

# 5 Strategies for Engaging Men As Gender Diversity Partners



### INTRODUCTION

Engaging men as allies and partners in gender diversity work is a powerful – and underutilized – lever for change. Substantially accelerating progress for women in leadership is nearly impossible without increasing men's involvement.

Men fill the vast majority of key decision-making roles across every industry and profession – law, medicine, technology, financial services and the list goes on.<sup>1</sup> Over recent decades progress has been incremental at best and there are multiple signs of backsliding for women in leadership.

Many organizations have diversity and inclusion initiatives in place. Yet few men, particularly white men, are actively involved beyond a small core of male champions whose capacity is typically highly constrained by other responsibilities.

The road forward:

- ❖ Requires expanding the reach to encompass men in early and middle management who play a pivotal role in the retention and development of female talent
- ❖ Requires men working in close partnership with their female colleagues
- ❖ Challenges women and men to co-design better and more effective organizations, fitting our 21<sup>st</sup>-century, global information economy

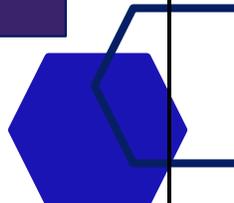
The first step is to proactively and thoughtfully engage men.

**The big challenge is HOW.**

Based on extensive research with male allies, we've identified five strategies for moving men from the sidelines to the front lines of diversity work

### STRATEGIES

1. Reframe men's involvement from have-to to want-to
2. Create a safe forum
3. Connect the dots
4. Lift up the positive
5. Emphasize learning & growth



### **STRATEGY ONE: Reframe men's involvement from a 'have-to' to a 'want to'**

The messaging to seek men's involvement in diversity efforts typically feels more like a command or plea, neither being particularly enticing. It's rarely framed as the incredible opportunity that engagement in gender diversity work provides.

Understanding gender diversity is an opportunity for men to learn cutting-edge leadership and management skills, to learn about themselves, and to strengthen their relationships with the females in their lives.

Organizations should communicate that men are wanted – and needed – to become active partners in diversity work. Creating a forum for men's involvement, valuing the time they spend, and rewarding their efforts - with words and actions – are all effective drivers for men to get, and stay, involved.

### **Men Are a Significantly Underutilized D&I Resource**

Men who participated in male ally groups on business school campuses reported *little support and no clear structure or pathway for their becoming involved in gender diversity work* when they reentered the workforce.

**If those men who are informed and passionate about facilitating gender equality in the workplace find it difficult to engage, what does that suggest for the men who are less inclined to do so?**

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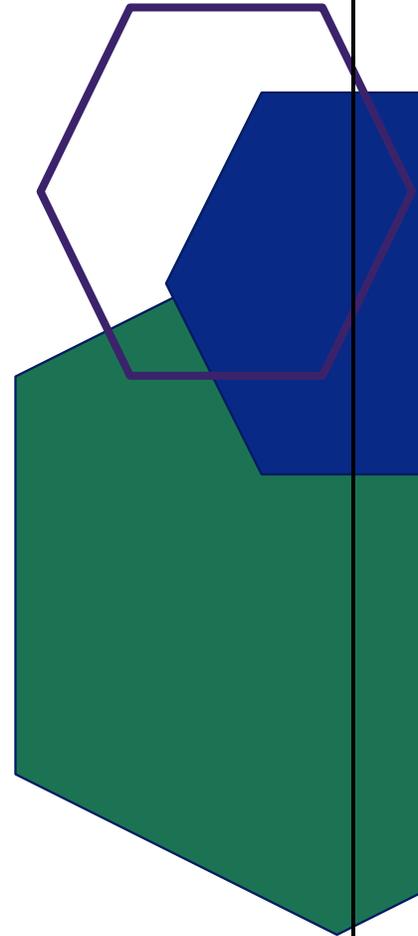
### Redefining Participation in Gender Diversity Work

One client's experience provides a helpful example of reframing the approach to engaging men. A first draft of the communication inviting men to participate in a year-long male ally development experience read as simultaneously demanding and apologetic. It emphasized the company benefits and the expectations of participants in terms of time and effort. The message communicated another 'have-to' on men's overflowing list of priorities.

The final invitation communicated a very different sentiment. It emphasized that the invitees had been *chosen* for an important leadership development program. The men were informed that they had been recommended by their female colleagues (through the company's women's network) for demonstrating male ally behaviors at work. The men learned they would be working with senior male leaders through the male ally experience in helping to build a company-wide approach for involving men in diversity work.

