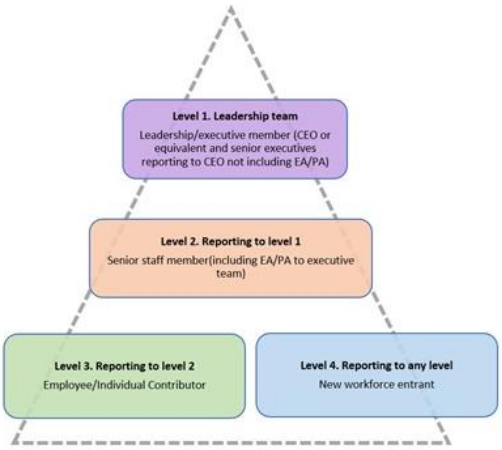
PRACTICE POINTS - **2026 AWEI EMPLOYEE SURVEY**

- 23.8% of respondents are in senior leadership roles
- The higher up within the hierarchy of roles, the stronger the representation of cisgender men.
- Trans and gender diverse people are not proportionately represented in the top 2 levels of seniority
- Hearing positively speak about LGBTQ+ inclusion falls away from level 1 leadership into middle management
- Trans and gender diverse respondents are, on average, 14.2% less likely to have heard their executive leaders speak positively than respondents of diverse sexuality
- Positive messaging has an impact on overall belief of inclusive practices. Particularly within the non-LGBTQ+ cohort.
- Respondents who hear their executive leaders speak positively are less likely to have witnessed bullying and harassment and more likely to feel their organisation would address them.

EDITION 9: Leadership Impacts

Insights from the 2026 AWEI Employee Survey

The leadership team, often known as the C-suite of an organisation, is estimated to be approx. 5-8 roles in small (under 500 employee) organisations, 8-12 for organisations up to 1000 employees, 10-18 for organisations up to 10,000 employees and 10-20 for organisations over 10,000 employees.[i]



Within the 2026 AWEI Employee Survey, 1,134 respondents sit within the leadership team of their organisation, with a further 8,951 senior staff members responding. This equates to 3.2% and 25.4% of all Australian respondents, respectively.

This year, 66 of the 148 participating organisations had fewer than 5 responses from their level 1 roles complete the survey, including;

- 10 organisations that received no respondents from this group
- 5 organisations where all level 1 respondents who participated are LGBTQ+ &
- 7 organisations where over 50% of level 1 respondents are LGBTQ+

It is difficult to accurately estimate LGBTQ+ representation within leadership teams, though it is significantly lower than the average. While 27.4% of respondents are LGBTQ+, only 19.0% of level 1 respondents and 23.0% of level 2 respondents are LGBTQ+.

Just as organisations have workplace gender equity targets, understanding the disparity in leadership team diversity among other minority groups can help ensure representation across all employees.

Often LGBTQ+ people and people from other minorities need to be able to see, hear or experience inclusion before they feel included. Leading from the top considerably impacts inclusion at all levels.

While other studies show that women are underrepresented in management roles, and that the current target of 40:40:20 (men: women; other identities) is promoted, we have also seen year on year that women are overrepresented in responding to the AWEI Employee survey.

This year, 58.1% of respondents to the survey were women, 38.1% men, and 2.8% identified as non-binary or another term; this trend is seen across all seniority respondent levels.

Compared to respondents in other cohorts, respondents in level 1 are ranked 1st for representing:

- More men,
- More cisgender employees
- More respondents over the age of 45, &
- More likely to have 4 of the 8 other diversity areas they feel impact their time at work.

While it may not be possible to ensure representation in the executive team at similar proportions as other areas in the organisation, striving for a genuine diversity within the executive team can improve culture across the organisation. The leadership team can also increase the visibility of inclusion by focusing on activities which highlight under-represented populations.

	Level 1	**Level 2**	**Level 3/4**
Gender identity:			
Women	53.8%	**58.6%**	58.1
Men	**43.9%**	39.2%	37.5%
Non-binary:	1.1%	1.4%	**3.4%**
***Gender Experience**:*			
Cisgender:	**97.4%**	**97.4%**	94.4%
Trans and gender diverse:	1.3%	1.7%	4.5%
***Sexuality**:*			
Heterosexual	**79.0%**	75.2%	68.4%
Diverse sexuality	18.5%	22.8%	**29.1%**
Age:			
under 34:	8.1%	13.1%	**31.7%**
35-44:	23.2%,	**31.9%**	28.2%
45-54	**43.1%**	35.8%	23.6%
55-64:	**21.8%**	16.1%	13.0%
Other areas which may impact their career:			
Aboriginal and/or Torres strait islander:	2.7%	2.3%	**2.8%**
Culturally, linguistically, or ethnically diverse:	20.8%	22.8%	**26.0%**
Living with a disability /long-term health condition:	14.8%	18.3%	**22.9%**
Neurodivergent:	11.7%	17.5%	**23.5%**
Faith or religious belief:	**25.2%**	24.1%	23.9%
Considered mature age:	**34.3%**	30.8%	27.5%
Have caring responsibilities for people under 18:	**45.6%**	43.8%	32.5%
Have caring responsibilities for people over 18:	**25.3%**	22.2%	17.1%

