

## Forward March

# Men have a vital role to play in advancing women in the workplace



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Encouraging greater equity in the workplace is an ambition that all would agree is a desirable outcome. A more balanced and equitable workforce is proven to contribute to a better performing and more creative business.

Achieving that balance, however, often tends to focus on what steps women can take to advance their careers, when in fact the debate should be focused also on what men could be doing to support their female colleagues.

Men have traditionally been resistant to change. Externally, they may declare an intention to drive change, but may not be aware of the simple steps they can take to turn an intent into reality. So why is this?

Firstly, there is a real fear in men that in promoting women, they lose their own status in their company, their department, and even in their family. "Masculinity," writes Adam Grant, an organizational psychologist, "is hard to win but easy to lose." I can recall a time at IKEA more than 15 years ago when the CEO declared an intent to promote more women in the business, only to find that the top 200 positions in the group were taken by men – and nearly all were white, 40-year-old men from Sweden!

For three days, these 200 leaders, alongside 50 women identified as having high potential, debated how to remove gender bias and promote more women in the business. We met again later for another three days, after which we formulated our first Diversity, Equity and Inclusion (DE&I) strategy. During these conversations, I well remember one of the men speaking passionately against the idea of positively promoting women saying that now, as a man, he had no career. The CEO was swift in his response: his colleague did have a career, but now

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there was more competition. The opportunity to be promoted on merit had not disappeared; it was simply that now there was a greater pool of talent to choose from.

## Removing the barriers

The belief that men have a greater right to promotion and a career is certainly one barrier that needs to be removed. Another is the belief that men cannot be carers, and that those who do take time out to spend with their children are stigmatized for doing so.

Raising a family is considered 'women's work', and they are discriminated against in the workplace because of it. Men who take parental leave, on the other hand, fear being seen as lazy or otherwise not committed to the business, and so refrain from taking leave to which they are entitled. Many men would actively welcome the opportunity of spending more time with their families and children but are afraid that their absence from the business will disrupt their future career progression, and how they are viewed by their peers. Removing that stigma against men will serve to advance the position of women, because there would be no need to discriminate against them.

Men can also take practical steps in everyday scenarios to support their female colleagues. They can be more proactive in including co-workers in conversations in social settings, finding topics of common interest, and not just talking about football or beer.

Leaders can be more helpful in giving women a voice in meetings, where statistics prove that men speak for longer than women, and women who do speak are often ignored. This is contrary to the now well-publicized comments from Yoshiro Mori, the former president of the Tokyo Olympics committee, who famously said that women should not be on committees because they talk too much! His comments, reported in the Financial Times and elsewhere, were not only sexist but also factually incorrect.

A review conducted by Deborah Tannen, a Professor of Linguistics, of 56 studies of speaking patterns in meetings found only two where women talked more than men. The phenomenon of 'Maninterrupting', however, is not always intended to offend. Adam Grant wrote in the Washington Post last year that men sometimes see interruptions as a sign of engagement, 'whereas women take them as a show of disrespect'.

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## Changing behaviours

Men can change how they see and react to women who have a point of view that they wish to express, and how they interpret what they say. If a man is assertive, he is seen as having drive and being initiative, and in control. A woman who is assertive is seen as being aggressive, and a threat to a fragile male ego. This was the point made by Tanvi Akhauri in a recent article in Shethepeople. A man who shows assertive traits 'is hailed as a powerhouse of leadership, a man with a plan, a man who will take his team along'. Assertive women, on the other hand, are 'loud, rude and bitchy'.

In many companies, the more prosaic tasks are nearly always given to women. At meetings, it is the women who are expected to make the coffee, or take the minutes, re-enforcing a prejudice that they are somehow less important than their male counterparts. Mentoring of new starters or interns is also usually given to women, and although they are of course up to the task, it is still taking them away from their day job and sending out the wrong message that their job does not carry the same weight as a man's.

Key to the advancement of women in the workplace is measurement, hiring and promoting women where they are under-represented, and understanding the importance of a balanced team. But it is also about freeing men from the impression that women are somehow the enemy to their own career progression. They are not.

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