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Making the case for male champions for gender inclusiveness at work

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Despite progress that has been made toward gender parity (equal numbers of men and women within organizations, across levels) in the workforce, women are still vastly underrepresented in upper level positions. While there is near gender parity for entry-level employees, there are fewer women rising the ranks to the C-suite. Currently, women make up 37% of mid-level managers, 25% of executive/senior-level managers, 19% of board seats, and only 4% of CEO positions in S&P 500 companies. Thus, while women have increased their presence in lower-level management, the upper echelons of organizations remain largely male-dominated.

This pattern persists despite women being as educated and ambitious as men. Women outnumber men in college-graduation rates, with women earning 57% of bachelor's degrees, 60% of master's degrees, and 51.7% of doctoral degrees. Further, although male and female graduates may have similar levels of ambition, men are significantly more likely to have positions in senior management, direct reports, and profit-and-loss responsibility.

More generally, diversity at top levels of organizations has been shown to correlate with better strategic decision-making and improved social performance. More specifically regarding gender equality, the positive link between gender parity and company performance has been demonstrated in past studies within the academic literature and the popular press. Gender parity in boards of directors has been shown to have positive effects on return on investments, return on assets, and net profit margins in comparison to similar firm without female leaders. In addition, the positive relationship between gender parity and firm performance holds true globally, as this effect has been found both in the USA and abroad.

However, despite the capabilities of women and their positive contributions to the workplace, bias against female leaders still exists. Women in leadership roles tend to be evaluated more negatively and their behavior tends to be viewed as more extreme (e.g., controlling and dominant) than men in the same role. Some of these negative perceptions may be a function of the sex of the perceiver. For example, college men have been found to be less likely than college women to describe female managers as ambitious, helpful, and objective; and more likely to perceive female managers to be hasty, frivolous, deceitful, easily influenced, and bitter. Further, research has found that, even when male and female top-level executives had equivalent levels of certain competencies that had been linked to job performance, male leaders may be rated as more successful than their female counterparts.

Thus, by and large, although talented women exist in the workforce, we have been unable to eliminate bias that makes it difficult for them to get ahead. However, we believe that great power lies in understanding how gender inclusive leadership behaviors of those in power might relate to greater inclusivity (a work environment which is free from gender bias and which actively addresses gender inequality when it arises) and more positive organizational outcomes at work. While many prior attempts to address bias against women at work aim to either change the skillsets of women or to train women to navigate hostile workplaces, we believe that actively creating gender inclusive environments from the top-down, instead of training women and men to simply avoid or cope with bias, will directly and positively impact gender equality in organizations. We will outline the premises for our arguments in more detail below.

MENTORING AND WORKING WOMEN: AN UNEVEN PLAYING FIELD?

First, we might learn something about the persistence of gender bias in organizations by examining the impact of

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males mentoring females at work. Mentoring is purported to be the most impactful activity for increasing diversity and inclusion at work, even compared to diversity training and a variety of other diversity initiatives. Unfortunately, women have reported greater barriers to finding a mentor than men do. Further, there may be some benefit to having mentors who have historically held power within organizations. For example, white, male mentors have been demonstrated to be beneficial for black mentees, increasing their earning potential. Further, receiving mentorship from senior males can increase compensation and career progress satisfaction for women specifically, particularly for those working in male-dominated industries. Because women may benefit from mentorship from senior-level males, and because it may be less likely that they find a mentor in general, women may not have the same opportunity to receive development from mentors as men do. While formal mentoring programs were intended to eliminate bias in determining who receives mentorship, these programs may not be as beneficial for mentees as informal, naturally occurring relationships that are initiated by choice. Because of the unique barriers to success that women might face when receiving mentorship from men within a formal mentoring program, effective mentors for women may need to have an understanding of bias toward women as well as awareness of the potential for harassment or sexual misconduct within workplace relationships. Thus, without role models for gender inclusive leadership, women are less likely to receive mentorship in organizations. Finally, in order for these relationships to be successful, mentors may need to possess both crucial mentoring skills but also an ally mentality.

As we will outline in greater detail below, allies differ from mentors because allies are "dominant group members who work to end prejudice in their personal and professional lives, and relinquish social privileges conferred by their group status through their support of nondominant groups" (Brown & Ostrove, 2013, p. 2211). While mentors may provide a variety of objective and attitudinal benefits to their mentees through both career and psychosocial mentoring, psychosocial mentoring practices which actively address bias may become even more impactful for those facing gender-based hurdles in the workplace. Thus, allies are directly focused on decreasing bias and increasing inclusivity, whereas mentors do not necessarily have to incorporate prejudice reduction in their mentoring efforts.

THE ROLE OF ALLIES IN ELIMINATING WORKPLACE BIAS

As previously discussed, although a great deal of work has been conducted on the topic of gender and leadership, gender bias and a relative lack of women in top-level leadership positions in organizations still exist. However, as discussed above, one possible solution may be engaging male allies in supporting these endeavors. For example, both Caucasian women and women of color may benefit from having a champion who is well-versed in diversity issues, due to the importance of directly addressing workplace.

In fact, allies have been important in other areas of diversity as well. Although allies are often thought of as being members of the dominant or majority group, people in minority or oppressed groups can also be allies for each other. Interestingly, allies do not always even know that they are allies. Researchers find that many allies do not see themselves as being allies, even though they have acted in a value-based manner against injustice or to support a friend. Allyship is linked to a number of positive outcomes in the workplace. For example, LGBT individuals have benefited from the presence of allies at work in the past. Additionally, in a recent study conducted by Catalyst (2012), mostly white male managers who participated in labs that emphasized building partnerships among white men and other groups, realized a positive change in five key behaviors (i.e., critical thinking about the experiences of different social groups, empathic listening, inquiring across differences, taking responsibility for being inclusive, and addressing difficult/emotionally charged issues) that facilitate inclusion. In short, these labs brought these men, as a whole, closer to being champions for diversity. Co-workers reported that these white men displayed greater interest in learning about people with different perspectives and worldviews and increased critical thinking behaviors. Thus, evidence supports the idea that males may be cultivated as champions for female leaders, creating the potential for positive change within organizations. However, this strategy has not been widely used or studied in depth. Further, while allies may be able to enact change within organizations and their mere presence has been demonstrated to have a positive impact on those who have historically faced bias at work, leaders who serve as allies have not been studied in-depth.

GENDER BIAS AT WORK: WHERE ARE THE MALES?

While we propose engaging males as a strategy to increase gender inclusivity, our current knowledge regarding allies literature and mentors offer only partial solutions to supporting women's leadership at work. Specifically, allies recognize and fight bias, which is useful for combatting injustice at work, but the ways in which leaders might best serve as allies remains unclear. On the other hand, mentors are often encouraged to assist with an array of career management issues in supporting mentees, but are not required to have an active focus on inclusivity and bias. The concept of male champions proposed in this paper combines the impact of mentoring with the ally mentality necessary to fight bias on a broader scale, while shifting the burden of creating gender inclusivity from those who may lack organizational power (women) to those who may possess it (men).

Within organizations, the main strategy that has been examined regarding decreasing workplace bias centers on teaching women to overcome it on their own. Because women are often less confident in their skills at work and may be more risk-averse than men (which is related to lower likelihood of achieving higher level leadership roles), there has been a lot of focus on encouraging women to build skills, such as confidence, in order to advance at work. There are reasons to believe that a lack of confidence affects women's performance at work. While both male and female executives may equally desire to reach top management, women

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