A communication was sent to each invitee's manager, informing them of the invitation sent to their direct report. The message requested the manager's help with integrating learnings from the male ally experience into their employee's goals and career development plans.

The client was delighted to receive a nearly universal acceptance to the male-ally invitation.



### STRATEGY TWO: Create a safe forum

A chief concern for many men with regard to supporting gender diversity in the workplace is psychological safety. Men fear embarrassment if their words or actions reveal a lack of understanding of gender issues and they fear false accusations that could profoundly affect their lives.<sup>ii</sup> The calculus for most men is: the chances of *getting it wrong* are far greater than *getting it right*, so the prudent approach is to avoid becoming involved.

The problem is, men's reluctance to engage in gender diversity work, facilitating women's career development as mentors and sponsors, is the exact opposite of what's needed to move the needle in building a robust pipeline of women leaders.

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## STRATEGY TWO: Create a safe forum (cont.)

Organizations need to create safe spaces for men to listen and be listened to, to make mistakes and learn, and to develop and deepen their gender lenses. Without a safe forum for becoming involved, organizations will fail to utilize perhaps the most powerful lever of change available to them, the active engagement of men.

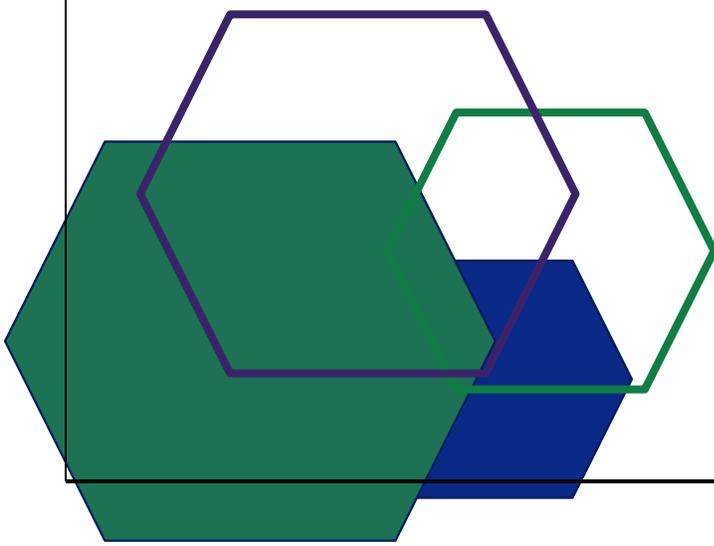
*People are not talked into - but listened into - change.*

### Men Feeling Unsafe?

It might strike as deeply ironic that men worry about safety, given the rampant sexism and harassment women face in the workplace. Nonetheless, the feelings are both common and real.

### The Me Too Movement: A Double-Edged Sword

While the Me Too movement has sent a powerful message that harassers will be held accountable and suffer the consequences for their actions, it has simultaneously surfaced widespread concern as men adapt to new, long-overdue norms of behavior in the workplace.



### **STRATEGY THREE: Connect the dots**

Gender diversity is typically defined as increasing women's opportunities and influence by facilitating their movement into leadership roles. But gender diversity is also about gender balance; organizations benefiting from the dynamic mix of men and women working together and sharing their diverse perspectives. Research indicates that a gender mix close to parity represents the sweet spot and as teams become skewed, toward men – or women, their effectiveness declines.