*NOTE: In the above table, the highest percentage of each group is **bold;** percentages for "Prefer not to respond % are omitted.*

Over the past years, we have discussed the significant impact that can be felt across all levels of the organisation when leaders visibly support inclusion initiatives. This report provides an understanding of overall culture differences when respondents agreed to the statement: "I have heard our executive leaders speak positively about LGBTQ+ inclusion", compared to those who responded neutrally or disagreed with the statement.

Who is most likely to have heard positive inclusion messages

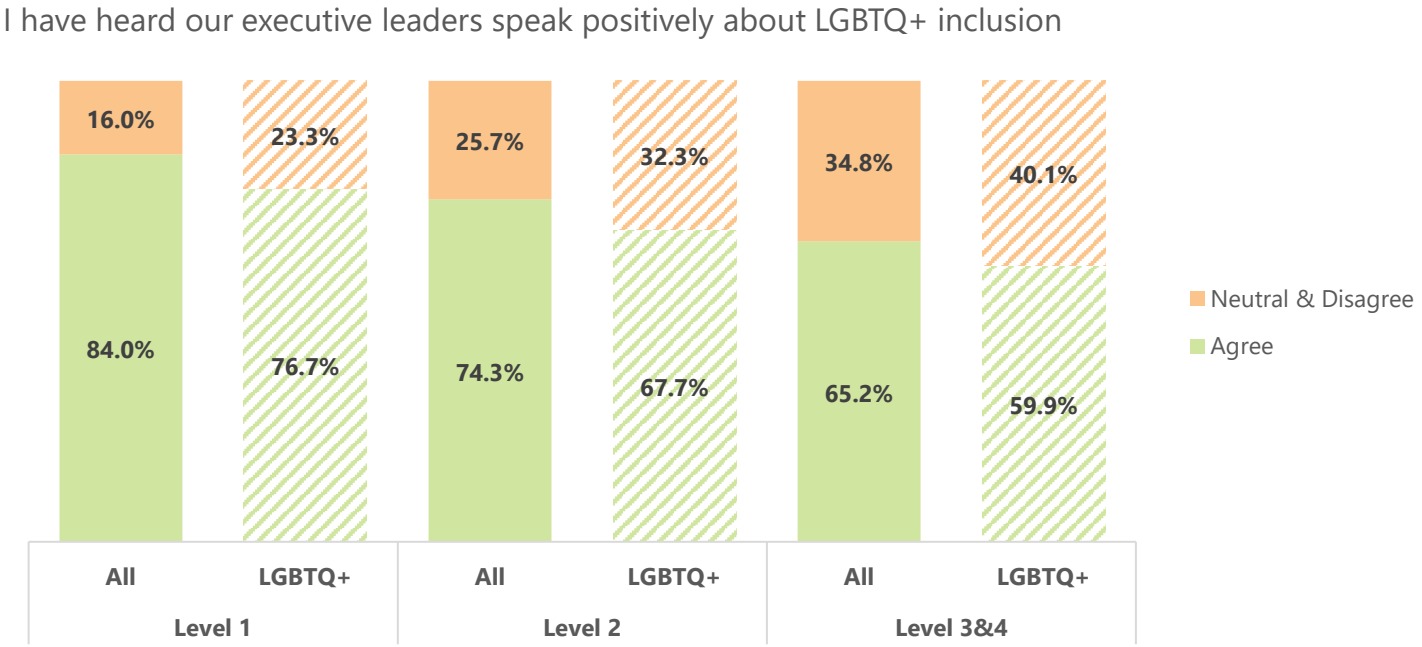
Level 1 respondents were the most likely to agree to this statement;

- 13.0% higher than those in level 2 roles, &
- 28.9% higher than those in level 3/4 roles.

When we consider only LGBTQ+ respondents, agreement steadily reduces to;

- Level 1: 76.7%
- Level 2: 67.7%, &
- Level 3/4: 59.9%.

