

Dismantling Bias Conference Series

Promoting Women in Leadership: Why Men Engage in Allyship

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Promoting Women in Leadership: Why Men Engage in Allyship

Abstract

Since entering the workforce, women have fought for fair and safe working environments, and have made great strides towards equitable workplaces. Despite advances, four in 10 women still experience gender-based discrimination in the workplace (13) and are underrepresented in leadership positions (3, 9). Women comprise nearly half of the workforce, but only 21% of C-suite leadership positions (e.g., CEO, CFO, CIO), up from 17% in 2015 (3, 9). However, research demonstrates positive impacts women leaders have in organizations (8, 9). Women's representation in leadership can alter the overall organizational culture and promote the importance and value of diversity and inclusion (9). Having someone who "looks like you" in the organization, especially at a leadership level, can increase feelings of belongingness, inclusion, and value (7, 12, 17). Furthermore, diversity in the workplace increases creativity, communication, and productivity (14, 19).

Despite the slight increase of women in leadership roles and a strong business case for women in leadership, women still face a plethora of barriers in the workplace. There are numerous reasons why there is a lack of women in leadership positions, including but not limited to family responsibilities, lack of access to informal networks, and workplace cultures dominated by males (4). Yet, perhaps the most influential reason why more men are in leadership roles than women is because of a longstanding traditional mindset: when people think of a leader, they think male (9, 10). This 'think leader, think male' mindset has hindered women's advancement in the workplace for decades (16) and places an added burden on women to prove themselves capable as leaders to their peers and followers (8).

Scholars argue that male allies can play a pivotal role in women's success and advancement in leadership, despite the barriers women may face, and that male allies work to reduce those barriers in the workplace. 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" (2). By using social capital that women may lack, men can help provide a space, voice, and recognition for women in the workplace, particularly in leadership positions (4, 11). Furthermore, through supporting and promoting female leaders, male allies can help eliminate role incongruences and break traditional gender and leadership norms and expectations.

This paper addresses what allies do, how allies can be change agents in the workplace, and how people become allies. The overarching goal of allyship is to end discrimination and create a more equitable experience for all people (2). Dominant group status allows allies to have "unique opportunities to create change and influence others" and are therefore perceived to be more legitimate when advocating for equality by utilizing social capital that marginalized group members may lack (4, 6). Allies can be change agents by creating space and helping marginalized group members' voices be heard and help oppressors recognize their own blind spots and discriminatory behaviors (4). Therefore, male allies can change the narrative for women in the workplace by bringing discrimination and inequality to light and breaking down barriers and obstacles to leadership that women face.

There are four levels for ally development (18). The first, *awareness* of one's own power and privilege, may be difficult as the individual learns about injustice and systems of oppression (1, 18). The second level is gaining *knowledge* about the oppressed group. As allies become aware of their privilege, they also learn about the experiences of minority groups. The next level

is developing *skills* for communicating that learned knowledge to others. This level can be challenging as allies may lack resources and opportunities to communicate this learned knowledge, however, it is crucial for moving to the final level: *action*, which integrates the first three levels and drives new behaviors and change that challenge and inequality and promote inclusion in the workplace.

This paper also addresses predictors and outcomes of male allyship, at both the individual and organizational levels, and barriers to male allyship in the workplace supported in the current literature. This paper aims to provide a review of the current state of research addressing male allyship for female leaders and provide suggestions for future research.

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