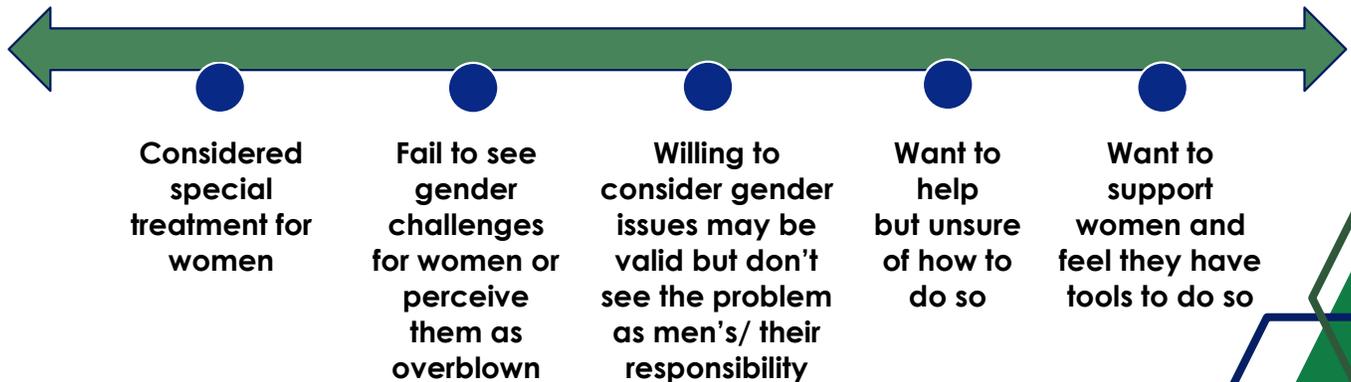
The business case for gender diversity, which is well documented<sup>iii</sup> and a critical piece of the puzzle, is the primary rationale organizations provide for a focus on women's development and advancement. Yet male allies overwhelmingly report their primary impetus for involvement in gender diversity work stemmed from the personal experience of one or more females in their lives, rather than from an economic concept.

Organizations help to engage men by connecting the dots and linking support for gender equality in the workplace to what's important to each man including their wives, daughters, sisters, female colleagues and more. Research highlights the power of these connections - fathers who have daughters run more socially responsible companies<sup>iv</sup> and men with working wives/ partners are more likely to promote women they manage.

A body of research documents several critical benefits of gender equality for men<sup>v</sup> – less work-life stress, better health and higher marital satisfaction to name a few – yet this information is not common knowledge for men, or for women.

Anchoring men's involvement in their personal experiences engenders a connection that is simultaneously intellectual and emotional. Expanding from the theoretical to the personal makes all the difference in motivating change.

### How Do Men Perceive Support for Gender Diversity in the Workplace?



#### STRATEGY FOUR: Lift up the positive

The drumbeat of men behaving badly reverberates and with each new story, the narrative reinforces the perception of men as the problem. Yet we rarely hear about the men who respect women – personally and professionally – and play an important role in facilitating their career success.

The saying *what gets measured gets done* is ubiquitous in business settings. Based on brain research, the addendum should read, **what gets rewarded gets repeated**. Male allies, the many men who encourage, advocate, enable and support women, receive little if any recognition for doing so in the workplace.

Organizations seeking to engage men in gender diversity work need to sing the praises of the men who are already doing so, whether formally or informally. Companies need to provide meaningful rewards - in the form of words, compensation and opportunity - to the men [and women] who actively mentor and sponsor women and help to drive change.

In addition to ensuring there are repercussions for bad actors – men behaving badly – organizations sending clear signals that diversity work matters, and raising up the men who are role models, set a tone that encourages men to participate.

### **STRATEGY FIVE: Emphasize learning and growth**

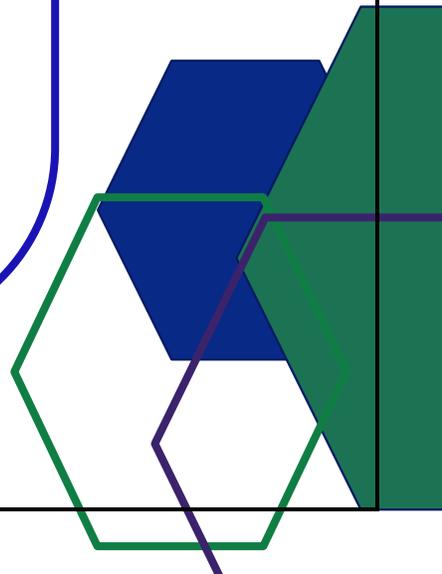
Discussion about diversity work often suggests a destination at some future point in time - when women reach gender parity on the management committee, when managers have completed unconscious bias training or when the gender gap in turnover disappears. The sense is diversity work will be complete when...

The destination metaphor is not the right one because diversity is a practice, an ongoing management activity, akin to product marketing, product management or business development.

Leaders change, industries evolve, and without ongoing attention, diversity declines. The incredible pull toward replicating the homogeneity of leadership is ever present thanks to human biology: like attracts like. It is the systems, structures and practices that collectively ensure diversity in leadership endures.

