

Gender

Men, Stop Calling Yourself Allies. Act Like One.

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Summary. Men are clearly positioned — owing to their gender-conferred privilege and their organizational power — to bring about workplace change. But simply calling yourself an ally to any person of an... [more](#)

Now and then, at the conclusion of one of our workshops on better male allyship for gender equity in the workplace, a man will ask us how he can get his “certificate” or “credential” proving that he is a certified male ally. In these (mercifully rare) moments, we shake our heads and wonder how we failed to effectively communicate the true nature of allyship.

Allies for gender equity are dominant group members (men) who actively promote gender equality and equity in their personal lives and in the workplace through supportive and collaborative relationships and public acts of sponsorship and advocacy intended to drive systemic improvements to the organizational culture. Although men often report low levels of psychological standing — not to mention competence with specific ally actions — for engagement in gender-parity initiatives, it turns out that male engagement is essential. Research by Boston Consulting Group revealed that when men are actively engaged in gender diversity and inclusion efforts, both women and men have a much more positive outlook on their organization’s progress toward eliminating inequities.

Although men are clearly positioned — owing to their gender-conferred privilege and, often, their organizational power — to

bring about workplace change, there is a real risk that self-congratulatory, shallow, or shortsighted male allyship might paradoxically undermine the very people and the cause these “allies” purport to promote. This is why we discourage men from calling themselves allies. There are at least four compelling temptations for men to self-label as allies to women.

First, there is the problem of misguided motivation. Some men show up as *performative allies*, exhibiting just enough “nice” behavior to the marginalized group to avoid appearing sexist, to improve their performance ratings, or even to impress women (aka, the “fake male feminist”). Early in their ally journey, many men are driven by self-interest, meaning they lack awareness of systemic oppression of women and may only be concerned about one woman they know personally — a daughter, partner, or colleague, for instance. But calling oneself an ally for gender equity merely because you feel protective of one person is missing the point of allyship more broadly: the creation of systemic change.

Second, there is the siren call of the heroic masculine “manscript” that some men find irresistible, even if unconscious. This occurs when a man misinterprets the meaning of allyship, equating it with the archetype of the rescuing warrior or saving the damsel in distress. Research on gender differences in expressions of prosocial behavior confirms that (in aggregate) men are more likely than women to express helping behavior in very agentic, action-oriented ways. Of course, male heroism and rescuing may merely reinforce the gender status quo, place men on a pedestal, and ultimately disempower women.

Third, aligning in solidarity with a social cause may be viewed as a way to avoid scrutiny of past behaviors. The irony in this self-protective thinking is that we cannot critically examine status quo practices without acknowledging the harmful and deleterious effects caused by our participation in these practices. Authentic allyship starts with humility and vulnerability to accept our complicit role in systemic inequities and then have the courage to change those practices.

Finally, there is the problem of overestimating one’s actual behavior. Research on allyship to racially minoritized groups reveals that white people tend to assume they are “allies” by expressing as little prejudice as possible but that they often fail to actively promote social justice for minoritized groups — behavior

that people of color identify as central to allyship. The recent [Allies-In-Action study](#) of over 1100 men and women across companies revealed a stark aspiration-execution gap in ally behaviors. For instance, 90% of men said they had personally given a woman credit for her contributions and ideas in a meeting during the previous year, yet only 40% of women reported witnessing such male ally behavior during that same period.

Calling yourself an ally to any person of an underrepresented group — including women — misses the point of allyship altogether. Instead of self-labeling, here are six rules to live by for men who aspire to better ally behavior in the service of promoting real gender equity in the workplace.

Allyship is a verb, not a noun.

Allyship connotes action, not self-enhancing labels. In *Feminist Fight Club*, Jessica Bennett reminds men that contributing daily to the struggle for full gender liberation and equity is all — and only — about using your power for good in actionable ways. So, amplify a woman's ideas, make sure she's included, pass along her resume at strategic moments, and search out pay disparities and fix them. To these actions, we add disrupting bias and sexism in real time, confronting other men for sexist or harassing behavior, and calling out biased questions and language at hiring and promotion meetings.

Allyship is a journey, not a destination.

The temptation to self-credential or display your ally badge can be mitigated by regularly reminding yourself that nobody ever “arrives” as an ally. Inclusive leadership thought leader [Jennifer Brown](#) shared this with us: “I think the work of allyship needs to be sustained over time. Being an ally is a journey, not a destination. It is something you aspire to, but you have to be careful when you claim it. Acknowledge that we all have our own work to do.” Allyship involves a constant commitment to learning about the experiences of other groups, fostering a growth mindset, welcoming feedback, reflecting on missteps, and iterating to get better.

Allyship is with, not for.

The phrase “[nothing about us without us](#)” might aptly remind men that appropriate ally action for gender equity must always be inherently collaborative, cooperative, and rooted in humble partnership. Here are some tactics for keeping your ally actions collaborative: First, listen and learn. Ask curious questions about the experiences of women at work. Then, ask — don't assume — what role you can play in providing support, leveling the playing field, and changing inequitable policies, procedures, and systems.

See yourself as a co-conspirator with women for upsetting the status quo and disrupting inequity.

Allyship perpetuates autonomy, not dependence.

Hold yourself accountable for the net outcome of your ally behavior. Are women you align with increasingly autonomous, self-confident, and advancing in rank and pay? Psychologists Peter Glick and Susan Fiske caution men about the subtle but insidious effects of benevolent sexism, those subjectively positive (in the view of men) attitudes that idealize women in traditional roles but are paternal and protective. For example, emphasizing a woman's capacity for care and compassion in an annual evaluation without also calling out her competence and courage may reduce her odds of selection to leadership roles. Remain vigilant to the very real temptation for heroic action, rescuing, and protecting. Like hostile forms of sexism, benevolent sexism serves to justify and maintain patriarchy and traditional gender roles.

Allyship is about decentering, not standing in the spotlight.

Remember that the center stage has long been reserved for majority men and that the heart of allyship requires awareness of this gendered privilege and determination to step back so other voices can be heard. Effective allies must continually and accurately judge when it is most appropriate to listen or speak up in a meeting. Better male allies speak less, hand the mic to women with key expertise, structure projects so women shine and gain credit, and talk about talented women — not themselves or their allyship — when the team scores a win.

Allyship is critical of the status quo.

To avoid performative allyship, we must examine longstanding practices that perpetuate systemic inequities such as the gender wage gap and lack of representation of women in senior leadership positions. Joan Williams' bias interruption model is an example of how allies can systematically disrupt bias in everyday workplace practices (e.g., recruiting, hiring, onboarding, feedback, evaluation, promotion).

Creating an equitable workplace that values and supports a diverse workforce demands authentic leadership and an abiding humility. To move beyond performance and self-interest, commit to action-oriented, results-driven, and outcomes-based allyship — no matter how uncomfortable it is. As leaders and colleagues, we owe this to the women in our organization, so let's show up as allies by listening, learning, and doing the work. And when

someone calls you an ally, feel good about it for a moment. Then get back to doing the work.



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