

# What Companies Need to Know

## Engaging Men as Gender Allies

The involvement of men is a foundational element of successful gender initiatives.

Not only do senior-level men determine company priorities and the use of resources, new and mid-level male managers play an outsized role in women's workplace experiences. Managers powerfully influence women's job satisfaction, professional optimism and desire to stay with (or leave) their organizations. An HBA Honorable Mentor underscored the importance of men in driving change:

*Creating a gender equity program within a company has to involve men. If 95 percent of CEOs are men and you don't invite men to the conversation, how are you going to change the dynamic? How are you going to get funding? How are you going to get people to prioritize gender equity?*

Messaging about the value of gender diversity is a starting point that needs to be combined with thoughtful and proactive outreach to men. Efforts to engage men remain rare and as a result, in many companies, men — particularly those below the most senior ranks — are tenuously connected to organizational efforts aimed at strengthening gender diversity beyond company-wide emails or one-off unconscious bias trainings.

Engaging men across all levels is a game-changer for expediting gender diversity progress. Well-managed gender partnerships can employ gender as a lens to identify innovative ways to serve clients and customers and to develop more effective organizational systems and practices. It begins with men playing a role in gender diversity work.

Through its research with male allies, including HBA Honorable Mentors, GenderWorks has identified key factors that influence men's decision-making with regard to engaging in and supporting gender equity efforts. The table below distills the pull factors encouraging men's engagement and push factors discouraging their involvement.

### INSIGHTS FROM HBA HONORABLE MENTORS

*I would not be where I am today if it were not for a woman. I was looking for a job in sales and one of the male leaders said, "I don't see sales potential in you." It was a woman who gave me the opportunity.*

*I want to make sure my daughters and son have an equal chance to reach their goals.*

PULL FACTORS	PUSH FACTORS
Positive experiences with women in their lives	Zero-sum thinking
Bearing witness to challenges women face	Shame and fear
The power of gender diversity and valuing women's contributions	The risk/reward calculus is problematic
Development of female talent seen as foundational to personal career success	Confusion about men's role in women's initiatives
Gender equality perceived as benefitting men	Ill-equipped to support women's career development

### PULL FACTORS

#### POSITIVE EXPERIENCES WITH IMPORTANT WOMEN IN THEIR LIVES

The primary reason that male allies give for the desire to support women's career success stems from females in their lives. They describe mothers who inspire them, sisters who mentor them and wives who provide wise counsel. Men reference women managers and leaders who played an important role in their careers. They share stories of women who believed in them, took a chance on them, expanded their thinking and shaped their perspectives. Men's personal experiences are the most powerful catalyst for their passionate engagement.

#### BEARING WITNESS TO CHALLENGES WOMEN FACE

In addition to positive experiences that drive men's support of gender equality, they are also motivated by hearing about – and witnessing firsthand – the gender inequities women experience. Male allies report nearly every woman has a story regarding a gender-related challenge she's encountered at work. Allies indicate having been present in meetings during awkward moments when a man shares a thoughtless joke and other men laugh while women stay silent, looking forward with blank stares, or observed how some men speak in demeaning ways about ambitious women. Men who seek to support women at work are aware of important women in their lives — their mothers, sisters and wives — who've shared needing to work twice as hard to be promoted as the men with whom they work. Male allies have seen the pressure women feel to choose between work and motherhood. These struggles motivate them to play a role in making the workplace better for women.

#### UNDERSTANDING THE POWER OF GENDER DIVERSITY AND VALUING WHAT WOMEN CONTRIBUTE

Men intuit, and directly observe, the power of diverse voices to solve complex problems and to uncover innovative solutions to business challenges. They believe in the importance of a workforce that is reflective of the clients and customers their organizations serve. Having worked in other companies where gender equity was a priority, and gender was embraced more constructively, male allies want to do their part to strengthen

*There are a lot of enlightened men who have figured out that the best approach to solving complex problems is not gathering only a bunch of middle-aged white men — and that's not putting down middle-aged white men, I'm one of them. But that narrow approach will limit the vision, thinking and ultimately business success.*

their employers. Male allies describe women they work with who are amazing team leaders and manage critical challenges — such as COVID-19 — with great skill. A preponderance of male allies in senior management characterized women leaders as employing a holistic and collaborative approach to managing complex situations with multiple, important stakeholder groups. Instead of perceiving advancement as a zero-sum game, male allies view women's contributions as helping to expand the pie of opportunity for all.

#### VIEWING THE DEVELOPMENT OF FEMALE TALENT AS FOUNDATIONAL TO PERSONAL CAREER SUCCESS

Both men who aspire to be future leaders, as well as men who've risen to senior management roles, perceive gender competency as a foundational skill for successfully operating in a global economy. They believe lacking that skill puts them as individuals, as well as their organizations, at a competitive disadvantage.

