

Men, Gender Equality and Fear It's Time for a New Approach



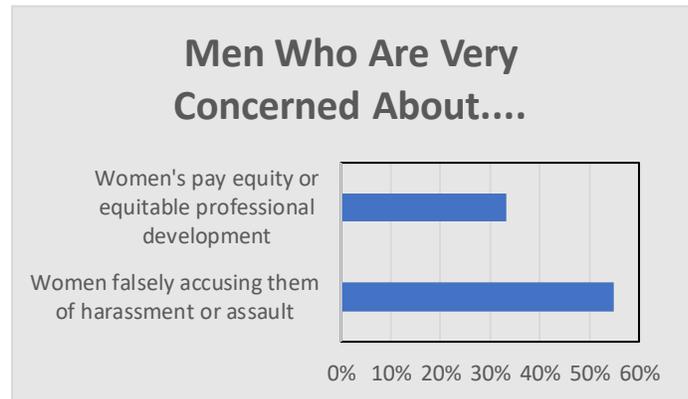
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After several decades of organizational women's initiatives, awards for companies that support women's advancement, and study after study documenting the powerful business drivers for prioritizing gender balance in leadership, we're at a point where men register greater concern about being falsely accused than about the substantial and persistent inequalities experienced by women.

The kicker is, *false claims of harassment are rare and most experiences of harassment at work never get reported.*

It's Time for a Change

This disheartening situation highlights the rampant fear and widespread misunderstanding about why gender equality is important for women and men. It's time to reboot the gender conversation and that's a good thing.



Source: Of All The Gender Issues At Work, Men Are Most Concerned About False Harassment Claims From Women by Kim Elsesser, Forbes, January 10, 2019.

Men Weigh In

- ❖ [60% of male managers'](#) report discomfort interacting with women in everyday activities (mentoring, socializing)
- ❖ Senior male leaders indicate being [ten-times more hesitant](#) to have 1-on-1 meetings with junior level women as compared to men

The truth is gender has long been weaponized and used to divide. The prevailing women versus men frame, in which gender is couched, magnifies and reinforces differences rather than providing a broader context which encompasses the many similarities.

Having spent most of my life as a close observer of how gender works in the world, as well as more than two decades professionally focused on the role of gender in the workplace and the home, I have come to believe that gender equality is far more linked to one's world view than to the gender of an individual. In its truest form, gender equality is about lifting the constraints posed by gender norms that limit women and men alike.

Defining a New Approach

What is this new approach to creating real gender equality in the workplace?

Essential Characteristics of a New DEI Approach

Foundational Elements

- Clarity on Stereotypes versus Archetypes
- Respectful Behavior

In the Office

- Gender Parity as a Business Asset
- A Partnership Mentality
- Focus on Big Organizational Challenges

Promoting Change

- The Importance of Nuance and Common Sense
- The Need to Ask New Questions

Think of it as

DEI 2.0.

GenderWorks has identified seven essential elements that characterize a new and improved way of thinking about and guiding efforts to strengthen diversity, equity and inclusion.

Clarity on Stereotypes versus Archetypes

The topic of stereotypes is front and center in discussions of diversity and inclusion in the workplace. Stereotypes are oversimplifications – of an idea, a characteristic, an individual or a group. Our brains are wired to detect a new piece of information and subsequently search for an existing pattern in our minds where it will be stored. The problem is, stereotypes are static and self-reinforcing – staying fixed in our minds – rather than evolving through time.

Why is that? The human brain selectively takes in information that reinforces familiar patterns while discounting stimuli that do not. Thus, we selectively pay attention to information that supports what we already believe. It takes both an open mind and effort to expand one's understanding of something or someone.

Stereotypes are partially true – and partially false – and repeatedly confused with archetypes. An archetype is a model or strong example of something with particular salient characteristics. Like stereotypes, archetypes are built from patterns that describe objects or people.

A helpful metaphor is the idea of the breed standard in the world of dog competitions. But a visit to any park will make it clear that an archetype is not all inclusive. While a breed of dog might be judged by some constructed standard, even within the constraints of a single breed, dogs come in many shapes and sizes.

