

What men can do today for a more just and inclusive tomorrow

It's high time to support gender equity as it moves into a crucial stage. Randall S. Peterson explores four things men can do

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

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, 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 the group Leaders as Change Agents (LACA), which is a way for men as well as 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 recruiting other manbassadors to the cause.

Keep a growth mindset.

The sage advice "to keep a growth mindset" 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 public person in the United States recently said on TV that a female political candidate, age 51, was "not in her prime" adding 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? Well, saying something to that political commentator, assuming that that person can amend his 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 *just don't know what they're doing or saying*. An offensive or off-putting turn of phrase may simply be an unprocessed or naïve mistake. That said, so-called locker room talk, even if it's just amongst men, is not harmless if it objectifies women or otherwise belittles them. So, my advice is to approach it as an opportunity to teach and to learn what could be done better. Because 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 attacking, manbassadors say, "Look, we're all in this together, and perhaps you didn't understand why that phraseology you used may be problematic." Let's bring more people in and educate them, rather than make it "us" versus "them." Instead of a blame game, coming from fixed mindsets, real progress is made with growth in mind.

Ask women for feedback.

The need for feedback is very clear in the context of meetings. Sometimes men like to "mansplain" everything, including women's rights. 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!" And yet, 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.

Take action at whatever level you find yourself.

The movement needs men's active support at all levels. And sometimes a man may feel he is a strong advocate for gender equality, but his current

boss is a bit of an old-fashioned sexist, so maybe he won't raise the issue right away. But saying nothing, even occupying the lowest rungs of a hierarchy, is *not* harmless. Wherever you find yourself on the org chart, you should take a stand.

To be honest, that means sometimes you will get pushback from your boss. Naturally, you will be judged. But, at the same time, 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, I would expect you to take the lead on gender equality initiatives at the organisation level. Frankly, I'd be surprised if you didn't. That's the kind of reassurance people want appointing leaders for an equitable future.

For example, when I look back over my own career, from my first management jobs, it's clear I appointed women and people of colour all along the way. That didn't necessarily win me many plaudits early in my career, but it's a big deal now. Now that I hold more senior positions, I am rewarded with the power to make some real changes.

Why these four 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 that you will probably find more support out there than you imagined you would. Twenty years ago, that wouldn't have been the case. But today, in 2023, it is. The bulk of public opinion is shifting.

Now's the time to galvanise support while it's still in a fragile state. Put your stake out to help attract others who may not yet have the guts to put their stakes out first. Be an ally and give the movement more power and strength. Have a growth mindset, seek out feedback and act at whatever level you find yourself. Through allyship, we men can help turn the tide.

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