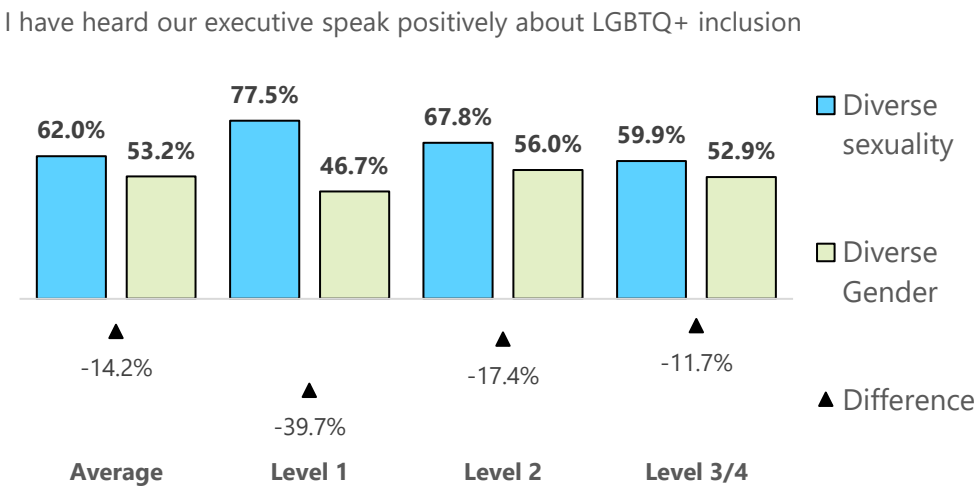
Identifying that these discrepancies exist even within the executive team provides the organisation with an opportunity to seek to understand why this is occurring.



Trans and gender diverse vs. Diverse sexuality respondents

Trans and gender diverse respondents are, on average, 14.2% less likely to have heard their executive leaders speak positively than respondents of diverse sexuality.

This disparity is most significant, 39.7% less likely, within level 1 roles, but it is important to note that only 15 level one respondents have a trans experience.

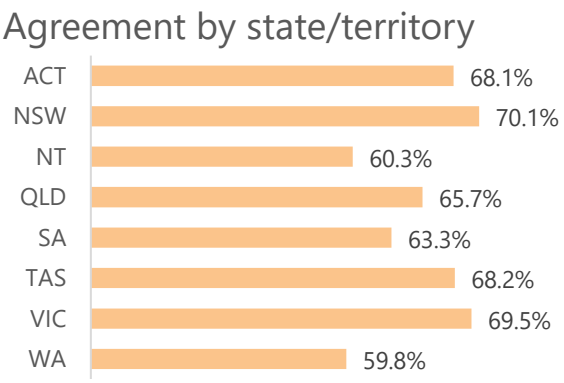


The remainder of this practice point provides data from only non-level 1 respondents.