#### EXPERIENCE GENDER EQUALITY AS BENEFITTING MEN

Senior level men who are stewards of organizational health and success prioritize facilitating women's career development because they see a clear link between gender diversity and business results. Male ally leaders relish in watching talented women they've mentored and sponsored flourish as company leaders. They feel pride in leading the creation of more inclusive work cultures that enable employees to make their best contributions.

Male allies earlier in their careers have seen fathers who sacrificed everything for their work, at a high cost to themselves and their families. These young men want the ability to be more involved fathers and to work in more sustainable ways they see benefit everyone. They perceive women leaders advocating to help create that reality. Younger male allies report wanting to work in diverse workplaces which prioritize equity (of all types), seeing these work cultures as more innovative, more enjoyable and better for their careers.

*When I first came into the industry, the old-boys network was really dominant. If you didn't stay late at the bar with the boss, you wouldn't get ahead. It was not inviting for women, but truthfully it wasn't inviting for me, either. That doesn't give me a pass, though, and I recognize I have a deep responsibility to not perpetuate that tradition.*

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# What Companies Need to Know: Engaging Men as Gender Allies cont.

## PUSH FACTORS

### ZERO-SUM THINKING

For men who see gender equity as a zero-sum game, a focus on gender diversity threatens their sense of professional security and their assumed power. This sense of threat was singled out as having the greatest negative impact on men's willingness to engage.

### SHAME AND FEAR

Many men experience pervasive messaging about gender inequities as laden with judgment targeted at them. They hear men are entitled and come by power easily. The complexity is while many men don't feel powerful in the workplace, the fact remains that overwhelmingly, those in the most powerful positions are men.

The result of men feeling shamed and blamed is that they shut down. Men describe the feeling of walking on eggshells when it comes to discussing gender at work. Too often, they decide to steer clear of any involvement. Ironically, the men who feel trepidation about responding inappropriately with regard to gender issues are overwhelmingly the same men with good intentions who seek to be supportive.

### THE RISK/REWARD CALCULUS IS PROBLEMATIC

Across levels, men experience a disconnect between messaging about the importance of gender diversity and the lack of attendant rewards. They see few senior-level male role models and conclude developing gender competence is not an important leadership skill.

Men are reluctant to engage in gender conversations and fearful of misspeaking or behaving in ways that telegraph that they're out of touch. Gender feels complex, weighty, confusing and best to avoid.

The #MeToo movement has spurred concern for men, particularly those in senior leadership roles, who worry about the optics of being alone with a woman at work and feel pressure from their spouses to keep their distance.

In the spring of 2019, *Lean In* reported 60 percent of male managers were not comfortable working alone or socializing with women while senior-level men were five times more likely to hesitate traveling or meeting for a business dinner with a junior-level woman versus man. Sadly, too many men choose to minimize and avoid contact because they perceive the risks outweigh the rewards. The result is enormous harm to the career development of women.

*To maximize men's ability to contribute to the movement, you have to address it without judgement or men will stay quiet and not muster the courage to step up. They're thinking, 'Gosh I know I should be doing this. I just don't know how.' Then we make no progress. How do we properly prepare, engage and invite men to be part of the movement in a non-judgmental way? It has to be a focus.*

### CONFUSION ABOUT MEN'S ROLE

Men often lack clarity about their role in supporting gender equity. They translate gender to mean women and conclude gender initiatives are by and for women. The truth is many gender initiatives have been, and continue to be, focused on connecting women with one another and furthering their professional development with no clear role for men. Men confront mixed messaging regarding how to get involved. Several male allies have shared stories of reaching out to become involved with gender initiatives at work and being met with suspicion by their female colleagues. Even men who were welcomed found little guidance regarding how they could best contribute.

### FEEL ILL-EQUIPPED

There are a surprising number of men who seek to support their female colleagues yet feel ill-equipped to do so. The default vision of supporting gender equity is confronting men who exhibit sexist behaviors. Many men are uncomfortable, particularly men earlier in their careers, to do so. In reality, the vast majority of strategies that male allies employ are not confrontational but focus on behaviors that include and elevate women. With regard to men publicly confronting sexist behaviors in real time, that is one way to respond but there are myriad, less challenging options for communicating with the individual.

Male managers who are committed to being stewards of women's careers admit feeling uncertain about how to manage differently or what it looks like to effectively mentor women. Men hear frequent messages about gender inequities yet big-picture pronouncements do little to concretize situations from which they can learn. Men feel expected to support gender equity and behave as allies yet struggle to translate how gender translates to their day-to-day work lives.

*It's not what women need to know about men but equally about what men need to know about women. It should be part of 101 management training.*

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