Stereotypes are highly problematic because the shorthand becomes the full story. While the *average* woman may be more emotional and talk more than the average man or the *average* man may be more passionate about sports or more comfortable with math than the average woman, this does not mean – by a long stretch – that every single woman or every single man is representative of these archetypal characteristics. The variability across a single gender is great.

The concept of gender is especially complicated because it has been treated as binary, with two choices on the menu – male or female. The real story, based on biological and sociological research, suggests the picture is far more complex. Gender characteristics are lumped into two big categories – masculine or feminine – with the expectation that men model masculine traits and women model feminine ones. Sadly, deviating from these prescribed gender norms has high social costs, even potential harm or death for those in the LGBTQ community (but that critical topic is beyond the scope of this article.) Instead of the binary model that we continue to reinforce, with two all-encompassing gender buckets, the reality is individuals possess a composite of masculine and feminine traits in endless permutations.

We judge others because they trigger our stereotypes and we stop there, not bothering to see the specific individual or group, not bothering to learn what is true for him, her, they or them. Stereotypes may be what we see at first blush but that's all they are. They are incomplete. Only through additional exploration can we get the real story, the far more complex and robust picture.

Respectful Behavior

An important starting place for dialogue on gender – and myriad controversial topics – is respect. This means showing regard for the feelings and traditions of others, even when you perceive things very differently, and treating others as you would want to be treated. I am not suggesting that this is easy by any means, nor that I am particularly skilled in this arena with regard to topics that have great import for me yet, I observe over and over again that it is in this context of mutual respect that it's possible to open a portal for insights and new beliefs.

Gender diversity work at its most effective requires women and men to listen and learn from one another, exploring how each experiences gender at – and outside of – the workplace. In this environment, it becomes possible to build a foundation of shared understanding that enables trust to grow.

A clear theme shared by male allies – across age, industry, and context for supporting gender equality – was the critical importance of listening. Terrific advice shared by a male ally was to approach discussions from a place of *not knowing* and in a tone that communicates a desire to know more. When emotions are high, it is particularly important to listen deeply, with the intent to hear rather than to prepare a response. When children’s behavior and words are challenging, parents are advised to *get curious, not furious*. This quality of detachment and observation is a practical way to demonstrate respect, particularly in

discussions where individuals have differing views. A male ally deftly described respect in action.



Women’s stories can be easy to dismiss as you’re thinking, that’s never happened to me so it wouldn’t happen to anyone else. Or you think the problem’s easy to solve or I wouldn’t tolerate it. It’s important to have empathy for others, to hear another side of the story and to listen to women’s experiences.

Gender Parity as a Business Asset

A rash of research studies have documented the business case for gender diversity, correlating greater gender parity with higher levels of innovation, lower risk, less volatility in earnings, and higher financial returns in the form of income growth and return on equity, among other metrics. The value of greater diversity comes not only from bringing a broader portfolio of perspectives to the table but also from white men, with more diverse viewpoints, being more willing to share those perspectives.

Instead of resources spent on gender diversity being viewed as a cost, it should be viewed as an investment in *retrofitting old ways of doing things*. Similar to capital investments in new technology or in space for staff expansion, investment in diversity work enables greater value creation.

A powerful way to approach gender diversity work, one that directly links to enhanced value creation, is to explore *how gender norms could be contributing to perennial business problems* such as employee stress, safety issues, and ineffective communication.

How Gender Parity Facilitates Real Solutions to Business Challenges	
<p>A major energy company found that on oil rigs, which were nearly all men, a highly machismo culture dominated and led to problematic, sometimes catastrophic, safety issues. Men did not value the importance of safety protocols and thus did not employ them. The presence of more women engineers on rigs helped to change the culture in ways the put safety front and center.</p>	<p>For a global pharmaceutical company, the transition from zero to three women board members changed the dynamics of how the group operated. While the men were more inclined to listen to a proposed change and immediately vote – thumbs up or down - the women asked many more questions before moving to the decision phase. Adding women to the board fueled not only more thoughtful dialogue but also more robust consideration of important issues brought to the board’s attention.</p>

Powerful forces such as technology and globalization have profoundly sped up the pace of work. Employees struggle to keep up experiencing burnout, mental health problems, and an inability to focus among others. This leads to a plethora of business challenges such as inexorably rising health care costs, turnover and its many attendant costs, poor customer service, quality issues and lack of innovation.

