

A White Male Network: You're Kidding, Right?

By Bill Proudman



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firm that builds effective partnerships and inspires courageous leaders. WMFDP is a leader in the essential work to reengage white men in successful diversity and inclusion initiatives inside companies. Bill has pioneered white male only learning efforts along with innovative partnership work for senior leaders in corporations for the last 15 years.

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The response to the suggestion to create a white men's affinity group (similar to networks for African Americans, women, GLBT employees, etc.) is often some laughter, a rolling of the eyes accompanied by a statement like, "What the heck do the white guys need a network for, when everyday at work is already a white men's group?"

In our 10 plus years of inspiring courageous leaders around diversity and inclusion (D&I) efforts, the notion of starting an affinity network focused on white men has invariably come up. Sometimes it comes from disgruntled white men who profess, "if everyone else has a network and the company's diversity effort truly includes everyone, why wouldn't a white men's network be a logical next step?"

Sometimes it is from white men, who feel disenfranchised by their perception of the company's current D&I efforts, and they suggest the creation of a group as a way to preserve the little toehold they feel they have left. And occasionally, we find courageous individuals of both genders and all ethnicities, who believe in starting a network, because long-term success in D&I is not possible without white men's full engagement.

At White Men as Full Diversity Partners[®] (WMFDP), we believe a white men's affinity group makes sense and is a viable strategy to the overall D&I effort. Knowing how a network focused on white male engagement will support your D&I efforts is critical. Reasons for a group include:

- ◆ To assist white men and others to better understand the self-interest that greater inclusion affords them.
- ◆ To help white men and others understand white male culture and its impact (ranging from positive to negative) on employees in the workplace.
- ◆ For white men to better understand systemic privilege and how it impacts how they think about D&I and their work partnerships.
- ◆ As a place to engage white men as full diversity partners and strengthen their skills as partners spanning gender and race, as well as with other white men.
- ◆ For white men to learn about diversity in the workplace from other white men, so they are not solely dependent on white women and people of color for their D&I learning.
- ◆ For women and people of color to examine their own assumptions about the white male group and how those assumptions, if left unchecked, can negatively impact their partnerships at work with white male colleagues.

Starting and supporting a white male focused network is a challenging and, at times, daunting task. Its formation goes against conventional wisdom. The forces against the effort are almost always stronger than the forces to create such a network. Some things to consider when initiating and sustaining a network:

1. Be clear initially with what your intent and desired focus are for creating a white male focused group. Without this, the negative forces and reactions toward a group focused on white men will likely assist with its early demise, while also setting back your attempts to increase white male engagement.

2. Creating a white men's network is pioneering work. Industry best practices don't really exist, so recognize that you may not discover a path to follow. If this is too unsettling for you and organizational leadership, you may not be ready to move forward.
3. You need some early courageous leaders, who are willing to forge the new path and not shrink back from the inevitable eyebrow raising or vocal challenges that will surface. Build that support group early on. Develop a support network that includes some influential key executives, who understand and support the need and role of a white men's network. If you don't have this, start first by building this key support, rather than creating the network.
4. Build more support from other affinity network leaders, so they understand how a white men's network will actually support the company's ongoing efforts to create an inclusive workplace, rather than be viewed as stepping back from the small gains made to date.
5. Start up is only the first step. To insure a group takes root, it will need a seemingly inordinate amount of ongoing support from other key leaders and individuals. It may even feel like handholding. It will certainly be more than what other affinity groups often need.

White male culture encourages and rewards individual behavior. While many white men may grouse saying "what about them" related to D&I efforts, simply starting a group and then expecting white men to make it work will likely fail.

Provide ongoing support to the group, which may not be as necessary for others groups. This support may have to come from multiple places: executive sponsorship, other affinity group leadership support, D&I office support, and external coaching and mentoring from consultants like WMFDP.

6. Visible white men, who step forth to lead an affinity group, will generally have their intentions questioned by others. While the historical issues of workplace inequity help to unite women and POC affinity networks, this often works in reverse for a white male effort.

White men have been taught to go it alone, and to not ask for help. A group focused on the needs and interests of white men will be a new experience where many people will read many things into the intention. You will need to over-communicate the intention of a group and expect that others will not hear this and instead substitute some of their fears about white men organizing.

7. Sustaining the group will take a long-term commitment with many ups and occasional downs.
8. Think long-term and slow, sustained burn.
9. Know that others will question the rationale and logic for a white male group. Invite these discussions and see the creation of the group as one way to surface this dialogue in the organization.
10. Be tenacious. Don't give up. If starting a white male group were easy, your company would already have done so.

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