassroots footy to the AFL and AFLW competitions. It has its own digital business and is also the owner and operator of Marvel Stadium, the busiest multi-purpose venue in the world, bringing to Australia, concerts, sports and entertainment offerings year-round.

Sarah also notes the AFL's impact extends far beyond the playing field and is more than just a game. It plays a key role in driving social change.

Whether it is advocating for marriage equality, raising awareness of gender-based violence or tackling racism and homophobia, people look to the AFL.

"We ask ourselves if we have a right to have a view and ensure it's not just a momentary action but can drive meaningful change. We are aware that we have a platform and with that comes an enormous responsibility that we take incredibly seriously."

*"Our vision is for everyone to love and connect with Australia's game. And when issues arise that impact people's ability to play, attend or enjoy our game, we take notice."*



## Transformation of the AFL

“Following Gill McLachlan’s CEO appointment, we embarked on a cultural transformation. The environment was male-dominated, competitive and in need of change.

We shared the same aspiration to make the AFL a truly great place to work.” Conducting an in-depth cultural assessment led to new organisational values and the start of a systemic cultural change journey.

One of the biggest game changers was shifting our performance framework to have a 50% weighting on our values, focusing on how team members showed up and behaved every day. This set the new standard of what success looked like at the AFL. From there we took deliberate and focused action and were uncompromising on our values.”

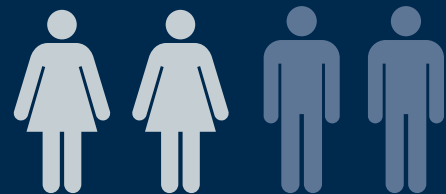
I ask Sarah about that uncompromising piece. In the public domain, there have been reported incidents of people who didn’t meet the AFL values.



***“They are the moments that matter. The moments where everyone in the organisation stops to see if our values really mean anything or if it’s all talk. Leadership is challenging at the best of times, but there are moments that define it. I believe you never regret the decisions that strengthen your culture. A strong culture builds a strong organisation.”***

## Women at the AFL

What is perhaps one of the less known, but most significant changes to be made at the AFL has been the transformation from a male dominated organisation to one that is inclusive and equitable for women.



In 2018 there were just 16% of women in senior leadership roles. Today it's 51%.

Importantly, the daily experience of women at the AFL is a positive one. Today, women are now slightly more engaged than their male colleagues with results well into the 90s in the AFL's most recent engagement survey results.

I ask Sarah about how such a notable shift has been achieved.

"We had a 100 plus year history with deeply engrained masculine behaviours and stereotypes. From the outset, we knew we had to do something different to get cut through.

We looked to other organisations with flashy plans and big targets and noticed a common trend that little progress was being made.

And at that time, there were high levels of 'gender fatigue.' For us, we wanted to ensure that it wasn't all about targets. That it wasn't simply seen a numbers game.

Talking to over 70% men about gender, we knew we needed a different approach. An approach that would ultimately shift our culture and lead to better outcomes for both men and women.

We didn't set targets, and we didn't start by launching a plan. We went all in on the long game and aimed for real, lasting change through an inclusion-led approach."

- **We engaged with every person in the organisation** to gain buy in to 'the why' and foster collective ownership – it was important that this was not seen as HR's responsibility
- **We focused on culture**, strategically addressing deeply ingrained cultural norms to create a truly inclusive environment where differences are valued
- **We actively engaged men in the conversation**, shifting the focus from a narrow view of wins/losses to having open and honest conversations about fears, hopes and misconceptions and identifying the mutual benefits of gender equality
- **We tackled structural inequities**, making meaningful changes to level the playing field including flexible working and role design
- **We overhauled our policies** and practices

We also invested heavily in women talent programs and built a strong pipeline to senior roles.

Executive Sponsorship has been a key part of our approach. One of our flagship talent programs, GenW, is built around this idea - where senior executives actively advocate for high-potential women, ensuring they gain greater visibility and access to career opportunities. Sponsorship goes beyond mentorship; it's about using influence and platforms to open doors and accelerate progression for the next generation of leaders.



