

GENDER

How Men Can Become Better Allies to Women

by W. Brad Johnson and David G. Smith

OCTOBER 12, 2018



HIROKAZU JIKE/GETTY IMAGES

Women's conferences and employee resource groups (ERGs) are increasingly inviting men to attend. By creating events aimed at men, they hope to include men in discussions around gender equity in the workplace, and make organizational diversity efforts more successful.

The evidence shows that when men are deliberately engaged in gender inclusion programs, 96% of organizations see progress – compared to only 30% of organizations where men are not engaged. But today, too many organizations still miss the mark on gender equity efforts by focusing gender initiatives solely on changing women – from the way they network to the way they lead. Individualistic approaches to solving gender inequities overlook systemic structural causes and reinforce the perception that these are women’s issues – effectively telling men they don’t need to be involved. Without the avid support of men, often the most powerful stakeholders in most large corporations, significant progress toward ending gender disparities is unlikely. What’s at stake? A study by McKinsey projects that in a “full potential” scenario in which women participate in the economy identically to men, \$28 trillion dollars (26%) would be added to the annual global GDP when compared to the current business-as-usual scenario.

But including men in diversity efforts is not as simple as inviting them to a gender-equity event. These efforts often reveal reluctance, if not palpable anxiety among targeted men. Sexism is a system, and while it’s a system that privileges men, it also polices male behavior. Understanding that is important to changing the system.

Challenges Facing Male Allies

We define male allies as members of an advantaged group committed to building relationships with women, expressing as little sexism in their own behavior as possible, understanding the social privilege conferred by their gender, and demonstrating active efforts to address gender inequities at work and in society. Debra Meyerson and Megan Tompkins refer to such men as tempered radicals – they are catalysts for change, challenging organizational structures that disadvantage women while remaining committed to the success of the organization.

While some research has shown that white men face no penalty for promoting

diversity, other studies suggest that there can be a cost to acting as an ally.

First, there's the dreaded *wimp penalty*. New research reveals that men perceived as less self-promoting and more collaborative and power-sharing are evaluated by both men *and* women as less competent (and, not incidentally, less masculine). Egalitarian men can feel the backlash effects of stigma-by-association – perceived as being similar to women by advocating for them. This is more likely in organizations where people endorse a zero-sum perspective on gender equality. Backlash against male allies is a real possibility.

Self-professed male allies can also face criticism from the women they try to ally with. As two men who write and speak about cross-gender allyship and mentorship, we've noticed occasional backlash from women when dudes show up at women's events. At one recent conference for women in technology, a Bingo card was circulated by women in the audience just before a panel composed of men on the topic of male allyship. The – seemingly cynical – objective? To identify as many worn-out clichés and defensive phrases men often utter in these contexts as possible. Some eye-rolling favorites included: “I'm a feminist; We're all in this together; My mother taught me to respect women; and, I saw the light after the birth of my daughter!”

Understandably, many women are initially skeptical about efforts to include men in women's conferences and ERGs. First, these gatherings have historically offered women a sense of community and camaraderie, a safe space for sharing experiences and formulating strategies for achieving equality in the workplace. This relational community is inestimably important and men need to respect it. Second, sub-tracks and breakout sessions for men at women's events are often given labels such as *Manbassador* or *Male Champion*, terrific for drawing men in, but in truth, rather grandiose to the ears of women who may sigh and ask, “Really dude? We have to call you a champion just to get you to be fair, respectful, and inclusive?”

This Pedestal Effect in which men are given special treatment and shout outs for even small acts of gender equality is understandably grating for women who for years have done the emotional labor and carried the load for equality with nary a man in sight. And there is always the risk that over-focusing on men in women's events may ultimately strengthen rather than dismantle the gender hierarchy status quo.

Third, there is the problem of the Fake Male Feminist. You know this guy. He slings on feminism like a superhero cape when his boss is watching, to impress – or worse, seduce – women, or to avoid being labeled as sexist despite his pattern of sexist behavior. Finally, there is the sincere but utterly naïve, ill-informed, or low-EQ man who's notion of allyship amounts to rescuing, mansplaining, or even attempting to become the spokesman for women in the organization. As Martin Luther King once reflected, *shallow understanding from people of good will is more frustrating than absolute misunderstanding from people of ill will*. When aspiring male allies fail to understand the critical importance of partnering and collaborating with humility, there is a real risk that they may ultimately undermine women's initiatives by attempting to dominate them.