A major barrier to finding more effective and healthier ways of working is a hero mentality - deeply embedded in masculine ideology – that equates to repeatedly increasing commitment, no matter the personal cost. This hero mentality devalues good planning and boundary setting, facilitates a crisis culture, encourages tunnel vision, and inhibits exploration of sustainable work practices. Greater gender parity, coupled with recognizing and valuing the wisdom working mothers bring to integrating work and caretaking, would facilitate new solutions and ameliorate the many business problems linked to perpetual overwork.

Feminine characteristics – just like masculine ones – can also create or exacerbate business challenges. For example, a heavily female-dominated health care company was struggling to meet deadlines related to updated health care regulations. The leadership was hearing that excessive and unproductive meetings were the culprit, cutting into time for focusing on the regulatory shifts. In the highly consensus-driven culture, instead of canceling meetings for which key decision makers were unavailable, the meetings would go on as planned, yet still require a follow-up meeting for finalization of decisions. In this case, the female tendency toward consensus-driven decision making was not being balanced by the need for more effective meeting management. A larger dose of the typical masculine drive toward action would have been helpful.

A Partnership Mentality

Gender equality is generally framed as benefitting women. A far more accurate angle is to discuss gender equality as loosening the grips of societally-dictated gender norms for all. This enables women and men greater flexibility and more choice around their work, caregiving and life decisions.



The famous women’s rights leader Elizabeth Cady Stanton aptly said, “

*And when women and men think,
the first step in progress is taken.*

While visiting a client site to launch a women’s network or to facilitate a task force of women leaders, inevitably a man not participating in the session would ask, “What are you ladies doing in there?” or joke, “They’re plotting a takeover.”

The men were clearly curious, and concerned!

Several male allies have shared stories of reaching out to join a women's network or indicating their desire to help, and being met with suspicion and quizzical looks from women network leaders. Women network leaders and members may be understandably wary that men's involvement could dilute their efforts. They fear men will seek to dominate - a key gender challenge for women in many work cultures - rather than to work alongside their women colleagues, together seeking to drive change. Male allies agree that a cardinal mistake some men make when first becoming involved in gender diversity work is behaving as though they're riding in on a white horse to save the day. This approach communicates arrogance and is the antithesis of partnership behavior.

Partnerships are characterized by mutual learning and by working together toward a shared goal. Gender competence is a skill that benefits not only men but also women. While women tend toward feeling undervalued and underutilized in the workplace, men are far more likely to feel misunderstood and unappreciated as fathers and husbands. Men who seek to support gender parity by working with women to drive change can set a positive tone by recognizing women's efforts - over a very long time - to combat gender-related challenges in the workforce.

Women can help engage men in gender diversity work by not ridiculing men's confusion, not just about understanding harassment, but also about the broader changing dynamics in the workplace and the home. Too often women roll their eyes - literally or figuratively - when a man says or does something that demonstrates he's not tuned in to the gender diversity conversation.

While it can feel exasperating for women (who know the struggles all too well), assuming positive intent and providing space for men to share authentically, to make mistakes and learn, and to clarify their understanding of gender challenges in the workplace, goes a long way toward creating a partnership that can endure. Furthermore, men also confront gender challenges yet have little - if any - avenue for feeling heard.

Focus on Big Organizational Challenges

We have become so accustomed to seeing the opposite gender in the other corner of the boxing ring, that too often we lose sight of what we are rallying against - systems, structures, and practices that need to be adapted for the reality of the 21st century workforce.

Women's voices often function like a canary in the coal mine, bringing attention to issues that have far reaching affects, and negatively influence men as well as women.

Take for instance the perennial issue of work-life integration.