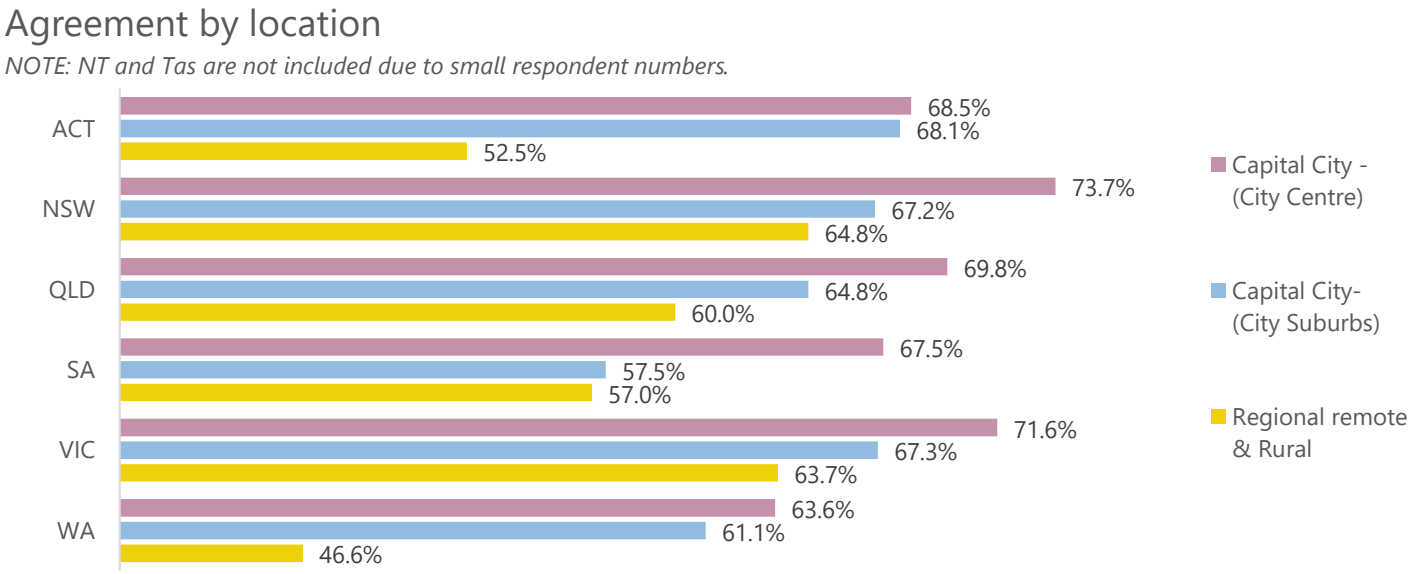
State and location

Across states and territories, there is a 17.3% difference, with NSW having the highest agreement at 70.1% of respondents, compared to 60.3% of Northern Territory respondents.

More importantly, the visibility of this positive engagement is not equitable across location areas.



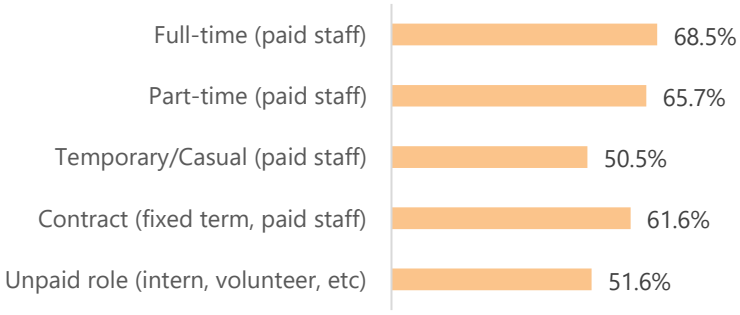
Respondents in Capital city centre locations are significantly more likely to have heard their executive leaders speak positively than those working in capital city suburban offices or outside capital cities.



Within other demographic populations

- People managers (have direct reports) are 12.4% more likely to have heard their leaders speak positively than those who are not people managers (72.4% vs. 64.5%).
- Full-time respondents are 35.7% more likely to agree than those in temporary and casual roles
- Those working in office environments even one day a week are 15.1% more likely than those who never work in an office

You may not need to do more....
But promoting support of inclusion differently could ensure all your employees can hear and see your message.



Influence on organisation culture

Respondents who have heard their executive leaders speak positively about LGBTQ+ inclusion are more likely by;

