



Gender



Male Allyship Is About Paying Attention

Ask, listen, learn. **by W. Brad Johnson and David G. Smith**

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Although most men notionally support more gender inclusion and equity, there is clear research that men often are challenged at recognizing gender discrimination and harassment in real time. For instance, despite the recent focus on workplace sexual harassment and assault, a [2018 study](#) revealed that 77% of men didn't see harassment as a problem — even as 38% of their female colleagues reported experiencing workplace harassment. Lack of awareness can keep even well-intentioned men on the sidelines, rather than serving as effective [advocates and accomplices](#) for change.

Situational awareness is a key element of what we refer to as male gender intelligence (GQ). Sharpening your situational awareness requires greater vigilance to the gender dynamics operating in the workplace. Developing more acute situational awareness demands that men focus in on the relational environment, watch carefully, ask curious questions of female colleagues, and then engage in generous listening. Moreover, it requires honest humility and a perpetual learning orientation. Situationally aware men become more acutely attuned to gender inequities and harassment and are more willing to address them in real time.

How can an aspiring male ally begin to sharpen his situational awareness and increase his GQ? Amy Orlov of Forte Foundation recommends that men, “look for patterns and begin to notice workplace behavior and dynamics they didn’t even see before. What is happening in the room? How are your female colleagues experiencing this moment? Try to objectively observe these dynamics.”

Here are several things men can begin doing today to build their awareness of women’s experiences and gender inequities in the workplace.

Self-educate.

Self-education heightens awareness of gender inequities, reduces sexist attitudes, and increases participation in gender equity initiatives. Build your own GQ by reading about gender in the workplace and attending gender inclusion events. In the words of inclusion consultant Jennifer Brown, “Emotional labor is part of allyship. An ally takes the time to do their homework in reading, listening, understanding, without burdening women or people of color to do more of the labor they’ve been doing already.”

Attend to nonverbals.

Building better situational awareness requires improving your skill at reading nonverbal language. Be aware of any nonverbal cues that all is not well with a female colleague. In one of her first jobs as a reporter, Gretchen Carlson was sexually harassed by a photographer assigned with her on a news story. She recalled, “The news director at the time saw that I was distressed and having trouble focusing on the story I was writing. He kept coming up to me and asking, ‘What’s wrong?’ He was perceptive enough to notice something was wrong, kind enough to care about it, and I eventually told him what had happened.” He relieved the photographer of his duties immediately. Consider the following questions as you go about your day:

- How would you describe the mood in the room (e.g., good-natured, energized, icy, angry, anxious)?
- Who appears to be comfortable? Who is folded in on themselves?
- Who’s clenching their jaw or furrowing their brow — classic signs of stress?
- Who’s not laughing at a joke along with others?
- Who avoids making eye contact?
- When the norm in the virtual environment is to have cameras on, who keeps their camera off?

Notice sexist words and phrases.

Be attuned to sexist comments, biased language, and even overt, leering harassment. Sift the ambient noise, the side conversations, banter, and formal dialogue. Actively listen for those daily slights, objectifying comments, and stereotypes that leave women feeling inferior or unsafe. Situationally aware male allies quickly debug conversations so that they can efficiently disrupt bias and call out misogyny. Ask yourself:

- Do you hear condescending or patronizing language? Who is the target?
- Are sexual innuendos or inappropriate humor often heard in the context of “bro banter”?
- Are women in the room visibly uncomfortable with the topic or something that’s been said?

Focus on the intersections.

Developing your GQ and sharpening your situational awareness requires learning about the experiences of women of color (among other intersectional identities) — first understanding and, then, noticing that they are more likely than white women to feel devalued, demeaned, disrespected, excluded, and isolated. Many women of color feel invisible because they are the dominant group for neither their gender nor their race. A situationally aware man is more inclined to notice when a Black woman is held to an unfair standard, overlooked for a promotion opportunity, offered less money at hiring, or mistaken for administrative or janitorial staff — and intervene.

- Do you notice simplified language or assumptions that define people by a single identity?
- Do people on your team avoid conversations about identities different from their own?
- Are there people who are more likely to “cover” or hide their identities because they don’t feel comfortable or safe expressing them?

Pay attention to who is included.

One in five women report being the “only” woman in the room at work. Senior-level women and women in male-dominated professions are twice as likely to have this experience. “Only” women are also 50% more likely to consider quitting. Joanne Lipman, former editor-in-chief of *USA Today* reminds men that women in male-centric environments can experience *belonging uncertainty*: “You are not invited to lunch or

drinks with the guys and don't feel comfortable inviting yourself. When you walk into a meeting, the guys are already in their doing their pre-meeting, talking to each other, laughing, etc., and then they go silent when you walk in." Notice who is included — and who is not — and go out of your way to make female colleagues feel that they belong. Ask yourself:

- Who's in the meeting? Who is missing?
- Given the topic of discussion, who should be in the room discussing their work or serving as a subject-matter expert? Do the attendees match that list?
- Who's sitting at the table? Who's standing or sitting in an outer ring?
- Who's speaking most of the time and who rarely contributes? Whose input hasn't been solicited and who is being ignored?
- Who's being interrupted? Who's being dismissed?

Finally, ask women about their experiences.

Validate what you've learned through the lived experiences of women with whom you've created trusting relationships. Often, a humble and curious question goes a long way toward building better empathy and situational awareness. Many women we interviewed in [our own research](#) emphasized the importance of asking. Ipek Serifsoy, President of the Deep Coaching Institute said, "Men have a terrible time fathoming the things women experience daily. Women are reluctant to share negative experiences with men because they know on some level that men don't share those experiences. So, men need to be humble and acknowledge there's a lot they don't understand." Here are some examples of good ways to start a conversation:

- I'm curious about some of the things women in this organization find most challenging day-to-day, things that I — as a man — might not notice.

- If there was one thing you wish men who work here were more aware of, something men could do, or stop doing, what would that be?
- If there was something I could be more aware of — perhaps one thing I could start doing every day that might make the workplace better for you and other women — what would that be?
- If a guy were asking how he could really show up as a male ally to make the workplace fairer and more welcoming for women, what would you tell him?

Developing a deeper understanding of the experiences of the women around you and sharpening your situational awareness will inevitably and irrevocably transform your perspective. Asking, listening, and learning in this way will benefit everything you do as an ally, as a leader, and as a man. [One man](#) who took the time to really ask about the experiences of his female colleagues reflected: “Once you put on that lens, you can’t take it off. The world never looks the same.”

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