



WHAT WOMEN WANT

(AND HOW **NOT TO**
GIVE IT TO THEM)

The reasons why your diversity efforts
probably aren't working.

BY ALICE ADAMS

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YOUR GOALS aren't the problem.

It's not that you don't want gender balance in the C-suite and, more importantly, in the middle-management ranks. It's not that you don't remember to add "... or her" whenever appropriate, or that you refused to sign off on the HR hotline to report discrimination.

But whatever you're trying isn't working: High-level meetings are overwhelmingly male, and it just doesn't feel as though anyone is taking gender issues all that seriously.

When great intentions and hard work fizzle into apathy, and when programs implemented in the name of gender equality end up with little to show, corporate leaders are likely to conclude that the sought-after changes are too much change at this particular time—and maybe that, in the big scheme of things, the changes aren't all that important.

But delay isn't the worst possible outcome. The worst case is a halfhearted effort and tools chosen thoughtlessly—or, more often, just because their initial cost is low. Lack of progress can create a general impression that the whole effort is futile, which makes it harder to effect real change later: When an initiative fails, everyone seeks to escape blame, but no one forgets the failure.

I will take my cue from the carpenter who came in to fix a collapsing floor in my 150-year-old farmhouse. He recommended ripping everything out and starting over, literally from the ground up. "How about just replacing the most damaged support beams and laying a new subfloor over that?" I suggested. "Well," he replied, "if what you're looking for is to have this floor collapse all over again, that's the way to go." He was right, and the end result is a nice, solid, level floor that will last.

When gender-inclusion initiatives fail, it's usually due to the same mistakes and omissions that put any other organizational-change initiatives at risk. Failure isn't an unforeseeable accident—it's achieved by taking specific steps. If, in the spirit of the ironic carpenter, I were advising managers on the best ways to derail gender inclusion, I would suggest that they:

1. Decide not to do an assessment, build a plan, set goals, or establish benchmarks.
2. Task a small group of committed, passionate people with designing and implementing a change initiative—and expect them to succeed without a clear mandate, significant resources, intelligent guidance, or visible support from above.
3. Start implementation without the support of key people.
4. Refuse to assign supervisors specific responsibilities; fail to reward those who follow through.

5. Keep quiet about the initiative, allowing it to be perceived as low-priority or to be ignored altogether.
6. Let negative talk or obstructive behaviors pass without comment or notice.
7. Assume that efforts that are well received in one part of the organization (a mentorship program, employee resource group, or set of educational workshops) will translate seamlessly to other parts of the organization.
8. Do the same things again and again, although they haven't resulted in the hoped-for outcomes.

FAILURE IS AN OPTION

Along with these general steps to failure, there are others that are particularly likely to undermine diversity management and gender inclusion. We've already lost a great deal—talent, productivity, morale, and money—by allowing gender segregation to structure our organizations. If I were asked to advise on how to build an ineffective plan, I would recommend that managers try the following doomed-to-fail maneuvers:

Ignore the business case and focus on issues of fairness. We still tend to think that being fair means going soft. Fairness isn't associated with the rigorous and universal application of performance expectations regarding productivity. It isn't associated with ensuring that everyone has equal access to opportunity and adequate support as they build their careers.

Fairness is associated with accommodating weak performance and setting low expectations for special groups—for instance, women who aren't really interested in having committed careers, but who like the idea of having something to do outside the home. Of course, that's an unfair—even absurd—explanation of why women work, but those underlying negative assumptions make arguing for gender inclusion on the basis of fairness a weak place to begin. The best way to outcompete negativity is to make business goals the foundation of the inclusion initiative.

Ignore people's unconscious responses to changes in gender roles. Gender bias can be conveyed so subtly that it escapes the conscious notice of everyone but the person on the receiving end, to whom it eventually becomes glaringly obvious. Bias comes out in small ways, often via nonverbal tactics (for example, using height or a booming voice to dominate an interaction) and patterns of verbal communication (for example, who interrupts whom and how often, and whose ideas gain traction during meetings). However disruptive interpersonal gender bias is, it's difficult and counterproductive to “police” individuals for these mostly unconscious behaviors. Many men already worry that ordinary work interactions will be misinterpreted as actionable sexual harassment, and although those fears are largely unfounded, ignoring them only widens the divide between men and women.

One way to narrow that divide is to recognize that women are just as prone to gender bias against women as men are. Both men and women tend to grant more authority, emotional latitude, and respect to men than to women.

Hire token females. Positioning individual women as tokens fails every time. Tokens are installed to show that the organization is willing to hire and promote an outsider. A token woman stands out, but not in a way that enhances her value: She seems to have her job in spite of (or just because) she's a woman. Hiring tokens is usually the first step companies take, and it does more to delay progress than promote it. Even if a woman's co-workers treat her like “one of the boys,” the fact that she's singular puts her in a suspect category. She has to outpace her male counterparts by a wide margin in order to demonstrate that she adds value, and even if she accomplishes this, the value may not be enough to overcome the token dynamic. One study of the performance of mixed groups versus male-majority groups found that “groups comprising men only or all-male groups with a token woman may be among the poorest performers.”