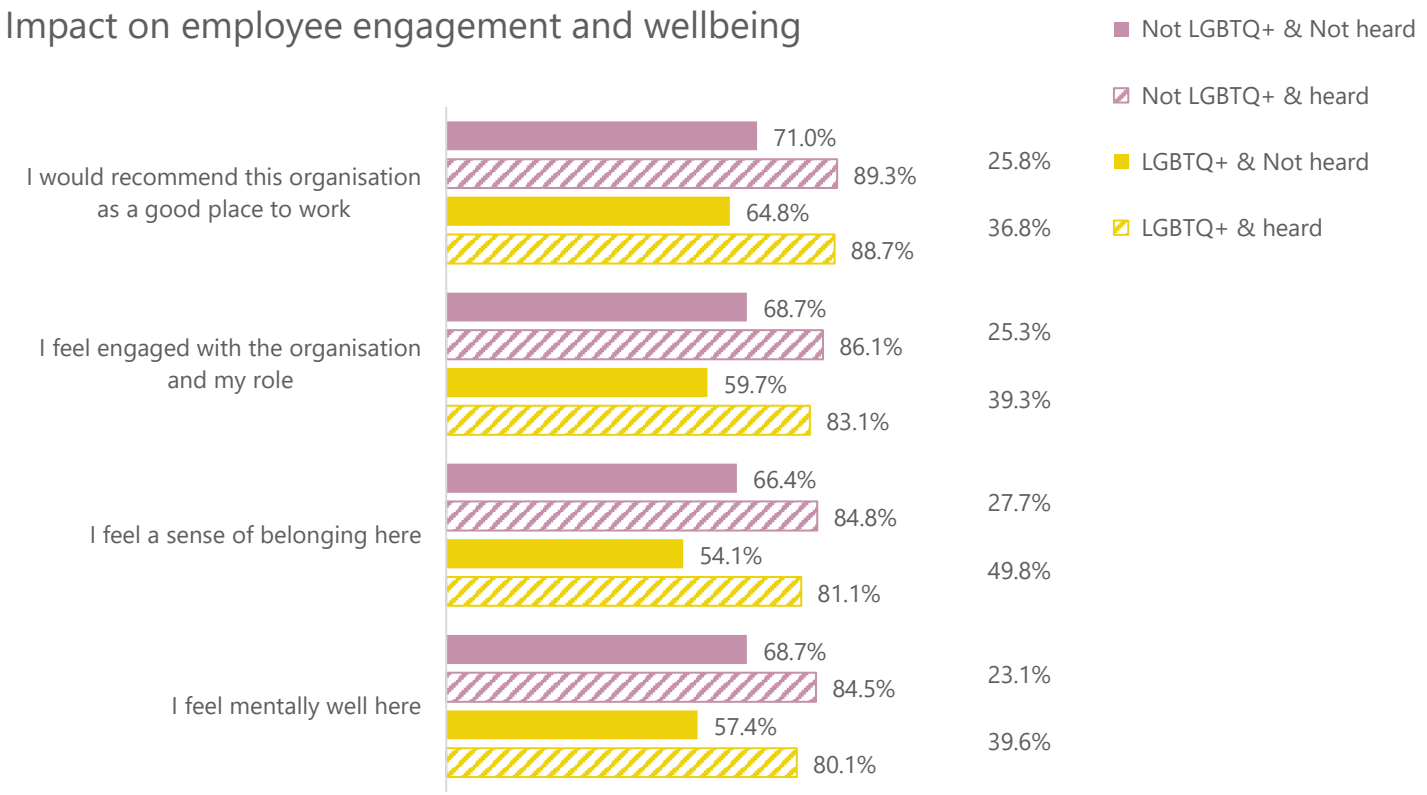
- 18.6% to agree that work in LGBTQ+ inclusion has a positive influence on organisational culture (heard: 84.5% vs. not heard: 71.2%)
- 19.8% to understand why their organisation puts effort into LGBTQ+ inclusion. (heard: 94.7% vs. not heard: 79.1%)

Overall, on a more personal note, those who have heard are more likely by;

- 30.7% to be engaged with their organisation and their role (heard: 85.2% vs. not heard: 65.2%)
- 30.3% to recommend their organisation as a good place to work (heard: 89.0% vs. not heard: 68.3%)
- 60.0% more likely to feel the culture in the organisation will enable them to reach their full potential (heard: 67.6% vs. not heard: 42.3%)
- 25.3% to be satisfied with their job (heard: 86.7% vs. not heard: 69.2%)
- 29.6% to feel mentally well (heard: 83.3% vs. not heard: 64.3%)
- 35.5% to feel a sense of belonging (heard: 83.7% vs. not heard: 61.7%)

These differences increase when considering responses from the LGBTQ+ cohort; respondents who have heard positive messages from their executive leaders respond with similar agreement to non-LGBTQ+ respondents.

However, unsurprisingly, the gap in agreement between LGBTQ+ respondents who have or have not heard positive messages is significantly higher than between non-LGBTQ+ respondents, showing a clear benefit to providing these positive messages.



We can also consider the impact on respondents' likelihood to leave their organisation for a more LGBTQ+ inclusive organisation. Respondents who have heard the positive messages are 47.8% less likely to consider leaving their organisation.

Impact on overall inclusion

Positive messaging has an impact on overall belief of inclusive practices. Particularly within the non-LGBTQ+ cohort. Non-LGBTQ+ respondents who have heard their executive leaders speak are more likely by;

