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## **ARTICLE** **GENDER**

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*by David G. Smith and W. Brad Johnson*

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# Lots of Men Are Gender-Equality Allies in Private. Why Not in Public?

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In the last week, film producer [Harvey Weinstein's](#) decades of sexual harassment — which many have described as an open secret in Hollywood — have exploded onto the pages of the New York Times. The New Yorker documents [even more disturbing accusations](#) of rape and assault. It's now clear that many men and women in Weinstein's company and in the film industry knew about these alleged crimes but remained silent, allowing it to continue.

How does something like this happen? It happens for some of the same reasons that equal pay, parental leave, and equitable hiring and promotion [have stalled](#) in many companies: Women lack genuine male allies in the workplace.

Real male allies tend to have three things in common as agents of organizational change. [Debra Meyerson and Megan Tompkins's research](#), using the National Science Foundation's ADVANCE program at the University of Michigan, finds that allies need three traits in order to create institutional changes to support gender diversity. First, as majority stakeholders, they have insider knowledge of the organization. Second, they show genuine understanding of the cost of inequality for *everyone* (not to mention the organizational bottom line). Finally, they demonstrate an honest commitment to what is right and just.

Cultural change requires a nucleus of organizational catalysts who [are insiders with outsider cultural beliefs](#). Meyerson and Tompkins describe them as “individuals who identify with and are committed to their organizations, and are also committed to a cause, community, or ideology that is fundamentally different from, and possibly at odds with, the dominant culture of their organization[s].” In today's workplace, these are men at every level of power and leadership acting to call out insults and affronts, eliminate pay and promotion disparities, and advocate for policies that retain a diverse talent pool. They are driven by the cause — not ulterior motives such as career advancement, public recognition, or getting a date. They truly believe the system is both unfair and capable of change.

So, why aren't there more of these men?

Too often, men find themselves in a situation where a male colleague makes a sexist comment or joke in a group of men and women. They feel the awkward discomfort, fully grasping the inappropriateness of his remarks. In this context, men too often look to see how a female colleague reacts, as if requiring confirmation that she was offended before bothering or daring to say something. Real male allies act at this point. Yet being in groups often inhibits action.

Talk with men about their mothers, wives, and daughters, and most will espouse commitment to gender equality; many express real anger at the possibility that these important women in their lives might be treated unfairly, harassed, or assaulted. Privately, [lots of men are allies for gender equity](#). So why not publicly? Why don't more men vocalize and demonstrate support for women at work? This is where social science helps reveal a number of social psychological, often implicit and unconscious, processes that create timidity and perpetuate silence among potential male allies.

One is the [bystander effect](#). When there are many witnesses, responsibility feels diffuse — people tend to expect that someone else will act.

Another is conformity: Belonging to a group is powerful, and can hinder us from acting against what we think is the opinion of the majority. [Recent research](#) shows men overestimate their peers' acceptance of sexism, which may result in a reluctance to act.

A third reason has to do with what psychologists call *psychological standing*, a sense of having skin in the game. [Research on psychological standing](#) shows that one aspect of men's reluctance to advocate for gender-parity initiatives is they don't think it's their place as men.

But researchers have also shown that these factors can be overcome. Bystander intervention trainings have helped people understand and get over their hesitation to get involved. Other interventions have flipped conformity on its head. For example, Christopher Kilmartin and his colleagues reduced men's perception that other men accept sexism by using interventions that verbally critiqued sexist ideologies with role-playing and written exercises. (A control group completed an assertiveness skills exercise.) The research team found a significant reduction in sexist attitudes for the men participating in the intervention. And some diversity initiatives have tackled the problem of psychological standing to include men in the conversation about policies and initiatives to reveal how they too will win as workplaces become more equitable.

More education and greater understanding of the social psychological processes that can affect behavior is an important component of developing and empowering male allies. But linking gender equity to leadership is equally vital. To create a culture in which men can be allies, we find it's essential to reframe gender equality as a leadership issue instead of a "women's issue." There are several ways to do this.

First, emphasize the importance of integrity. Integrity is not only knowing and acting on what is right but also, as Yale Law's [Stephen Carter](#) implores, *publicly explaining why you are doing so*. As a leader, it's not good enough to be a male ally in the privacy of your home or in personal conversations with female colleagues; you must act publicly and transparently.

Leaders also have an obligation to their teams to create a work environment that is free of harm and that allows people to be their best. There are volumes of research documenting the insidious and [detrimental effects of harassment](#), bias, and prejudice in a toxic workplace. When men ignore gender discrimination and harassment, evidence-based outcomes for all employees include: reduced psychological safety, increased use of sick leave, decreased morale, decreased productivity, increased employee turnover, decreased job satisfaction, and diminished organizational commitment. Real male allies are committed to creating an inclusive workplace free of hostility and bias.

Beyond acting to correct or stop sexist behavior, real male allies advocate for policies and practices that improve the workplace for everyone — even those who don't look like them. For example, just because you don't have children doesn't mean paid parental leave and available childcare are not important to many of your colleagues. Real male allies also step up when it comes to recruiting,

hiring, and promotion practices. In their research on 350 executives, [David Hekman and Stefanie Johnson demonstrate](#) that while white men are not penalized for publicly valuing diversity, people of color and women are penalized in performance ratings when they advocate for such initiatives. Although men may fear reprisal for championing diversity and inclusion initiatives, or feel it's not their place, the evidence is clear that they have little to lose.

Finally, it is imperative that leaders create a work environment that supports allyship itself — a workplace where curiosity, courage, confidence, caring, and commitment are valued traits. In this environment, men can support each other on the path to becoming an ally — acknowledging mistakes, holding each other accountable, and maintaining a learning orientation along the way. Maybe then we can appreciate our role as agents of change. Maybe then men can lean in as real male allies.

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