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5 Ways to Engage Men in Gender Diversity Initiatives



By *Elizabeth Harrin (London)*

Gender equality is still an issue at work, but it is not a women's issue. Gender initiatives have traditionally focused on improving women's participation in the workplace, but recently (in sociological terms, anyway) there has been a shift towards making 'gender' a gender-neutral problem.

We need men to be part of the conversation on diversity. "The preponderance of men in leadership means their efforts are necessary to advance change in the workplace," says Ilene H. Lang, President & Chief Executive Officer of Catalyst, a nonprofit membership organisation working globally to build inclusive workplaces and expand opportunities for women and business. "Research continues to show that diversity well-managed yields more innovation and is tied to enhanced financial performance – factors good for all employees."

While it's great news that the human resources professionals are creating a sense of inclusiveness, that hasn't quite filtered down to the Average Joe in the office. Or the Senior Joe, for that matter. There are many men who 'get it' but there are still plenty who don't. So how do you bring men onboard with gender initiatives, and start tackling this issue together?

1. Help men recognise that gender bias exists

"Before individuals can support a change initiative, they must first be convinced that there is something wrong with the status quo," write Jeanine Prime and Corinne A. Moss-Racusin in their report for Catalyst, *Engaging Men in Gender Initiatives: What Change Agents Need To Know*. "For men to get behind their organisations' gender initiatives they must first be persuaded that there is problematic gender bias in the workplace." The research that Prime and Moss-Racusin carried out for their report shows that the higher men's awareness of gender bias, the

more likely men are to feel that achieving gender equality is important. The more aware the men in your workplace are, the more likely it is that they will support gender initiatives.

People – men and women – with a strong sense of fair play will want to explore inequalities, but they need to know that they exist in the first place. Make sure your gender initiatives include things like first-person interviews, case studies and the opportunity to discuss and analyse workplace behaviour. Creating mentoring partnerships between men and women can also help explore the difficulties and challenges for both parties at work. All these elements will contribute towards highlighting disparities and hidden gender bias.

2. Use social proof

Social proof is the idea that because everyone else is doing it, I will too. Human beings have a tendency to herd, and when it comes to gender initiatives, that's no bad thing. "Have influential managers, especially men, play an integral role in inviting employees to participate in D&I training," is the advice in another Catalyst report from Prime and her colleagues, *Engaging Men in Gender Initiatives: Stacking the Deck for Success*. "This outreach should include not only emails and employee broadcasts, but also in-person meetings where influential male managers can share positive experiences and outcomes related to training."

Influential male managers should support diversity initiatives at work because they are responsible for the productivity of their people, says Simma Liberman, author of *Putting Diversity to Work*. "The purpose of a diversity initiative is to engage everyone, and if some people are not engaged, it drags productivity down. Any good manager wants to have people working at their optimal level," she says. "Managers that don't support diversity initiatives run the risk of either losing good employees, or not benefiting from their skills, experience and perspective. If the group doesn't do well, the manager has to take the blame."

3. Show the advantages for everyone

The Catalyst research showed that a powerful predictor of men's interest in diversity training was whether or not they would lose out. Zero-sum thinking is the belief that advances in gender diversity mean losses for men. The more respondents believed that promoting gender diversity meant less jobs for the boys, the less likely they were to be interested in attending diversity training. The reverse was also true.

"Imagine sitting in front of group of investors, or a client group, of all women or minorities, and your company team is all white men!" says Janice Ellig, Co-CEO of Chadick Ellig, a New York-based executive search advisory firm. "Enlightened CEOs and senior managers know that 'picture' is bad for business. It's not a women's issue, it's a business imperative. Catalyst, Mckinsey, Deloitte and other firms have done studies showing the correlations: with greater gender diversity in the board room and C-Suite, financial performance increases by 1/3 to 50% on stats like ROE, and Return on Sales, when compared to companies with less diversity."

Get men involved by explaining that diversity helps everyone, and the business as a whole. Explain that gender issues are about making the office better for everyone, so avoid conveying initiatives as 'women's issues.'

4. Make it clear that diversity includes men too

It's great to plan to include men in diversity initiatives, but the full benefit will only be felt if men feel they are also part of the diversity of the workforce. Men – especially white men – sometimes take a back seat in questions of diversity because it doesn't appear to include them. They become disengaged with diversity and inclusion initiatives – and disengaged employees cost the U.S. workforce more than \$300 billion in lost productivity alone, according to Gallup. Training programs like Pegine Echevarria's White Guys Are Diverse Too (watch the video!) focus on re-engaging men with the idea that they too are part of a group that makes up a fully diverse workforce.

“It's important to show men that they are part of diversity, that it is in their interest and will help them be better at their job,” says Liberman. “Real diversity includes everyone and old narrow ideas that certain groups are not included need to be changed. Have a clear definition and make sure that everyone gets a copy.”

5. Make it a way of doing business

“Getting men involved is easy. If all managers, men and women, know that they will be measured by what they deliver to the top and bottom lines, they will know diversity is not a ‘program’ but a way of doing business,” says Ellig. “If a financial services company wants to attract the Chinese, Japanese, Vietnamese, Mexican, African American or female client groups then they need employees who will look, think, feel and act according to certain cultures.”

Ellig suggests that hiring a white male line executive as chief diversity officer, as long as that person can see and communicate the business case, can send a strong message. “A Chief Diversity officer, or a better title might be Chief Branding & Business Development officer, who is a male Caucasian, sends a strong message that the ‘majority supports the minority’ and it no longer is an issue of diversity, but of inclusion. Men and women who run the line businesses should make diversity a priority if they want to be the preferred choice of clients and employees.”