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# THINGS MEN CAN DO TO SUPPORT GENDER EQUITY

**Randall S Peterson** suggests four things that men can do today for a more just and inclusive tomorrow

Men can and should do more to support gender equity. Backed by decades of research and advocacy, not to mention countless meetings with women (and men), here are my top four tips:

## 1 Be an active participant and bring in more allies

In work, as in geopolitics, allies are crucial. Allies grow the network. It's not enough to say, "I do my bit," because we need as many people as possible, men and women, banging the drum for change. That's how the needle is moved. I like to put it this way:

Truth alone never wins. Truth supported wins. And that support comes from allies who change the dynamic – from a lone voice to a force to be reckoned with. So, speak up. Join groups. For example, I am involved with [Leaders as Change Agents \(LACA\)](#), which is a way for men and women to join forces to

advocate for diversity and inclusion at the top levels of business in the UK.

In short, men should seek out and ally themselves with others who are also supporting an egalitarian agenda. Let's call this role being a manbassador and recruit other manbassadors to the cause.

## 2

### Keep a growth mindset

The sage advice to develop and retain "a growth mindset" at all times and in all scenarios is based on [research](#) by my London Business School colleague

Aneeta Rattan. A growth mindset assumes people are capable of change – as opposed to a fixed mindset, which assumes behaviours are set.

On a related note, don't conclude that someone is prejudiced based on what they said. Don't end the conversation before it can begin. For example, a well-known TV anchor in the US recently said that a female political candidate aged 51 was "not in her prime" and that a woman was considered to be in her prime "in her 20s, 30s and maybe her 40s." What? In her prime as a political candidate? Saying something to that TV presenter – assuming they can amend their opinion and become more enlightened – is showing a growth mindset for the good of progress. Yes, there should be a conversation, but the conversation should encourage positive change.

Remember: sometimes people don't realise the import of what they're saying. An offensive turn of phrase may simply be a naive mistake. That said, so-called locker room talk, even if it's just amongst men, is not harmless if it objectifies or belittles

women. So, my advice is to approach it as an opportunity to teach and to learn what could be done better. One of the things that I find in [my research on boards of directors](#) is that a lot of white men (and boards are still mostly made up of white men) are doing less than they are willing or capable of doing because they're so worried about being attacked for making a mistake.

If, instead of going on the attack, manbassadors could say, "Look, we're all in this together and perhaps you didn't understand why that phraseology you used was problematic." Let's bring more people in and educate them, rather than make it "us" versus "them." Instead of a blame game, real progress is made with growth in mind.

# 3

## Ask women for feedback

The need for feedback is very clear in the context of meetings. Sometimes men like to "mansplain" everything. Hogging the floor isn't helpful. It crowds out useful comments, criticisms

and perspectives. My advice is to get direct feedback from women. Ask: "Is this helpful?"

Even in the interest of clearing the path for women's voices, men might step out front and exclaim, "Clear the way!" But clearing the path is part of learning to be a leader. The women on your team should have the opportunity to step up themselves and lead.

That said, sometimes a manbassador can help yield the floor to women's voices – but if that seems necessary, ask women first. Seek out their feedback and try to understand what they say would help.

# 4

## Take action at whatever level you find yourself

The movement needs men's active support at all levels. And sometimes a man may be a strong advocate for gender equality, but won't

raise the issue right away as his boss is an old-fashioned sexist. But saying nothing, even when occupying the lowest rungs of a hierarchy, is not harmless. Wherever you are on the org chart, you should take a stand.

# 1% to 3%

Women are underrepresented in executive director and chair roles. Over a 20-year time span (1996-2017) the proportion of executive directors who were women increased from 1% to 3% (ICSA, 2019)

# 36%

There has been a significant rise in the number of women on FTSE boards... representation of women stands at 36% on FTSE 100 boards and 33% on FTSE 250 boards



# 33%

The Hampton-Alexander Review included a target of 33% representation of women on FTSE 350 boards by 2020... more than half of FTSE 350 companies have exceeded the 33% target

# 59%

In 2020, 59% of FTSE 350 companies did not meet the target set by the Parker Review of having at least one director from an ethnic minority background on their boards... with less ethnic diversity observed on the boards of FTSE 250 than that of FTSE 100 companies

That means sometimes you will get pushback from your boss. Naturally, you will be judged. But research shows that if you have operated with a set of values and lived those values consistently, you can enter a leadership position with appropriate expectations regarding your mandate. Being true to your beliefs will benefit you in the right organisation – even if it takes a while to get there.

So, if I appoint you to a leadership position, I know what to expect. You've been advocating for gender equality for 25 years, you're now a senior leader in this business and I expect you to take the lead on this at the organisation level – frankly, I'd be surprised if you didn't.

That's the kind of reassurance people want when appointing leaders for an equitable future. For example, when I look back over my career, from my first management jobs I appointed women and people of colour all along the way. That didn't necessarily win me many plaudits

**'Saying nothing, even when occupying the lowest rungs of a hierarchy, is not harmless'**

early in my career, but it's a big deal now. Now that I hold more senior positions, I'm rewarded with the power to make some real changes.

## Why these actions matter now

In our latest [report](#) for the UK regulator of the boards of FTSE listed companies, our interviews revealed that many directors (mostly men) are quietly supportive of gender-equality initiatives. The quietness can be misleading. It can feel scary for some men in the #me-too era. I see men staying quiet because they worry about being called out or attacked.

But if you, as a manbassador, can be vocal, my research indicates you may find more support out there than you imagined. Twenty years ago that wouldn't have been the case, but public opinion is shifting.

Now's the time to galvanise support. Put your stake in the ground to help attract others who may not yet have the guts to do so first. Be an ally and give the movement more power and strength.

Have a growth mindset, seek out feedback and act, regardless of the level you find yourself. Through allyship, we men can help turn the tide. □

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