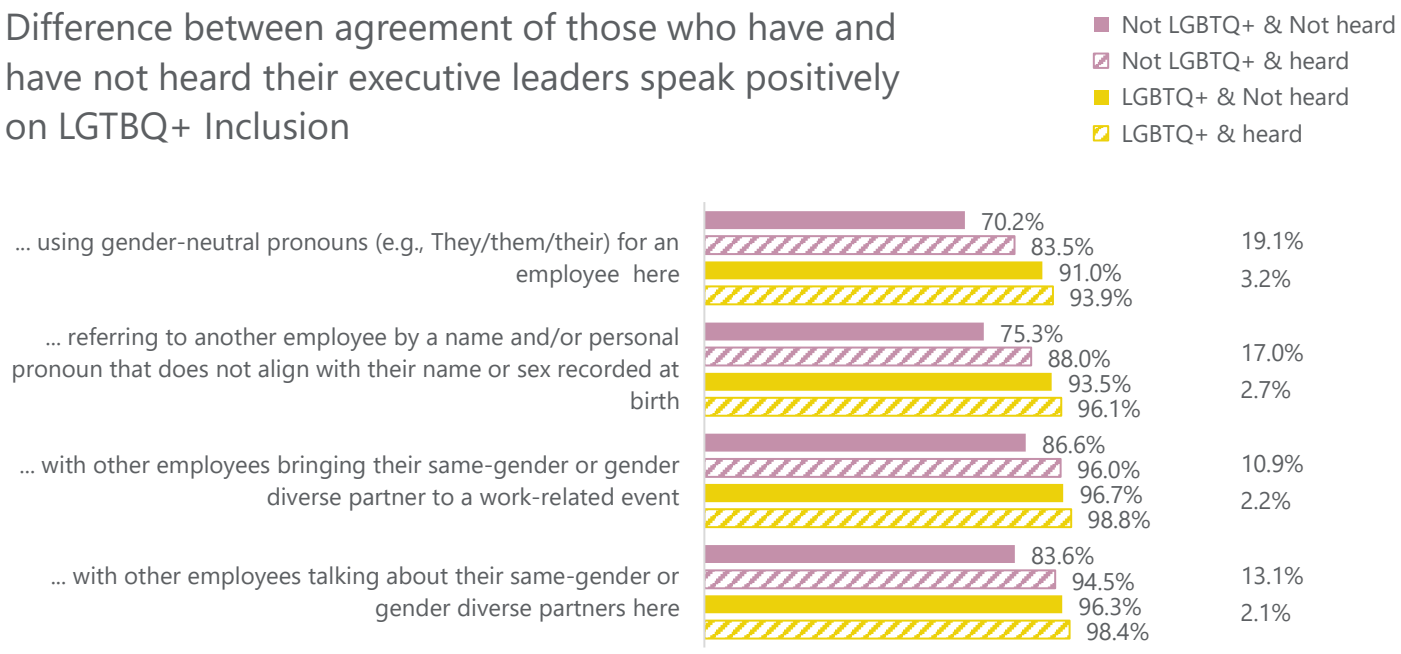
- 25.8% to agree there are more than two genders (heard: 58.1% vs. not heard: 46.2%)
- 25.3% to understand the unique challenges that LGBTQ+ employees face in the workplace (heard: 79.1% vs. not heard: 63.2%)
- 14.2% and 14.8% to agree it is important employees are able to choose to be out about their diverse sexuality (heard: 94.3% vs. not heard: 82.5%), or
- open about being trans and gender diverse (heard: 94.2% vs. not heard: 82.1%) without negative repercussions

Across both LGBTQ+ and non-LGBTQ+ respondents, the belief that LGBTQ+ employees would be welcomed, supported and included is also significantly increased with those who have heard from their executive leaders;

- 17.0% more likely to agree a person of *diverse sexuality* would be welcome in my team and treated no differently than anyone else (heard: 97.3% vs. not heard: 83.2%)
- 21.8% more likely to agree a person of *diverse gender* would be welcome in my team and treated no differently than anyone else (heard: 94.5% vs. not heard: 77.6%)
- 26.7% more likely to believe that if a member of their team were to begin affirming their gender, they would be fully supported by their team (heard: 92.7% vs. not heard: 73.1%).

