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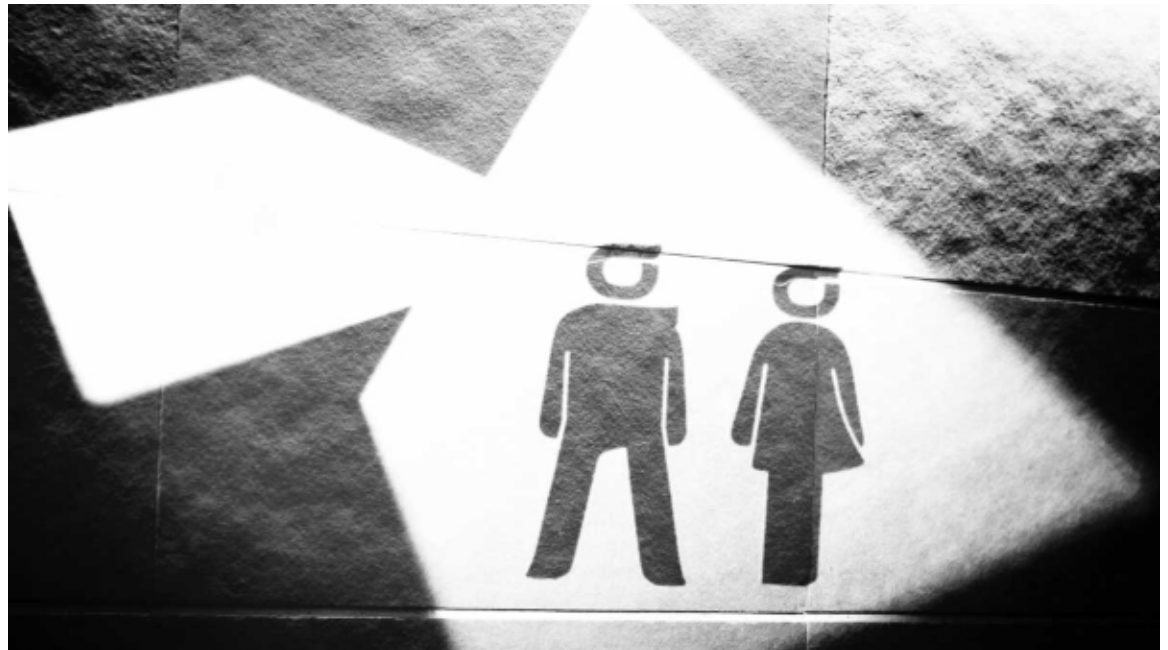
# The Men Who Mentor Women

*by Anna Marie Valerio and Katina Sawyer*

GENDER

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While women make up [51.5% of all managers](#), much fewer women rise to the C-suite. A survey of 25,000 Harvard Business School graduates found that although [male and female graduates had similar levels of ambition](#), men were significantly more likely to have positions in senior management, direct reports, and profit-and-loss responsibility.

We know having a sponsor who supports your career [can help level the playing field for women](#). So who are the men in your organization known as informal champions of women, for the way that their behaviors advance female leaders? And what do they have in common?

From previous [research](#), we already know that these “male champions” genuinely believe in fairness, gender equity, and the development of talent in their organizations, and that they are [easily identified by female leaders](#) for the critical role they play advancing women’s careers.

But we wanted to know more about what these men *do* differently. How do they stand up to pressure from peers or the expectations of outmoded organizational cultures? How do they use their power to create diverse, inclusive organizations?

We asked senior male and female leaders in Fortune 500 companies and non-profit organizations to tell us about the behaviors of these “male champions.” We conducted 75 semi-structured confidential interviews with leaders in the C-suite or one to three levels below C-suite in both Fortune 500 companies and non-profit organizations. After subjecting these interviews to a rigorous qualitative analysis, we saw several themes emerge.

Generally, we saw that “male champions” have learned that gender inclusiveness means involving *both* men and women in advancing women’s leadership. Although many organizations have attempted to fight gender bias by focusing on women – offering training programs or networking groups specifically for them – the leaders we interviewed realized that any solutions that involve only 50% of the human population are likely to have limited success.

