



Gender Equity at Work

How do you ensure gender equity at work?

To be sure, making our way through the pandemic has required real focus; for many leaders, keeping the lights on has been priority one. And yet, I've noticed that great leaders have managed to reach the light at the end of the tunnel without losing sight of the gender gap. They understand the advantages of inclusivity and gender equity. Unfortunately, they remain the exception, rather than the norm.

Consider this: prior to the pandemic, the percentage of men and women employed in the U.S. was almost equal, and yet the ranks of leadership remained male-dominated. Women remain underrepresented in positions of power and status. The highest-paying jobs are the most gender-imbalanced as organizational barriers and managerial actions limit opportunities for even the most promising women.

In the new book [*Glass Half-Broken*](#), authors Colleen Ammerman and Boris Groysberg share their research on the gender gap. They reveal how women are squeezed from the leadership pipeline through their entire careers, and for a wide variety of reasons.

According to the authors, "The gender imbalance at the top still remains, even in many women dominated industries such as health care and education, where men are still more likely to be found in leadership and executive roles."

Fortunately, many organizations have made great progress in bridging the gender gap. They fairly value the capabilities and contributions made by women. Why?

Successful Gender Equity

Successful organizations—and leaders—understand that gender equity at work is advantageous for everyone. Here are just a few of the advantages:

- Improved thinking and decisions. Studies show how diversity improves perspective, thinking, and problem solving.

A Message from Nancy...

Let me ask you:

- Are the people on your team engaged and committed or just collecting a pay check?
- Do you have the right people in the right seats on the bus? Are *you* in the right seat?
- Is the high cost of turnover eating away your organization's bottom-line?
- Are your processes and procedures (or lack thereof) delivering productive and efficient results?
- How comfortable are the members of your senior team managing and leading others?



In today's highly competitive environment, it's no surprise that "*what got you here may not get you there.*"

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- Increased focus and innovation. Gender diverse boards prioritize innovation more than male-dominated boards.
- Greater access to talent. An organization known for prioritizing diversity, equity, and inclusivity (DEI) will attract talent. Similarly, organizations that offer paths for advancement and fairly promote women improve engagement and retention.
- More resilient workforce. According to Ammerman and Groysberg, while navigating workplace inequality women develop grit, resilience, and strong external support networks. They are often more familiar with managing well through crisis, and able to rise to a challenge.

In order to make progress in gender equity within organizations, you must be systematic. This begins by addressing inequities in key areas of talent management.

The Obstacles Women Face

- **Inadvertently disqualifying female applicants.**
 - Over-reliance on personal networks or referrals. Our tendency to associate and bond with others “like us” often comes at a cost: lack of diversity and even exclusivity.
 - Poorly written job descriptions. When we are unclear about the role and responsibilities, include stereotypes of masculine characteristics, and/or are too extreme, we discourage (or disqualify) women.
 - Blind spots. Often hidden or unknown, gender bias affects how we screen and evaluate resumes. It also rears its ugly head in the promotion process, which create a no-win situation for women leaders.
- **Inadequate integration.** When we fail to integrate women into an organizational culture as equals, they are often excluded from opportunities to bond with their peers and colleagues. Ultimately, they are squeezed from the leadership pipeline.
- **Lack of challenging assignments.** When opportunities to shine and grow are disparately offered to male counterparts, work and tasks become gendered.
- **Non-standardized/informal/irregular performance assessment.** When we lack a clear process in how assessment tools are applied, we often over-rely on a manager’s judgment—and standards.
- **Inequitable compensation and promotion.** Unclear parameters and vague salary terms disadvantage women from the offset. Self-

nomination promotion processes can cause a backlash for women.

- **Failure to retain female employees.** To be sure, poor treatment and lack of opportunities and advancement will cause higher employee turnover. But women also face the caregiver penalty.

Fortunately, more organizational leaders are being held accountable for advancing diversity, equity, and inclusion (DEI). But, are they prepared?

Gender Equity Allies

Men are a crucial and often over-looked ally of gender equity. While many leaders care about equality, and actively support gender equity, many men are hesitant. Why is that?

To be an ally to women means having an interest and investment in the advancement of women—at work, and in life. It is understanding the imbalance in opportunity, and working to change it.