The Allies Male Allies Need

Women who want to dismantle sexist systems will be well-served by appreciating the wide variation among male allies and the factors most likely to help them get better at collaborating with women to shrink gender disparities. Diversity consultant Jennifer Brown recognizes that not all male allies are equally evolved. She frames allyship on a continuum, ranging from *apathetic* (clueless and disinterested regarding gender issues) to *aware* (has some grasp of the issues but not at all active or engaged in addressing them) to *active* (well-informed and willing to engage in gender equity efforts, but only when asked) to *advocate* (routinely and proactively champions gender inclusion). Although we might not waste our time recruiting apathetic men to gender-inclusion events, we're delighted to get in a room with the other three varieties, taking a shot at spurring their internal motivation and sharpening their ally

skillset. We just want them in the fight! The evidence is in. The more positive interaction men have with women in professional settings, the less prejudice and exclusion they tend to demonstrate.

Organizers of women's initiatives who wish to engage male allies should also consider recent research on psychological standing (a perception of legitimacy as an ally to women). Evidence reveals that gender-parity efforts are most effective when men believe they have a dignified and important role to play, that transformation in the workplace is something they can share in. The motivation for this role is often tied to personal examples and a sense of fairness and justice. Moreover, when allies feel accepted by the disadvantaged group they endeavor to support, their internal motivation to participate is bolstered. If men feel like unicorns, met by raised eyebrows when they muster the wherewithal to attend a manbassador track in a women's conference, gender alliance efforts falter.

How Men Can Be Better Allies

Here are some with tangible recommendations for men who are invited to participate in women's conferences or other initiatives as allies for gender equality in the workplace. These are best practices for men who want to be better collaborators with women.

- *First, just listen!* Consultant [Chuck Shelton](#) reminds men that listening to women's voices in a way that inspires trust and respect is a fundamental relationship promise you must make, and then keep, with women who invite you to participate around equity. Generous, world-class listening requires focus, sincerity, empathy, refusal to interrupt, and genuine valuing of both her experience and her willingness to share it with you.
- *Respect the space.* Women's conferences and ERGs are often one outgrowth of experiences of exclusion, marginalization, and discrimination. Many of these experiences are painful. Large events and local resource groups have afforded

women a powerful platform for sharing experiences, providing support, and strategizing equity initiatives. Tread respectfully into these spaces and before you utter a word, revisit the recommendation above.

- *Remember, it's not about you.* Ask women how you can amplify, not replace or usurp existing gender parity efforts. A large dose of gender humility will help here. Decades of [research](#) on prosocial (helpful) behavior reveals a stark gender difference in how it is expressed. While women often express helpfulness communally and relationally, men show helpful intentions through action-oriented behaviors. Sometimes, we need to rein this in. Refrain from taking center stage, speaking for women, or mansplaining how women should approach gender equity efforts.
- *Get comfortable being uncomfortable.* Developing psychological standing requires a commitment to learning and advocating for gender equity. Learning about the professional challenges of women may produce feelings of self-shame or self-blame that cause anxiety. The solution is more interaction and learning, not less.
- *Engage in supportive partnerships with women.* The best cross-gender ally relationships are reciprocal, and mutually growth-enhancing. Share your social capital (influence, information, knowledge, and organizational resources) with women's groups but ask them – don't assume – how you can best support their efforts.
- *Remember the two parts to allyship.* Keep in mind that committing to express as little sexism as possible in your interactions with women is the easy part of allyship. The hard part requires you to take informed action. Use your experience in women's events and initiatives to learn how you can best become a public ally for social justice around gender. When the time comes, this may require you to upset the status quo.

W. Brad Johnson, PhD, is a professor of psychology in the Department of Leadership, Ethics, and Law at the United States Naval Academy, and a Faculty Associate at Johns Hopkins University. He is the co-author of *Athena Rising: How and Why Men Should Mentor Women* as well as other books about mentoring.

David G. Smith, PhD, is a professor of sociology in the Department of National Security Affairs at the United States Naval War College. He is the co-author of *Athena Rising: How and Why Men Should Mentor Women*. His research focuses on gender, work, and family issues including dual career families, military families, women in the military, and retention of women.

This article is about GENDER

 FOLLOW THIS TOPIC

Comments

Leave a Comment

POST

6 COMMENTS

MGTOW IS FREEDOM 2 days ago

Women can not be trusted, this article is a load of bullsh*t. Typical academics no idea how the real world works. No idea how toxic women are to men.

REPLY

0  0 

 [JOIN THE CONVERSATION](#)

POSTING GUIDELINES

We hope the conversations that take place on HBR.org will be energetic, constructive, and thought-provoking. To comment, readers must sign in or register. And to ensure the quality of the discussion, our moderating team will review all comments and may edit them for clarity, length, and relevance. Comments that are overly promotional, mean-spirited, or off-topic may be deleted per the moderators' judgment. All postings become the property of Harvard Business Publishing.