More specifically, we found that some of the key behavioral themes associated with gender inclusive leadership that support women’s career advancement are:

- using their authority to push workplace culture toward gender equality
- thinking of gender inclusiveness as part of effective talent management
- providing gender-aware mentoring and coaching
- practicing other-focused leadership, not self-focused leadership

### **Using their authority to change workplace culture**

As researchers, we know that gender parity in the workplace is associated with improved profitability. Companies with female board representation have been found to [outperform](#) those with no women on their boards. Gender parity has been [found to correlate](#) with increased sales revenue, more customers, and greater relative profits. Companies in the top quartile for gender diversity were found to be [15% more likely](#) to outperform those in the bottom quartile.

In our experience, most executives don’t know about this research. But even so, many of the leaders told us that gender inclusiveness is simply good strategy for the organization, and they explicitly used their authority to push for it.

For example, one leader addressed the business logic for diversity and inclusion, stating, “Let’s do cost/benefit. If we are excluding half the talent on the planet...[do] we have the best chance of getting the best talent, or if we doubled our chances of getting the best talent do you think we’d have the

best chance? Obviously, we want to fish in a bigger pond.” Another leader emphasized that a lack of diversity demonstrates a lack of effectiveness in systems, noting, “My experience is when you get to very high levels, whether it’s government, higher education, or business, there are excellent men and women so if you’re really not making good progress toward having representation at all levels of the company, you’re doing something wrong.”

Taking this attitude has an impact on the overall culture of the organization. As one of our leaders described her champion, “He’s creating the environment that says, ‘I care about all,’ and that may be broader than just women but that is modeling an environment that makes it harder for others not to be champions, too.”

Another leader mentioned that he had built so much trust within his organization that he was able to single-handedly champion women into very high positions of power, saying, “I can walk into the Executive Committee and say ‘This woman deserves to be on the bench 2-3 years from now. I want her to become the CEO.’” In a more nuanced way, another leader championed women by vying for them when they were in positions where success may have been unlikely, noting, “I was in a position of power to do something, and I suggested coaching for one woman whose direct boss was not very good. I just did the little things you do for someone to position them to move up in the organization.”

While they were able to have a strong impact on women’s careers in many ways, the male champions also recognized that their values were not always shared by others in their organizations. Leaders reported the need to show courage and persistence in order to overcome resistance to gender inclusiveness even in their own teams and peer groups.

One described the ways in which he pushes back on non-diverse pipelines directly: “I have what I call ‘talent days,’ in which my management team spends the whole day once a quarter, and we try to look through our organization for rising stars and try to identify people early. The other thing that we do is we try to make sure that we have proactive interviewing. For any position, we have leading and lagging metrics for diversity. And I ask them: ‘How come, in the last month, you’ve gone after a large number of new people, and you haven’t interviewed one woman for the position?’ I started asking questions like this – I am not expecting them to have the answers. I’m expecting them to know that the next time I ask these questions, you better have the answers because I already have the data.”

Similarly, one of our champions mentioned the importance of pushing back on gender stereotypes, saying, “I think just having the courage to raise the questions is important. If I’m in a people review with all the business leads and we’re talking about behaviors and we’re saying, this woman is just really, you know, aggressive, the Scarlet A! Then I ask them ‘Are we’re talking about it with almost the exact same behaviors as a male, in a very complementary way?’ So being able to have the courage to raise those questions, and not in an antagonistic fashion, but more in a very constructive, non-judgmental way is very important.” Finally, one of the females who had been championed, summed it up, saying, “Many of these men with whom I worked, clearly were very comfortable in their own skin

and believed in the values of having equity in the workplace and were willing to stand up and fight for it.”

### **Recognizing gender inclusiveness as effective talent management**

Although many of the male leaders said they had not known they were considered to be “male champions” until recommended for the research study, examples of their behavior show that they practiced talent management effective for gender inclusion, using best-practice strategies in recruitment, early identification of talent, and succession planning. For example, a leader described his hiring process, detailing, “We’ll remember if we hired the absolute best person for the job, which includes considering women and building diversity in our team. So I hold the jobs open, [and] we’ve never lowered the bar. That’s probably not that unique, but I make sure we have a slate of candidates that include all who are qualified for the job.”