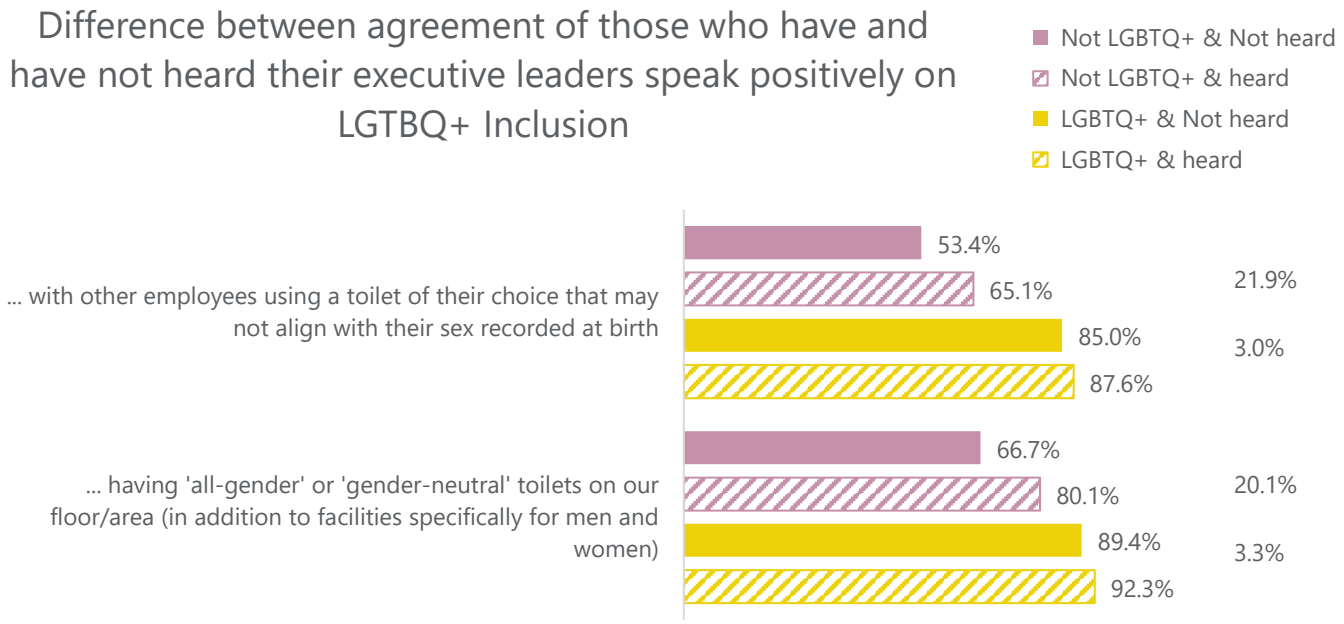
LGBTQ+ respondents are between 2.1% and 3.0% more likely to agree to statements around working with others. For non-LGBTQ+ respondents, those who have heard their executive leaders speak positively are more significantly more comfortable when it comes to LGBTQ+ inclusive actions, including being more likely by;

- 13.1% to be comfortable with colleagues speaking about their same-gender or gender diverse partner (heard: 94.5% vs. not heard: 83.6%)
- 10.9% to be comfortable with colleagues being their same-gender or gender diverse partner to work events (heard: 96.0% vs. not heard: 86.6%)
- 17.0% to be comfortable referring to another employee by a name and/or personal pronoun that does not align with their name or sex recorded at birth (heard: 88.0% vs. not heard: 75.3%)
- 19.1% to be comfortable using gender-neutral pronouns for a colleague (heard: 83.5% vs. not heard: 70.2%)



Additionally, respondents who have heard their executive leaders speak positively are more likely to be comfortable with gender-neutral facilities being available and employees using their toilet of choice.

- 20.1% to be comfortable having 'all-gender' or 'gender-neutral' toilets on our floor/area (heard: 80.1% vs. not heard: 66.7%) &
- 21.9% to be comfortable with other employees using a toilet of their choice (heard: 65.1% vs. not heard: 53.4%)



Impact on negative behaviours targeting LGBTQ+ employees.

Respondents who have heard their executive leaders speak positively are less likely to have witnessed bullying and harassment behaviours and more likely to feel their organisation would address them if they occurred.

The impacts are slightly higher for LGBTQ+ respondents but are significant across all respondents. In organisations where executive leaders speak positively about LGBTQ+ inclusion, respondents agree that;

- Workplace incivility will be acted upon quickly
    - 92.7% more likely when targeting diverse sexuality &
    - 99.4% more likely when targeting trans and gender diverse employees
- Managers/leaders are willing to address workplace incivility
    - 74.3% more likely when targeting employees of diverse sexuality &
    - 77.3% more likely when targeting trans and gender diverse employees

