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5 Tips on Engaging Men in Gender Partnership

By Rayona Sharpnack



One of the barriers to resolving the problem of gender imbalance in business is that men keep thinking it's a women's problem and women need to fix it. The guys say, Women need to "lean in" more, leap for new opportunities, negotiate harder, and speak up when they have a good idea.

The reality is, we need men to help fix the gender imbalance. They have the power! They have the numbers! Let me show you five ways to give men a well-tempered shove in the right direction. In my experience, many men, when they see what a difference they can make in this area, feel good about doing so.

1. Share with some of the men you know the global data showing that gender-balanced teams perform better. The biggest study on the impact on financial performance of adding women to the executive team was done by Credit Suisse in 2014. They found a correlation between companies with more female executives and higher returns on equity, higher valuations, better stock performance, and higher payouts of dividends. It's clear from this and dozens of other studies, men and women working together make better business decisions than men alone.

Present this data in whatever way you feel comfortable, then say something like, "I'd love to see our company's financial performance get a boost like that. Let's ensure we have gender-balanced teams on all our projects."

2. Talk to a man you know well on your project team and ask him to support you in meetings. Ask him, "Please notice when I make a good point and no one reacts until one of our male colleagues picks up the idea and runs with it. You don't have to fight my battles, but it would help me a lot if you could say something like, 'Yes, that's a good restatement of what Janet was saying earlier. Janet, do you have anything to add?' "

3. Share with a male ally how uncomfortable it feels when you walk up to a group of guys talking golf or whatever, and they all suddenly shut up. "I feel like I'm invading your space, when all I want is to be one of the group. I can handle a little golf talk. Or college football stats. But when you guys start walking on eggshells because I've come in the room, I feel like an outsider."

4. Ask a receptive male manager to encourage the women in his meetings to offer their ideas. "We all know the guys will speak up or raise their hands immediately, but you could be missing out on a lot of good ideas if you don't urge the women to come forward with what they're thinking."

5. Remember that shaming and blaming do not work. It's no way to win allies and supporters. Also remember that privilege is invisible to those who have it. Most guys don't realize how comparatively easy things are for them. By the same token, most of us white women don't realize how easy we have it compared to multicultural women: Our privilege is invisible to us.

We all need to learn how to look out for and speak up for those who don't get seen or heard. Only by enabling every contributor to have a voice will our companies thrive and our workplaces be productive, creative, and exciting places to work for women and men alike.

Rayona Sharpnack is the CEO and founder of the Institute for Gender Partnership and the Institute for Women's Leadership, which has been teaching Fortune 500, government, and non-profit managers for 25 years the secret to achieving breakthrough results and achieving full