Mirroring business cycles, the commitment to diversity and inclusion efforts waxes and wanes, as does the related outcomes. A robust new talent development program, focused on ensuring women don't fall through the cracks, gets shelved when a merger takes place. An organization that's been highly intentional in improving the gender balance of the executive team finds there's little gender diversity in their feeder pool for leadership talent.

Organizations facilitate men's involvement when they treat diversity management as an ongoing business function. Men will be far more likely to get, and stay, involved when diversity is no longer relegated to a program or initiative, but instead becomes a leadership skill, perceived as requiring ongoing cultivation.





### CONCLUSION

Men are an untapped resource for accelerating gender balance. Men are unclear about not only what – but if – they have a role to play in gender diversity work. The Me Too movement, which has brought critically important attention to the problem of workplace harassment, has simultaneously chilled men's inclination to support women's careers or even to discuss gender equality in the workplace.

Organizations have an opportunity to recalibrate their diversity approach, to engage men (particularly Caucasian men) not as helpers but as true partners, engaged in the day-to-day work of driving change.

Male allies report their involvement in gender diversity work shifts the frame from 'helping women' to 'working side-by-side with women,' together seeking to dismantle diversity-related barriers to advancement, to evolve the work culture, and to co-create a more satisfying, effective and healthier workplace. Inviting men's involvement and creating forums for men to engage in diversity work helps them to better understand the females in their lives, to see how gender equality benefits men both at and outside of the workplace, and to identify not as an outsider but as an important part of the diversity story.

It is possible to realize gender equality in the workplace and thru men partnering with women to make it happen, *it will* become a reality.

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### A New Approach: Moving Men from the Sidelines to the Frontlines of Diversity Work

Strategy	Current Reality	New Approach
Reframe men's involvement	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>✚ Few men involved in gender diversity work</li> <li>✚ Men unclear about their role</li> <li>✚ Men receive little recognition for championing women's advancement</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>💡 <b>Brain-related research:</b> what gets rewarded gets repeated</li> <li>✚ Demonstrate diversity work's importance to the organization through recognition and rewards for involvement</li> <li>✚ Positively and proactively engage men</li> <li>✚ Frame gender competence as a leadership skill and involvement as leadership development</li> <li>✚ Broaden gender to mean women &amp; men focused on leveling the playing field to enable gender balance</li> </ul>
Create a safe forum	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>✚ Men highly fearful of gender missteps; perceive safest strategy as <u>not</u> getting involved</li> <li>✚ Women deprived of critical mentorship &amp; sponsorship opportunities</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>💡 <b>Brain-related research:</b> a threat state – real or perceived – shuts the brain down and is not conducive to learning</li> <li>✚ Create safe spaces for men to get involved in both male-only and co-ed forums</li> <li>✚ Encourage authenticity and allow men to speak, to listen and to build trust</li> </ul>
Connect the dots	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>✚ Many men don't see the relevance of gender diversity work in their lives</li> <li>✚ Gender-related challenges are invisible for many men</li> <li>✚ The company-oriented business case is the rationale provided for men's engagement in gender diversity work</li> <li>✚ Men are lectured to rather than listened to and engaged in diversity work</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>💡 <b>Brain-related research:</b> people pay attention to what they see as relevant and connected to their lives</li> <li>✚ Help men understand gender and the links to their lives at, and beyond, work by including discussions of masculinity</li> <li>✚ Listening to women's stories is a powerful mechanism for enabling men to see and understand gender issues</li> <li>✚ Assist men in shifting the focus from specific situations to broader systemic norms that perpetuate gender inequalities</li> </ul>
Lift up the positive	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>✚ Gender conversations focus on 'men behaving badly' leaving many men feeling like the problem</li> <li>✚ Little attention paid to men who role model male ally behaviors</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>💡 <b>Brain-related research:</b> what gets rewarded gets repeated</li> <li>✚ Put the spotlight on men who support women's career development</li> <li>✚ Recognize and reward men who demonstrate male ally behaviors</li> <li>✚ Ensure rewards are meaningful and visible</li> </ul>
Emphasize learning & growth	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>✚ Diversity is seen as having an end point</li> <li>✚ Shaming and blaming drives men underground</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>💡 <b>Brain-related research:</b> a growth mindset encourages ongoing learning</li> <li>✚ Position diversity as an ongoing business function, not a program or initiative</li> <li>✚ Communicate that gender competence deepens through time, developing a gender lens requires experimentation, reflection and practice</li> </ul>

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