***We also focused heavily on biases in recruitment, performance and remuneration. Earlier this year the AFL recorded a 0% median pay gap.***

Sarah emphasises the point that while a lot of progress has been made, there is still more work to be done.

“We have learnt a lot along the way and haven't always got it right.

We want to ensure the AFL organisation, and the AFL industry more broadly is one for

everyone. We will continue to listen, to learn and work on strengthening our culture so that people from all backgrounds can actively pursue fulfilling careers to the highest levels at the AFL.”

I ask Sarah if she could we see a female CEO of the AFL in the future.

“Without a doubt. The AFL is full of incredibly talented women with the ambition, leadership and expertise required at the CEO level. They come from diverse industries, bringing a wealth of experience and fresh perspectives that are crucial for the future of the game. It's a common misconception that you need to have a football background to excel in leadership within the AFL.”



Sarah and Janelle also discussed AFL Women's with the 2024 AFLW Grand Final having been played just over a week ago. North Melbourne, the first club in history to have a women President (Sonja Hood) and CEO (Jen Watt) won their first AFLW Premiership.

## AFLW

"It's been an amazing journey so far. Back in 2015, Gill announced we were fast tracking the launch of a women's competition and within 18 months AFLW was established.

During those 18 months we worked closely with the inaugural 8 clubs granted an AFLW license to ensure an inclusive environment for women. We worked together to ensure the clubs were set up in a safe, respectful, and welcoming way for women entering a traditional male-dominated environment.

"The competition has grown at an incredible pace since its inception in 2017 and will celebrate its 10th season next year. All 18 clubs now have an AFLW team and we are the largest employer of female athletes in the country with 540 players. The number of girls participating in AFL is growing at a record rate. And the game is now a sporting career young girls can pursue with player payments increasing

significantly. It is has been an extraordinary journey so far and it will only get better and better."

***"Our ambition is for AFLW to be the most loved, played and watched elite women's sport in Australia."***





## Founding Board Member of Chief HR

We turn our attention to Chief HR Australia, and I ask Sarah why she became involved with Chief HR as a founding board member and what she is hoping our organisation can achieve.

"I'm really passionate about this profession. In this next era of Artificial Intelligence, the biggest competitive advantage organisations will have is human connection, with people-centric leaders at the core. The role of the CHRO becomes more, not less important. It's crucial that CHROs are seen and heard as strategic partners. COVID showed that people problems are in fact strategic problems.

We need to work on shifting the perception of the CHRO role at Board level. It should be seen as a clear and legitimate pathway to the CEO position. After all, CEOs dedicate a significant portion of their time to managing people and culture - areas where CHROs excel.

It's time to challenge the outdated assumption that CHROs lack the capability, commercial insight, or ambition to lead at the highest level. By recognising the full potential of CHROs, we open the door to a new generation of leaders who are uniquely equipped to drive both people and business outcomes."

# ChiefHR

AUSTRALIA

Chief HR Australia is the premier organisation for Chief Human Resources Officers in Australia, established in 2024 to serve as the collective voice of HR leaders. Our mission is to provide a platform for advocacy, collaboration and elevation of the CHRO, empowering CHROs to lead transformational change in their organisations and across the broader Australian workforce.

For media inquiries, please contact Janelle Leonard - CEO Chief HR Australia

[info@chiefhr.com.au](mailto:info@chiefhr.com.au)



Janelle is the Founder and CEO of Chief HR Australia, an organisation dedicated to being the collective voice for Chief HR leaders nationwide. Drawing on her extensive experience as a former CHRO, Janelle brings profound insights into the opportunities and challenges inherent in the CHRO role.

Renowned as a strategic operator, Janelle has a proven track record of delivering value in complex and high-pressure environments. She specialises in driving large-scale transformation and navigating change across diverse organisational cultures and ownership structures.

**Chief HR Australia**

ABN 28 675 096 929

email: [info@chiefhr.com.au](mailto:info@chiefhr.com.au)

[www.chiefhr.com.au](http://www.chiefhr.com.au)