Women continue to be far more likely than men to be asked about how they combine their professional and caregiving responsibilities - yet men's reporting of personal work-life conflict has *surpassed* women's in recent years. Are men not caregivers' as well? Are men's roles as fathers less important than women's as mothers? Are men not also struggling to be active parents while coping with rising workloads?

Instead of devolving into the adversarial stance of men vs. women or couching gender diversity efforts as helping women (when research indicates so many ways in which gender equality benefits men), a far more productive approach is exploring the connections between gender norms (think archetype not stereotype) and major organizational challenges. Focus on organizational problems such as stemming the rise of healthcare costs through efforts to tackle employee burnout or strengthening client relationships through efforts to reduce disruptive turnover.

This approach supports women and men seeing themselves as being on the same team (not as adversaries), facilitates gender partnerships that are oriented toward problem solving, and results in organizational changes that benefit the business and the workforce simultaneously. Diversity, equity and inclusion evolve from being an HR initiative to being a helpful way to assess business challenges and generate more effective solutions.

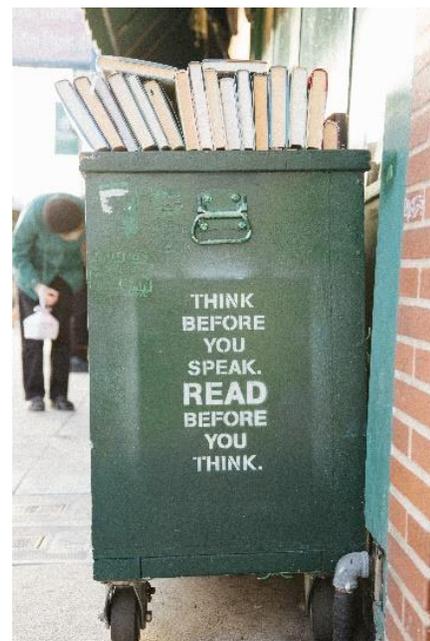
The Importance of Nuance: A Common-Sense Approach to Harassment

A rising tide of understanding, calling out inappropriate behavior in the workplace, has left even the well-intentioned worried. Men's heightened fear in response to the Me-Too movement argues for the importance of a more thoughtful and nuanced understanding of harassment.

Brain research indicates black and white thinking is closely associated with a perceived lack of safety. This binary thinking is closely linked to individuals operating in a threat state. While for our prehistoric ancestors, reactionary thinking and response was a survival skill, the complex challenges that characterize the modern workplace require a very different approach. Big, multi-layered issues necessitate the ability to see shades of gray.

The discussion of workplace harassment desperately needs more gray, coupled with defining clear boundaries that are non-negotiable. We have conflated innocent errors (always referring to leaders as he) with thoughtless, obnoxious behaviors (sexist jokes) with behaviors that cross a boundary (sexualizing women co-workers) which more often than not represent a clear abuse of power. Think a more senior-level person linking work opportunities with a desired sexual relationship.

This oversimplification is hurting – not helping - the development of a common-sense approach to managing harassment in the workplace. There are a whole range of harassment behaviors along a continuum. Frequency, intent, willingness to hear and



respond to feedback, and the relative levels of the individuals involved are all critical factors in crafting a *proportionally appropriate response* to harassing behaviors.

I've often heard men say something like, "I'm not even allowed to tell a woman she looks pretty or that I like her outfit anymore." I would argue that telling a woman she looks attractive is not the problem. The problems arise when: 1) the compliment is sexually charged and inappropriate for the workplace, 2) there are excessive compliments targeted at one individual, or 3) all the compliments are about women's looks and not about their professional contributions. Context matters.

Men worry that they will somehow be caught off guard and charged with harassment, potentially upending their careers and all they've worked so hard to achieve. This worry is misguided. Egregious cases tend to be clear cut and avoiding them straight-forward.

Most of the high-profile news stories spotlighting harassment reflect an abuse of power, fueled by egotism, a lack of regard, the absence of self-reflection and in some cases, outright cruelty.

