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Diversity and Inclusion

3 Ways Men Can Advance Gender Equity at Work

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We know gender equity in the workplace leads to more profitable companies and higher stock prices. We know gender equity initiatives in general are three times more successful when men are involved. We also know men still occupy most leadership positions and therefore hold the power to make organizational culture change.

While workplace culture continues to lag behind in gender equity, the majority of men report that they overwhelmingly care about the

issue; in one survey, 88% of men reported wanting to be involved in advancing women. So why aren't more of them involved, be it in company-sponsored gender diversity initiatives or in advancing gender equity in general?

There are three main barriers that seem to be holding them back. According to research from Catalyst, for men to join in the effort toward gender equity, male organizational leaders need to acknowledge fear, address ignorance, and overcome apathy — and, just as importantly, they need to understand that it's not about them. It's about creating a workplace that works for everyone. Here's how male leaders can get themselves — and their peers — meaningfully involved in advancing gender equity at work.

Acknowledging Fear

Understand the source of the fear

While it may be hard to believe, men are afraid — afraid of saying the wrong thing, being labeled, and having good intentions taken the wrong way. We recognize that, in relative terms, these fears are not *that* consequential. They are not, for example, nearly as detrimental as the fears that many women, especially women of color, have had to navigate, including fears of physical and psychological harm. In fact, research has shown that women who experience sexual harassment and assault lose significant compensation in the form of wages, pensions, job loss, and forced career change, in addition to suffering from mental health issues such as depression and anxiety.

Comparatively, there is no evidence of men being fired or physically threatened for speaking up against discrimination. Instead, there is evidence that masculine anxiety is hurting both men and women — and it can be especially detrimental to women of color, as it

creates additional barriers to career advancement, like less feedback, mentoring, and sponsorship.

Therefore, if the goal is a more equitable work environment, masculine fears cannot be dismissed on relative terms. Instead, we must work toward a massive cultural shift.

Create space for men without taking it away from women

A culture of male engagement requires male leaders to create space for discussions around gender equity — without taking space away from women. We've found this to be most effective when difficult discussions are intentional, productive, and space-making.

Affinity groups and mentoring programs can be especially useful as alternative spaces for men to get involved. For example, at the Rutgers Center for Women in Business, we developed a group mentoring program called G.A.M.E. (Generating Allyship in Male Executives) in which we gather cohorts of executive men on a monthly basis. These guided group conversations create a time and place for men to focus on advancing women and creating gender equity. We've found that it's helpful to begin each session with mutual understanding that a) good intentions are expected and b) there is "permission to get some things wrong here." Granting permission to fumble through tough conversations provides psychological safety and sets the tone for collaboration rather than condemnation. It communicates to others that despite the fear you might be feeling, you want to learn. And that helps to quell the defenses of others, engage their empathetic listening, and ultimately lead to more lasting change.

Because men remain the gatekeepers of structural institutions of power, it's difficult to hold in tension the idea that they need space to process change when from most vantage points, it could be argued that men already have plenty of space. Discussing creating more space for men

can seem counteractive to a core principle of women's advancement, which advocates for women to take up space. Yet not acknowledging the need for room to process change can stunt progress.

You may have noticed we're not using the phrase "safe space" when talking about psychological safety. One reason is that historically, safe spaces have referred to physical safety. The term originated in the mid-'60s with anti-sodomy laws still in effect, and it was used by and for the gay community. Safe spaces referred to gay bars where those in the queer community could be out with lower risk of being physically harmed.

However, as scholar and activist Moira Kenney points out in her book *Mapping Gay L.A.*, safe spaces always involved risk of some kind, and they were more about resisting repression than they were about a guarantee of safety. Similarly, addressing the issue of masculine fear will involve risk, as it's challenging a longstanding gender norm. Be careful not to appropriate the term but instead learn from it. Use the history of safe spaces to educate your male coworkers and start a conversation about how speaking up, at risk of being wrong or questioned, is exactly what it's all about.

Addressing Ignorance

Create opportunities for awareness

Research suggests that men are worse allies than they think. Part of the issue is that men are unaware that their behavior is, at times, the source of the problem.

We were surprised to find that many of the executive men we talked to weren't aware of issues that are so obvious to us women. While we are not advocating for women to take on the additional burden of educating men, there is value in men hearing firsthand about women's

experiences in the workplace. Setting up guided, one-on-one, prompt-driven conversations with a female colleague can be one way to address ignorance, as she can provide an authentic perspective of her lived experience.

