

What Men Need to Know

Male Ally Strategies

Male allies ranging in age from their 20's to their 60's highlight how men can support gender equity in their workplaces.

BE CURIOUS.

A clear starting point is a desire to engage. Male allies seek to understand the challenges women face. They pay closer attention and observe situations at work, noticing patterns that previously may have been off their radars. They ask themselves new questions such as, "Why are there so few women on the team," or "Why does the only woman in the group rarely get asked about her projects in team meetings?" They realize that unconscious biases are universal and they reflect on their own decision-making and behaviors. They think about what made a difference in their own careers and how this could apply to supporting women's careers.

LISTEN AND LEARN.

Among the most consistent feedback across male allies of all ages was the importance of men becoming better listeners, forgoing the instinct to jump into problem-solving mode. They report the need to listen actively and to ensure they are understanding what is being said, "This is what I'm hearing, am I getting that right?" Men are advised to ask women what would help and then listen closely to their responses.

Male allies seek to educate themselves about gender inequities in the workplace by reading articles, talking to women in their lives, perhaps attending a women's network event. HBA mentors talked about their learning journeys with regard to supporting gender diversity.

ENGAGE AND SUPPORT.

There are endless ways in which men can support gender equity. Male allies advise focusing on one or two ways in which they can help make a difference to start rather than feeling overwhelmed and doing nothing.

Men behave as allies by being a shoulder to lean on when a woman needs support, including women by asking for their perspectives and making sure they receive credit for their ideas (both when they are and are not in the room). Men can play an important role in facilitating women's career success by simply making sure she understands the value she adds, by encouraging her and by being a safe sounding board.

Male allies described identifying their sphere of influence and thinking about how they could make a difference with their co-workers, friends and family.

ENGAGE WITH OTHER MEN.

In addition to supporting women directly, men support women by engaging with other men. Male allies find sharing with other men what they've learned about inequities in the workplace and the experiences of women is an avenue to open up the diversity conversation.

Men can help to redirect sexist conversations and dial back the negative stereotypes about ambitious women being strident or new mothers becoming less committed. Simple steps like not providing oxygen to the funny man who relishes in telling off-color jokes at women's expense is both concrete and effective.

INSIGHTS FROM HBA HONORABLE MENTORS

REFLECT

I remember the moment when my manager said, "I want you to lead the training for the unit. I believe in you and know you can do it."

I did do it and didn't get hurt; it was formative for me as a confidence builder.

ASK QUESTIONS

Shouldn't the leadership of any organization reflect what the rest of the company looks like? It absolutely should. If 65 percent of employees are women and if you don't have at least 50 percent women in leadership then you have to ask yourself, why?

ENCOURAGE

You may have to be a cheerleader and a mirror, someone who helps them see their own greatness and believe in themselves.

What Men Need to Know: Male Ally Strategies *cont.*

ENGAGE WITH OTHER MEN. *CONT.*

When observing a problematic situation, a male ally can discreetly take aside his colleague and address the problem with language that communicates positive intent such as, "I don't think you meant anything by it but let me replay how your comments affected the women in the room."

From a neurological perspective, the human brain is highly sensitive to threat, real or perceived, and reacts with the fight (becoming defensive) or flight (leaving physically and/or emotionally) response. Because gender equity can be a loaded topic, it's important to create a sense of emotional safety in order for men (and women) to authentically engage. When that happens, there is the greatest opportunity for seeding lasting change.

AVOID PROBLEMATIC BEHAVIORS.

An easy place to start behaving like a male ally is to avoid behaviors that contribute to the problem such as talking over a female colleague or brushing off a woman who shares a gender-related challenge she's encountered. Validating women's experiences, rather than explaining away problematic behaviors, is powerful.

Among the most important steps men can take to behave like allies is to avoid making assumptions about women's career aspirations and goals. For instance, with the best of intent a male manager may seek to lessen the pressure for a woman back from maternity leave by assigning her to lower visibility, less time-sensitive projects. A far better approach is to have a conversation and ask the new mother her desire for taking on new project work.

Men who want to be supportive of gender equity need to understand that women don't want men to simply take over their efforts. The tendency of some men to see themselves as 'coming to save the day for women' is anathema to gender equity and fails to honor the tireless efforts and contributions of women. Instead, men send the right signals by prioritizing listening and working in partnership with women to strengthen gender equity at work.

REPEAT.

Male allies don't see support of gender equity as attendance at one event or participation in a program but recognize that they continue to learn about the complex issue of gender – or race or other diversity issues – through time and experience. Understanding builds, comfort grows, awareness broadens, skills develop, understanding deepens and the cycle goes round.

We need to foster a culture of safety, not just physical but emotional safety. I find that women on the team are frequently willing to be very open and direct with me. When they are, it's important for me to listen and provide a safe place for them to express both their frustrations and blue-sky thinking. Creating that safe space is critical to fostering a truly bias-free environment.

INSIGHTS FROM HBA HONORABLE MENTORS

I don't color things with crayons that might not exist like her husband is an investment banker and makes so much money that she is not going to work hard.