You see, women don’t want to be recognized or given roles solely because they are women, rather, they want equal opportunities. Men who are allies to women recognize the challenges and biases women continue to face, and take action to create an environment where everyone has opportunities to succeed and advance. They act as allies even when women are not in the room.

So why don’t more men ally with women?

Gender Issues and The Big Myth

Ammerman and Groysberg point to scientific research and studies on how some men believe that it isn’t their place to speak up about gender issues. This psychological standing refers to whether an individual feels they have authority or legitimacy to take action for a cause or issue.

However, studies find that attempts to bridge the gender gap are more effective when men participate by speaking up with ideas, volunteering to improve gender imbalance, or serving as equality champions.

The key is invitation: ask men to participate.

Regardless of their position or role, men can:

- **Understand** the experiences and perspectives of female colleagues. Men who listen, ask questions, and gain understanding, can and do create meaningful change.
- **Amplify** what women are saying. Ensure they have a platform to speak, and amplify their voices (without taking credit for their ideas).
- **Empower** women. Ensure they have a seat at the table.

To be sure, the gender gap at work is not a special

interest problem, or a problem for women to solve. **It is a shared problem.** When men engage in the conversation, by listening and sharing their experiences and thoughts, they can foster awareness and be part of the solution.

Simultaneously, there are steps leaders can take to address, prevent, and mitigate barriers.

Explore Existing Practices

- How do you attract strong candidates, both male and female?
- Do you work with a recruiter, and if so, what are their methods? If not, how do you ensure you have gender diversity in your pool of candidates?
- Are job descriptions clear, written with gender neutral language void of superlatives? What about qualifications?
- How do you determine which applicants to interview? Do you use a weighted scoring system? Is screening and interviewing done by a gender diverse group? If not, what is your methodology?

Resumes that are anonymized by omitting names or any indicators of gender increase the number of female applicants who advance in the process.

Many barriers prevent women from advancing within an organization, including those that exclude women from opportunities to bond with their peers and colleagues. For example, sports activities, community events, or mentoring programs that take place outside the office can lead to greater trust, collaboration, and connections. But, do women in your organization have access to these opportunities? When women are treated as equals, both inside and outside the office, mutual support grows.

Day-to-day processes also require review for potential barriers to women. For example, when task segregation occurs—when women are expected to complete less-rewarding work—they are denied access to more challenging and career advancing work. Being transparent in the promotion processes, including career development, is critical.

Ammerman and Groysberg share that women who move up into leadership positions, “tend to be those who have mentors and sponsors earlier in their careers.” They note that, “the most important decisions made about your career usually happen in a room that you’re not in.” Ensuring equitable processes to attract and retain great male and female talent is critical for every organization.

Managers and Gender Equity

Great managers fully support gender equity initiatives and programs. As allies, they help

address talent management inequities in three key areas.

Equitable Evaluation: Performance evaluations can make or break a career. Unfortunately, they are often based on criteria other than employee results and behaviors. Ask anyone who has sat in on a calibration meeting: even when an organizational culture is very healthy and well established, equitable evaluations take time and practice. If your organization is working to bridge the gender gap, the performance evaluation process should be carefully reviewed and updated.

For example, how do you differentiate top performers without gender bias? Do you use blind evaluation rubrics?

Ultimately, managers use their judgment. Assumptions, likeability, and group think (if calibration meetings are utilized within your organization) can influence the outcome of performance evaluations. Great managers apply fair and equitable standards, regardless of gender, that serve the organization well.

Equitable Pay and Promotion: When managers provide clear information—when communication is consistent and reliable—compensation and promotion is much more equitable.

Here are a few questions to consider:

- Do all employees have access to median salary information for every position?
- How much flexibility do managers have in awarding compensation and promotion?
- Are employees aware of this? If not, why not?
- Do all employees have access to performance feedback? If not, why not?
- Is performance feedback tied to specific business outcomes?
- How do managers provide insight into what individual women need to do to advance?

Team Culture: Day-to-day practices greatly affect retention and workplace gender equity. Consider the stigma of WFH (work from home), flex schedules, and other family or accommodation policies. In many organizations, extreme dedication has become the team culture norm.

According to Ammerman and Groysberg, “Women working flexible schedules tend to be seen as less committed and less motivated than those working standard hours, even when their actual performance is identical.”

Examining team cultures, and working with managers to intentionally shape them, is critical to gender equity at work.



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