From these conversations, men hear firsthand about unwanted interruptions, mansplaining, and innuendos, as well as women's desire for actionable feedback, stretch assignments, and promotions that had gone unanswered. Most importantly, men learn to ask, and not assume. Ask her if she wants the promotion. Ask her if she wants that stretch assignment. Ask her how you can help her advance in her career. Do not assume she is the secondary earner or wants to scale back because she has kids. Examining assumptions can also be a great way to educate male colleagues about the biases that contribute to an inequitable workplace.

Redistribute invisible labor

Studies show that women volunteer for more non-promotable tasks (think organizing the team holiday party or taking notes in a meeting) than men at work because they are expected to. We were surprised to discover in our work that most men weren't aware of this invisible labor.

Leaders can challenge this kind of harmful norm by making everyone, regardless of gender, responsible for the non-promotable tasks that need to get done. One simple way to do this is to avoid public volunteerism for that work. Instead, use a "corporate chore wheel," i.e., a rotating list that equally distributes the tasks, agnostic of gender. It's a small fix that can have a big impact.

Don't fault people for what they don't know

We've found a "You don't know what you don't know" mentality is the most helpful starting place for addressing ignorance. Should men know more about gender inequities at their workplace? Probably.

But faulting them for what they don't know will only slow progress. Valuing continuous learning in the workplace means prioritizing inquisitiveness over intellectualism. Create a culture that assumes good intentions toward a shared common goal by encouraging questions and rewarding curiosity. Rather than condemning individuals for blind spots, encourage them to consider multiple points of view.

Overcoming Apathy

Creating a culture of male engagement involves normalizing gender equity in the workplace as a shared effort among everyone — which means getting *all* men to care. Apathy can have different drivers: Some people don't know *how* to care, whereas others truly don't care. As it relates to women in the workplace, sometimes men are apathetic because they don't think gender equity is their problem.

Get involved

Some men don't think they belong, which can leave them feeling stuck about *how* to get involved. But caring is contagious, and the more men can express to their male colleagues how much their engagement matters, the more workplace culture will shift.

More specifically, men who are involved in gender equity, be it mentoring and sponsoring women, equally distributing the invisible office labor, or in other ways, should proactively talk about their experiences with other men so it becomes normalized. It may sound trite, but it's not happening as much as it should be, and conversations like these can be transformational. Additionally, some women's employee resource groups (ERGs) have rebranded themselves to be "women and allies" to purposefully include and educate men on how they can advance gender equity. If you're a man already involved in a women's ERG, invite a male colleague to join you at the next event.

Show how gender inequity affects everyone, not just women

When met with the apathy, it would be helpful for male leaders to reinforce the fact that gender inequities affect both men and women. Not getting involved is not only contributing to stagnancy in a changing workforce, but it's resulting in many talented women leaving. Refocusing the discussion around what is lost when you don't engage and inviting other men to participate can help reduce apathy and create group cohesion around a common goal.

It may not be possible to make every single employee deeply care about gender equity, but leaders can remind their male colleagues that caring pays: Male engagement is associated with better health and economic outcomes, and can even have positive benefits in their personal lives. And as mentioned previously, companies with more diverse boards and leadership teams have greater profitability, higher stock price returns, more innovation, and reduced risk.

Don't place the burden of educating men on women

The truth is, women are exhausted, and we can't be the only ones asking men to care. Overcoming apathy requires internal work, and that begins with men turning inward to understand why they don't care more and in turn, why they should care. Women, and especially women of color, have been laboring for decades toward a more equitable work environment, and getting male employees to care will happen most effectively when they understand *why* they should. To that end, the work toward gender equity will be most effective when men lead by example and implore other male employees to get involved — and, if met with resistance, engage in conversation and seek to understand *why* their male colleagues aren't inclined to be doing more.

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Shifting workplace norms can be unsettling, but we're hopeful that true change can take hold through difficult conversations. Allowing for

open discussion gives language to emotions that may be keeping your workplace from more collaborative initiatives. Encourage psychological safety and curiosity, but don't confuse either for comfortability. Call on your fellow male leaders to help build a culture of male engagement where everyone is working toward the common goal of a more equitable workforce — that also happens to be more creative, innovative, and profitable for all.

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