Similarly, another leader noted, “It’s not particularly hard for me ...to make sure that we have a slate of candidates that are qualified folks that include women.” Finally, other leaders mentioned that they were consciously consistent about ensuring that men and women were given the same opportunities on their teams. For example, one leader stated “We do have mentor programs, we do have emergent leader programs, we have things that require executives and SVP-types within the business to participate. It makes the high potentials better leaders”, while another leader noted, “I always try to get at least 50% women in my groups and I’ve been pretty successful at doing that and my current group I think is 80% women and there’s a lot of research that shows you need diversity, and it’s just smart to do that.”

### **Providing gender aware mentoring and coaching**

Mentoring was recently found to be the most impactful activity for increasing diversity and inclusion at work, [compared to diversity training and a variety of other diversity initiatives](#). Receiving mentorship from senior males can [increase compensation and career progress satisfaction](#) for women, particularly for those working in male-dominated industries.

Many champions made special efforts to provide visibility to talented women through mentoring and coaching. For example, a leader mentioned strategically exposing women to the leadership process, stating, “One of the things I would do is take one of our high performing women executives and often make them chief of staff to me so they would run my office, participate in executive committee meetings, format the meetings, really be an extension of my office to give them an opportunity to see the world top down and to work with other senior executives, which was a very important developmental experience for them.”

Other leaders mentioned that they helped to coach women by providing necessary skills that they would need to get the job done. For example, one leader recounted a conversation with a female he championed, stating, “She said ‘I’m not sure if I’m good enough to do the job.’ I said ‘Well, I think you really are so let’s talk about where you feel you need more development.’ So if they’re not

confident before they have the job, you've got to be proactive and ask them 'What do you need to be comfortable with that job?'"

Finally, one of our champions mentioned that understanding the goals of women he has championed was also key, saying, "They don't necessarily have the visibility either because of the roles that they're in or because they're not necessarily getting sponsored... We expand their visibility but also arm them with experiences that will broaden their perspective and therefore enable them to compete even more effectively for big roles."

Women leaders also recognize when opportunities for visibility are provided to them. One of our female interviewees mentioned, "I realized before I gave the presentation, thankfully, that he was giving me a huge opportunity to be seen by a much broader audience and he never made a lot fanfare about it. He never told me that he wanted to help my career. He just did." Similarly, another female interviewee highlighted the importance of being let into strategic networks, stating, "I often went to lunch with him when he went to lunch with people. I sat in on a lot of phone calls." In the same vein, another female interviewee mentioned that being privy to new contacts within the organization was helpful in career advancement, noting, "You get increased contacts across the organization and more senior contacts than you typically would, because even if you haven't met somebody, if they've seen your name on a report or heard of your name with regard to a high profile project, when you do meet them they already know who you are."

Further, as a result of the mentoring and coaching, many women reported feeling greater self-confidence which gave them the comfort of doing even more. One female interviewee stated, "The outcome of some of these actions that my male mentors took is they helped me understand that I had a lot more capacity than even I knew." Similarly, another female interviewee mentioned, "It's building self-confidence, it gives you the confidence that you belong at the table and that you have a right to be there."

### **Practicing other-focused leadership**

For cross-gender mentoring relationships to be successful, Stacy D. Blake-Beard [suggests](#) mentors need to possess both crucial mentoring skills but also an [ally mentality](#). [Allies are](#) "dominant group members who work to end prejudice in their personal and professional lives, and relinquish social privileges conferred by their group status through their support of nondominant groups" in the commonly used definition.

Enabling the development of others' leadership requires moving away from a focus on one's personal power so that others may be recognized for their achievements. Many of the male champions we interviewed embodied this spirit of leadership as an exercise for others - not for oneself.

One leader explained, "How many people can you point to who are in leadership positions in the company because they worked for you, with you, and you helped make them better? A lot of times people want to hire, what I call "younger brothers and sisters" that are not threatening and not really

as effective as they need to be. Your job is to hire and develop people who can be better than you, if they're not better than you to begin with.”

A female interviewee concurred, stating, “I also think that there might be some level of altruism too, right? They're doing it for the greater good of the organization, and, and not necessarily having a strategic goal in mind, but it's the right thing to be doing for people.”

Through behaviors like these, men can begin to change organizational cultures from the top down. Acknowledging the crucial role that men can play in creating gender equality at work is necessary in order to truly engage the entire workforce in conversations surrounding equality and fairness at work. The examples provided by male champions and female leaders who have been championed by them contain important leadership lessons, useful for any organization interested in promoting gender inclusivity at work.

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