

ISSUE: WOMEN IN MANAGEMENT *October 24, 2016*

# Should Men Advocate for More Female Leaders?

By Joanne Cleaver

## “Getting men involved is a no-brainer”

### Executive Summary

Male business leaders can be a powerful force in the drive to increase the ranks of female executives—but they need to listen as well as to talk. Here’s one key takeaway:

- White men are uniquely insulated from negative consequences when they advocate for greater workplace diversity.

### Full Article

It seemed like a good idea at the time.

Thousands of female tech workers had gathered for the annual Grace Hopper Celebration of Women in Computing in October 2014. The conference organizers sought to enhance the program by scheduling a “male allies” panel. It featured top executives from Google, GoDaddy, Facebook and Intuit—all men.

The result was a social-media backlash from women who condemned the panel as patronizing and insulting by positioning male executives as experts on what women needed to do better. <sup>1</sup> The criticism was so intense that a “re-do” session was hastily scheduled, at which women spoke and the tech execs mostly listened.

The incident reflected the intensity and complexity of an emerging debate within the business world about the extent to which men should take responsibility for addressing how to get more women into leadership.

The debate pits those who argue that the problem is with the traditional corporate power structure, not with women, against those who argue that only those in power can change that structure.

International accounting giant Ernst & Young, in a 2011 report, urged male leaders to publicly advocate for changes that remove barriers to women’s accomplishments. <sup>2</sup> It cited the work of Noor Abid, an executive in the company’s Middle East and North Africa practice, in addressing his region’s cultural pressures by introducing flexible work policies designed to attract and retain women.

In recent years, a proliferation of conferences, groups and projects have been launched with the aim of retaining more women in the executive pipeline. But that has led to a new problem: women networking mainly

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with each other, instead of also with men, said Peggy Klaus, an executive coach and leader of corporate training programs. <sup>3</sup> She wrote that getting men involved “is a no-brainer. It is absolutely critical to our success.”

Klaus cited the example of Marc Benioff, CEO of the cloud services firm Salesforce, who ordered a gender pay audit at his company. “As a result of the discrepancies he found, he spent millions righting the company’s monetary wrongs and prompted several other industry titans to examine their own payrolls,” Klaus wrote. <sup>4</sup>

Research shows that white men, who are the most entrenched group in the business world, are uniquely immune from backlash when advocating on behalf of others. <sup>5</sup> A University of Colorado, Boulder, study found that while no one scored points with the boss for promoting greater workplace diversity, female and nonwhite executives who did so were evaluated negatively by their supervisors, but white men were not.

Katie Bullard, chief marketing officer for the data analytics company Discoverorg.com, says that the gender imbalance was striking as she rose through the ranks. At one point, she says, she was the only woman in a department of 20. She purposefully tried to learn from men—in a way, she says, she had no choice, as most of the leaders she worked with were male—while seeking out women in similar situations.



Katie Bullard: “Having a great network of other women leaders who’ve been through this is essential.”

One tactic that she has cultivated: openly discussing gender balance and framing differences in terms of each person’s strengths, not gender. “As people are conscious that having different perspectives on teams results in different decisions, there will be more opportunities,” Bullard says. “Having a great network of other women leaders who’ve been through this is essential. The broader those networks become, the easier it will be for women to navigate up.”

As Bullard’s experience illustrates, the growing number of women gaining power increasingly has positioned women to address the paucity of women on boards and in executive positions. A study by the advocacy group 2020 Women on Boards found that female-led companies have more women on their boards and that female board members are better at finding female candidates for executive and board openings. <sup>6</sup>

The study found that in companies with women CEOs or board chairs, women hold more than 27 percent of the seats on the board of directors. In companies with men in the top jobs, less than 18 percent of the directors are women. <sup>7</sup>

“Men tend to know men in their network and don’t know how to reach out and attract those additional women,” Stephanie Sonnabend, a co-founder of the group, told Bloomberg Television. “I don’t think companies want mandates. What we do need is more men to get involved in this issue and realize it is a profitability issue, not just a women’s issue.” <sup>8</sup>

## About the Author

Since 1981, Joanne Cleaver has covered businesses and business leaders for numerous publications, including Crain’s Chicago Business, Crain’s New York Business, Working Mother, Inc., the Chicago Tribune and the Milwaukee Journal Sentinel. She also has written for consumer and trade publications. She previously wrote for SAGE Business Reports on Meetings and Team Management (<http://businessresearcher.sagepub.com/sbr-1775-99376-2723046/20160314/meetings-and-team-management>).



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