Repeatedly asking someone out who has clearly indicated a lack of interest? Pretty clear. Making a sexual overture toward a woman who is clearly subordinate (more junior in rank or substantially younger)? Should be pretty clear but apparently isn't. Offering professional opportunities in exchange for sexual favors or threatening professional harm in the absence of sexual favors? Egregiously clear. Physically forcing or restraining someone in any way? Couldn't be clearer. Intentionally seeking to frighten, demean or marginalize someone with words and actions? Is it necessary to ask?

The reality is that the overwhelming majority of men who seek to do the right thing, and feel confused by what constitutes harassment, have nothing to worry about. Here are a few simple ways men can clear up any possible confusion if they're concerned:

- 1) Stop any behaviors that are worrisome or potentially problematic
- 2) Investigate and ask the woman or women involved if the behavior is a problem
- 3) Ask yourself the question, how would I feel about a man treating my -- daughter, niece, wife, sister, female friend, fill in the blank - this way? If the response is, I'd want to punch him in the face or worse, then the answer is clear.

While organizations are seeking to make long-needed adjustments to how women are treated in the workplace, growing pains are inevitable. Change is hard.

The Need to Ask New Questions

The ability for organizations to realize gender parity requires them to start asking new questions. Many of the obstacles to greater progress result from inertia and a lack of innovative thinking. Too often diversity, equity and inclusion work can feel marginalized,

relegated to an HR project rather than regarded as a powerful lever to strengthen financial returns, drive innovation, and reduce risk, all benefits documented by research.

Asking new questions opens up pathways in the brain. The table below highlights common issues and challenges that women confront at work and poses questions that can help to spur innovative thinking and solutions.

Common Issue/ Challenge	New Questions
Women leave a company after discovering male peers are paid substantially more	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ➤ Is there an organizational philosophy (or guidelines for managers) regarding pay disparities by gender? ➤ What is the process for leaders and managers to proactively monitor pay disparities by gender for their teams? What is the impact on women’s engagement at the company feeling they are underpaid and undervalued? ➤ As a leader, if all salaries were public, could you justify the gender disparities?
The leadership model at the company (perceived as requiring unbounded commitment), conflicts with women’s vision of success enabling the integration of career <u>and</u> active family involvement.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ➤ Is the all-in leadership model truly necessary? ➤ What are the problems with this model – for the business? The individuals? ➤ How can leadership roles be restructured to be more sustainable and inclusive? ➤ As a leader, if your care responsibilities suddenly increased - due to a family illness – requiring your daily involvement, how would the company be affected?
Women are strongly motivated by the ability to make a positive difference in people’s lives. Yet they find the company’s mission is <u>not</u> the compass for daily decision making.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ➤ Is the company’s mission overshadowed by a singular focus on the financials? ➤ How would the business change if that equation was reversed? ➤ How would women’s desire for leadership roles change if that equation was reversed? ➤ Is a strong connection to the company’s mission seen as a business skill, or a lack of business skills?
Women’s ambitions are eroded by multiple converging forces: motherhood translating to reduced opportunities, less qualified male peers getting ahead, and managers with little time or interest in their development.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ➤ Does the company having a listening system to ensure an understanding of women’s experiences? Why their ambitions decline? Is it safe for women to be candid? ➤ How is this listening system connected to proactive responses when problematic patterns are identified? ➤ How can management be structured to ensure employees have multiple individuals invested in their careers? ➤ Do fathers take advantage of workplace supports for new parents in similar ways to their female peers? If not, why not? ➤ How can male managers develop male ally skills so as to recognize problematic gender patterns?

Conclusion

Women's potential has been - and continues to be - squandered in the workplace, [with little progress in sight](#). Globally, the [underutilization of women's talents in the workforce translates to a 12 trillion](#) – with a T – dollar loss.

At the same time, having men on the sidelines, marginally involved (if at all) in diversity work represents a tremendous lost opportunity. **The prevalent approach to gender diversity work is missing a major piece of the puzzle – proactively involving men – as allies and partners.**

By employing a new approach to framing gender in the workplace, organizations can engage men in ways that not only substantially benefit women and companies but also enrich men's lives. That's a win-win-win!