

How To Be A Manbassador

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Leadership Strategy

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Male champions, male allies, manbassadors. Terms that are increasingly used in business circles these days. More people are realising that it’s only with the support of male allies that gender balance in the workplace can ever be achieved. In fact, if you look at the history of the world, no group has gained equality without the cooperation of at least a significant fraction of the people in power.

What exactly does it mean to be a manbassador? It can be as simple as calling out the misallocation of credit in a meeting. Or recognising the implicit power dynamics in your boss-employee relationship and how they affect your judgment. Easy to say, not always easy to do.

As a life-long manbassador, and a Professor who studies these things, here are four of the guiding principles I’ve gathered along the way:

1) Truth alone never wins. Truth supported wins.

As a solo voice you are unlikely to have impact. In a group, truth alone almost never wins. But when the second person echoes the first person’s point, the dynamic changes substantially. And when you get a at least a third of the group to join you, then things change very quickly.

So talk to others in your organisations, have off-line conversations, encourage allies, and throw a lifeline to others when they challenge in a meeting in order to make change happen.

There are numerous alliances working to bring people together to address the challenge of achieving gender balance in the workplace.

For example, the Women in Business Club was set up 20 years ago by London Business School students dedicated to advancing inclusion in business, inspiring future women leaders and improving opportunities for women wanting to have their economic contributions valued in the same way as men's.

At the Leaders As Change Agents (LACA) "Lead the Change" Board, we're working with the UK Government Equalities Office to encourage the CEOs of the UK's 500 largest employers to act as change agents by promoting diversity and inclusion in business, and to achieve greater equality and opportunity in their companies. As with any group, the early adopter CEOs have had to be brave, but as we reach 1/3 the challenge of gaining their commitment gets easier.

Look into local groups or set one up within your organisation to identify those people who will stand up *with* you to advocate for gender equality.

2) Always keep a growth mindset.

Don't automatically assume the worst of people when they do or say things that you interpret as deliberately sexist. Instead, believe that sometimes people do not mean what it sounds like, and that attitudes can be changed for the better, demonstrating that you can make a difference in facilitating that change.

The growth mindset says: “Maybe this person doesn’t intend to be overtly sexist, maybe they didn’t realise how their actions could be negatively interpreted.”

Only by believing that people have the desire and capacity to change, can we start to question and effectively tackle unhelpful behaviours.

We need to be brave and confront people when we see sexism in the workplace. But it can be difficult to do this effectively. Our cultural programming is to back off and avoid confrontation, and an overly critical approach can often lead to a complete shutdown of what should ultimately be a positive process. Despite this, effective manbassadors need to challenge when they see inappropriate behaviour.

[Think for a moment about road rage: why do we see road rage with people in vehicles but never with people on the pavement? Largely because people feel protected in their cars and empowered to confront others in a way they would never dream of doing face-to-face.]

Opening a conversation with a challenge is not the best way to engage someone with whom you want to work constructively. If we confront someone with accusations or strong judgments about their behaviour we are likely to see a shield going up, alienating them rather than encouraging further dialogue. We need to find a way to ask questions in a way that doesn’t threaten their identity or give them a label they don’t agree with.

Engage people, push back by all means, but do it in a way that leaves room for the possibility that the problematic behaviour wasn’t intended to do harm and that the individual wants to grow and learn. That’s the only way we’re going to make progress.

3) Ask women for feedback.

Be sure you are being a helpful manbassador. Being helpful could be something as small as lending a listening ear, introducing a woman to someone you know, or ensuring a woman's voice is heard in a meeting.

Measure progress if you can. Some of our ultimate goals are difficult to measure but there are specific steps along the way that can be counted. For example, business leaders are being asked to pledge to:

- Take personal responsibility for promoting better diversity and inclusion in their business and striving to achieve the targets set out by the Hampton-Alexander and Parker reviews
- Promote better diversity and inclusion by sponsoring between one and three individuals from an underrepresented group within the organisation who have the potential to secure an executive role within three years
- Be an active and visible change agent by being part of the wider business conversation and achieving better diversity and inclusion across the organisation as a result

Actively seek feedback from women. Be mindful that actions are what make a difference and keep asking for assessment, comments, criticism from women.

4) Take action at whatever level you can — live your truth for gender equality at whatever level you find yourself.

Change comes in most organisations from the middle and the bottom. It matters whether you are a voice for gender equality even at the lowest levels of the organisation. Effective change can be slowed by the people at the top, however, so most successful change efforts requires permission, and ideally active support, from the top.

At board level, for example, we know that recruitment processes too often rely on existing networks to identify new candidates. This makes it less likely that all male (or all white) boards will appoint new non-male (or non-white) directors. If this is going to change, it requires a real commitment to change from the top, and greater support for gender equality across the organisation to ensure a pipeline of qualified candidates for board-level roles.

Elsewhere in organisations, role models, mentors and mentees form an increasingly vital network of change agents. Role models have a domino effect and inspire others to step forward up and down the organisation, encouraging better representation at all levels in business, not just in the board room.

Why should we care?

Business only stands to lose in not empowering women. The evidence is clear: businesses that work to foster women's success (as well as men's) have been shown to significantly outperform those that don't. This means more than appointing women to important positions, but means actively working to ensure their voices are heard.

History, sociology, economics, personal experience all tell us that the world is not a fixed pie of opportunity. There is no set limit on the total number of opportunities available to us. Nor can we think of opportunity as some kind of win-lose dynamic where opening the door to a woman implies closing it on a man. When women win, men win too because the pie grows in size.