

Making Gender Work: Winning Gender Strategies

By Dr. Alice Adams



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to Strength: Leveraging Gender @ Work. Dr. Adams will be leading a learning team at the 2010 *Women In Leadership Summit* in November.

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An excerpt from “Playing to Strength: Leveraging Gender @ Work”

Gender inclusion is, along with racial equity, one of the two foundations of workforce diversity. Over the years, other diversity topics like sexual orientation or micro-inequities have joined in, but race and gender remain the most demanding of inclusion challenges. Sixty years on, de facto racial segregation is still dividing our workplaces—and its constant companion is gender segregation.

Inclusion is the solution, but when it comes to gender, there is a lot of disagreement about what that means or if it is even a desirable goal. Gender inclusion would mean roughly equal representation of men and women in all jobs and at all organizational levels. We are a long way from achieving that. Efforts to reduce gender segregation have focused on increasing recruitment of qualified women, closing the pay gap, ensuring that advancement opportunities are equally available to men and women, defusing gender stereotyping and designing programming and education so that they speak to men as well as to women—while also being sensitive to racial and cultural differences. Why, considering all the effort that has been directed at gender inclusion, are we still so far from the goal? The problem is not that the culture is not ready to change, and it is not that women and men are more comfortable in their own workplace niches. The problem is strategy, and the first step toward inclusion is to give up on diversity and inclusion programming designed for an outdated “women are from Venus and men are from Mars” mindset.

Gray’s bestselling Mars and Venus series, marketed as courageous and revolutionary, is actually about as old as it gets. The basic premise—that men and women are so different that they constitute nearly separate species—goes back well beyond the Victorians to (at least) Aristotle. It was always wrong. When it comes to the ability to do any kind of work or take any leadership role, men and women are about equally outfitted for success. Women really do not bring a “softer side” to management, and men really are not more aggressive or decisive than women. The consequences of exaggerating the significance of gender differences are worse than most people realize. When we think about indicators like the wage gap, for example, it is easy to see how women and their children lose out, but we usually ignore the effects on men. As one man commented during a recent workshop, “So my wife can’t earn as much as I do just because she’s a woman—and that’s not just her problem. It is our whole family’s problem.”

The Tool Box and Sewing Kit

Believing that women have special abilities, problems and needs that men do not have – leads to serious errors in judgment that affect the well-being and financial health of organizations. Women and men are well matched in terms of skills and qualities that can make the workplace hum, but they also share a number of human flaws that can work against them. We are all about equally likely to make inaccurate judgments about how gender affects a person’s abilities and commitment. When it comes to making practical decisions, people of both sexes, including those who consciously support the ideal of gender equality, still tend to revert to old ideas about men being doers and women being helpers. We still tend to believe that men are rugged individualists, but women depend on relationships for their well-being. Men still get the message that empathy and listening are feminine skills, and women still get the message that analytical problem solving and the ability to perform at top leadership levels are masculine assets. The fact is, all of us, men and women, are highly responsive to social cues about how we are supposed to behave and what we are supposed to aspire to. Most people try to live up to expectations even when the role does not feel comfortable and does not reflect their real competencies. When people are “misfiled” into gender boxes that do not reflect all that they are,

the result is that only a narrow range of their capabilities can be tapped. And that, unfortunately, is the ultimate result of maintaining separate development and networking programs for women, offering gender education that focuses only on women or treats male and female as if they were separate species, and promoting work/life balance as if women are the primary beneficiaries.

Women Are not Special

For the most part, “gender inclusion” has been misinterpreted to mean the advancement of women. And it is true that organizing diversity programming around women or what are perceived to be women’s issues, and advertizing them as such, can have positive effects. Thinking of women as a special population can be helpful in organizations that have historically failed to hire women, retain and advance them, or pay them fairly. Similarly, if the workplace culture discourages women from entering existing channels for networking and mentoring, or if relations among women are marked by bullying and hostile competition, women-centered programming actually *can* facilitate gender inclusion, at least for a while.

However, over time, woman-friendly programs stall gender inclusion. Special programs can make a company more attractive to women, but there is a big price to pay for making women feel special and giving them a helping hand not extended to men—and women end up paying more than their share of the cost of those privileges. Special women’s programs can solidify a divide between men and women, mark the path of the “mommy track”, become an excuse for paying women less than their work is worth, and persuade them that they should lower their sights and be content with finishing their careers at a midlevel position. When special programs are marginal to the workplace culture and the real business of the organization, they lead right out the door, and women who want to rise have to avoid them or lose credibility. That is because women do not need remedial mentorship or opportunities to bond with each other nearly as much as they need to become organizational insiders who can network with both women and men.

And yet, even when progress toward gender inclusion has slowed to a standstill, most organizations go on recreating the same woman-centered programming again and again rather than moving on to more promising strategies. Or they drop the effort, believing they have done everything possible to help women, or that women themselves have reached the limits of what they can accomplish, or that the pace of social change is just too glacial to permit more rapid progress in the workplace.

The answer to this problem is not to rescind employee programs that increase productivity, because it is not the programs themselves that are at fault. The problem is in identifying them as women’s programs.

Men Are not Special Either

During one organizational assessment, I talked with a supervisor (I’ll call him Joachim) whose initial attitude about efforts to recruit and retain more women was “that is fine, but it does not have anything to do with me.” Except for the fact that he would be supervising some of those new women, I could see Joachim’s point of view: what benefit for him could there be in a gender inclusion initiative? At some point during that conversation, however, I mentioned that the women’s employee group was campaigning for back-up child care. “Why didn’t I know about this?” Joachim asked, suddenly very interested. I thought he was envisioning how fewer

absences among his subordinates would make his job easier, but it turned out that he was a single parent who was struggling with his own child care arrangements. At least on that one issue, he was now ready to see how gender inclusion could benefit him personally.

Joachim had not heard about the child care campaign because the women's employee group operated on the margins of the organization. Although officially anyone could join, and although its agenda and minutes were available to anyone via its webpage, the women's employee group operated as a woman-only group. As far as he knew until that moment, Joachim had no reason to be interested in what the women were up to.

Isolated on the sidelines, the women's employee group was never going to gain much traction, even for proposals that would clearly benefit the organization as a whole. That disconnection was as unnecessary as it was dysfunctional. Men are as likely as women to need consideration for family responsibilities, but they usually are not leaders on work/life issues, and they are less likely to take advantage of existing policies. Men are often concerned that they will lose credibility and standing if they take a family leave or try to negotiate flexible hours, or like Joachim, they may not have even considered that bringing so-called "women's issues" into the mainstream might benefit them personally. As Joachim's sudden interest suggests, making advancement programs and work/life policies a visible rallying point for gender inclusion can help break down divisions between men and women.

Striving to succeed is not just a Mars thing. Caring about others is not just a Venus thing. Caring about success and making it happen is an "everyone-on-Earth" thing.

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