



Strategies for change:

Practical things men executives can do to help women executives

By Bobbi Mooney

Editor's note: The following recommendations connect with the article, "Senior level woman describes exclusionary treatment," by Bobbi Mooney.

When I talk to men about gender diversity, I generally find they fall into two categories: 1. Those who feel they are already very "progressive" and none of this is applicable to them. 2. Those who want to learn more about their own behaviors and want to help create a more inclusive environment for women. For the latter category, I find a sincere desire to take action, but a lack of awareness about how to get started.

Practical suggestions

Here are a few practical suggestions.

1. **Talk to women** about gender issues. Find a couple of female colleagues with whom you feel safe and actively ask them to become your learning partner. Don't expect them to open up right away or answer your probing questions candidly the first time. Keep trying. Talk to the women who are closer to you emotionally, your partner, your daughter, your sister, your friend. Because of the established emotional connection, you may understand things from them that you wouldn't understand from a female colleague.

2. **Begin to track when you see yourself or other men** behave differently to women than they behave to men. Don't try to label these as good or bad or make yourself feel guilty about them. Just practice noticing them.

3. As you increase this tracking, occasionally be the voice who interrupts a demeaning or patronizing behavior or comment. Women cannot point these out very often because of the risks involved. It feels very supportive to have a male colleague do it instead.

4. **Fight the tendency**

to defend yourself individually, that you are "more progressive or more sensitive than most men" when it comes to gender differences. Even if you are, you are still part of the "male group" and will get tagged with things your community represents.

5. **Don't treat the diversity learning journey** as something that you can conquer or complete. It's a lifelong study and the landscape constantly changes.

6. **Be careful about using gender humour** inappropriately, and narrow your definition of inappropriate. It usually removes all shadow of doubt that you are uncomfortable working with women or don't "get it" at all.

- For example, I've heard men address a large audience with "Gentlemen ... pause ... and ladies" realizing it was an afterthought and then laughing.

- Or commenting "You need to keep her; she's both female and ... an ethnic group... so you get double points" and laughing.

- **Eliminate sexual jokes** and direct or implied humour that disparages women. There is simply

no place for either in a professional working environment. I don't want to eliminate fun, but this stuff isn't any fun for a significant portion of our population and may be the most common form of exclusion.

7. Remember that men and women both have masculine and feminine characteristics. Cultivate some of your own

feminine characteristics; if you always repress them you give the impression they are "bad".

8. **Observe the times** that your female leaders have different opinions on a decision or discussion point than most of the men and explore it. Pay attention to what a different perspective might do to the outcome if you don't ignore it. Even consider accepting a woman's intuition on a decision. Try it out a few times; test it and see that it works.

9. **Model your own behavior changes** to other men and women below and above in our organization. Nothing else will send a greater message or actually change the system more effectively.

Change takes time

Change takes time. Many fear that setting targets around gender diversity in leadership positions could turn into a numbers game, with token positions, and riddled with cynicism. I share that concern, and I recognize that targets and measurement are very effective change mechanisms in our corporate

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culture. I hope the process of understanding why the targets are difficult to meet begin to show what is unbalanced within our systemic structures and ultimately cause the necessary personal behavioral changes throughout the organizational culture. Only then do we begin to poke at the core of our systemic structures, which may take a generation or more to significantly change. Deep change takes a long time. Be patient. ■

Bobbi Mooney is a senior level leader with a Fortune 500 company.

See related article: Senior level woman describes exclusionary treatment, by Bobbi Mooney, also published March 2003.