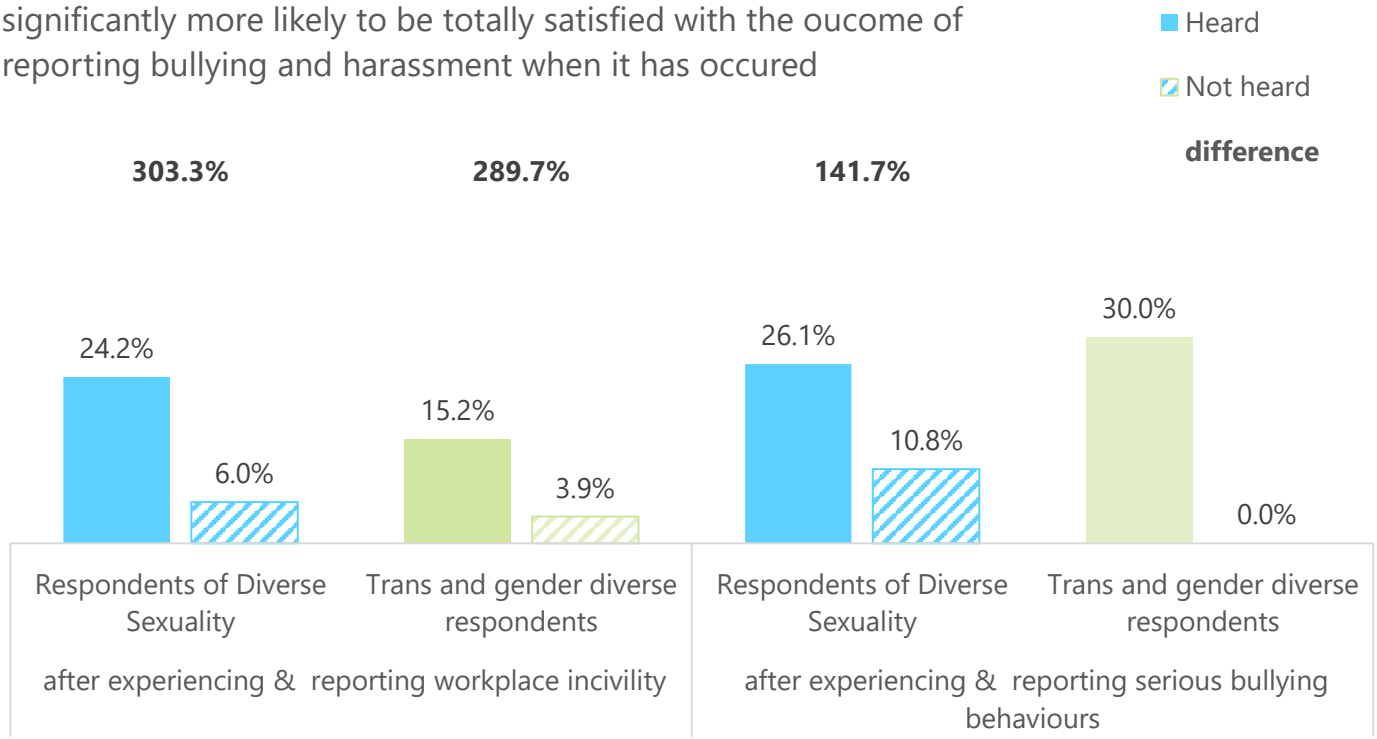
When it comes to having witnessed negative behaviours, responses are encouraging. Respondents witnessing;

- Workplace incivility that targets
    - employees of diverse sexuality: 47.7% less likely
    - trans and gender diverse employees: 45.7% less likely
- Serious bullying behaviours that target-
    - employees of diverse sexuality: 54.7% less likely
    - trans and gender diverse employees: 53.5% less likely

For LGBTQ+ respondents, these results continue to provide visible impact, with respondents being less likely to have experienced negative behaviours by;

- Respondents of diverse sexuality
    - 61.0% for workplace incivility (heard: 6.0% vs. not heard: 15.4%)
    - 70.2% for serious behaviours (heard: 1.3% vs. not heard: 4.5%)
- Trans and gender diverse respondents
    - 61.0% for workplace incivility (heard: 6.0% vs. not heard: 15.4%)
    - 70.2% for serious behaviours (heard: 1.3% vs. not heard: 4.5%)

Respondents who have heard their executive leaders speak positively are significantly more likely to be totally satisfied with the oucome of reporting bullying and harassment when it has occured



ACTIONS:

1. Dissect the systemic and cultural framework in which leadership opportunities emerge and are filled
2. Introduce tailored leadership development pathways for aspiring LGBTQ+ leaders.
3. Set up formal sponsorship and mentoring/coaching programs and match aspiring LGBTQ+ leaders with organisational sponsors
4. Ask current LGBTQ+ out leaders to raise their awareness on being role models and allies.
5. Review the structural and systemic impediments for underrepresented groups like trans and gender diverse aspiring leaders

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Pride in Diversity (2026). Australian Workplace Equality Index (AWEI) Employee Survey. ACON's Pride Inclusion Programs

[i] Chief Executive Women. (2025). *CEW Senior Executive Census 2025: The pipeline problem*. https://cew.org.au/hubfs/01_Website%20Content/Downloadable%20Resources/25_01%20CEW%20CENSUS%202025.pdf