I know women who have adapted to the token situation so well that their solo status has become crucial to their self-esteem. While that's a happy outcome for the individual, the triumph of one woman doesn't benefit the organization. If she

attempts to shut out other talented women whose presence threatens her status, she can do significant damage. The tactic of hiring token women (or “test cases”) to see if they'll do well in a male-majority environment always impedes progress toward inclusion.

Gender tokenism has a long history in the professions and in technical and construction industries. A hundred years before large numbers of women became doctors, for instance, the occasional token woman physician found her way into private practice or public service. Tokens don't do anything to pave the way for women in general, because their success appears to be unique; it says nothing about the abilities of women in general. For that reason, the success of a solo woman doesn't become a reason to hire more women. If, however, a solo woman fails, it looks like a failure representative of women in general. That's true even if she fails for the same reasons men sometimes fail. It is irrational, but it's the inevitable effect of employing the tokenism strategy. If there are doubts about whether women can do a particular job well enough to make the risk of hiring them worthwhile—or if it seems possible that the organizational culture, the bottom line, or men's morale could suffer if too many women are promoted—then it will seem perfectly rational to tolerate a solo woman but resist gender inclusion.

Expect men not to feel that gender inclusion means a loss of status for men. Michael Buerk, a former BBC journalist, drew media attention in 2005 when he complained that women had taken over broadcasting and just about everything else. The result, he said, was that men and male values were disappearing from the working world, and in their place, “What we have now are lots of jobs that require people skills and multitasking, which women are a lot better at.”

What's unusual about Buerk is that he put into words perceptions that many men hold but wouldn't dream of expressing in public. Buerk's female former colleagues dismissed his complaints, but his underlying fear that men lose status as women advance must be taken seriously. Historically, men really have enjoyed far more access than women to jobs and advancement, and it's undeniable that more women in high positions means fewer men there.

That loss, I believe, is what motivated my dentist to ask, when he heard I was writing a book on gender in the workplace, whether I had been attending secret women's meetings to overthrow men. “How many men will be left when you're done? Maybe 2 percent?” It's always better to humor the person who wields the dental equipment, so I shrugged. “But you'll keep me around because I'm a dentist,” he said. “I'm useful. On the other hand, a lot more women are becoming dentists these days. I guess you won't need me after all.”

My dentist is wrong about male dentists not being needed: In 1970, only about 2 percent of dentists were women; now the figure is 22 percent—an exponential rise, but hardly enough to make male dentists redundant.

Statistics, however, were not at the root of his teasing. Although men's employment prospects and wealth didn't fall when women entered the workforce, being a man has lost some of its powerful symbolic value. Ignoring that loss, expecting men not to feel it, and failing to acknowledge that the world really is

changing for men sets up a pretense that gender inclusion is only about women, and that men's needs don't deserve consideration.

Expect people to line up behind their assigned masculine and feminine stereotypes. Buerk may not like sharing his working world with women who are his peers or superiors, but he does feel that women have certain feminine advantages. In his view, people skills and multitasking are easier for women, while men are more single-minded and stoic and talk less. Joan Bakewell, also with the BBC, said that Buerk had benefited

THE MYTH OF MERITOCRACY

BY JACKI ZEHNER

It drives me crazy that in 2010 we still have to make “the business case for women” in order to convince male-dominated leadership teams that they are missing something when women are absent. With the incredible research out there proving that decision-making and ROI improve when women are added in critical mass, one would think that executives would finally get it and, better yet, commit to doing something about it. But sadly, most corporate diversity programs have failed in both of their missions: delivering the intended results and changing the mindsets of executives and organizations.

One problem with diversity programs is the name often used—Office of Diversity, which for many organizations might as well be Office of Marginalized People. If diversity programs are to be truly effective, they should begin with a name change—to Office of Talent or of Human Capital Management. The renaming would, one hopes, lead to a reframing,

since the issue is not diversity as a goal in and of itself but, rather, the need for diversity in order to maximize human capital. And this would lead to the mainstreaming of traditional diversity initiatives, with a focus on how to embrace and leverage differences for the best possible business outcomes.

We have a long way to go. I recently worked with a large asset-management firm that is as of yet doing little about its extreme gender imbalance. It's a typical pyramid: Incoming analysts are 25 percent women, 15 percent of the VPs are women, and the entire management committee is male. The

top people recognize that this doesn't look good or seem right, but they're unlikely to embrace change. Why? Because they—and the firm—have been successful without women. I have suggested that the executives take a good look at Enron and see what can happen to successful male-dominated companies whose management is convinced that they're just too awesome to fail. Of course, the classic reasons for why so few women make it to the top apply here too: narrow pipeline, extreme work culture, and work-life challenges. But these are excuses and not reasons. If I promised to reveal the secret for lasting success, these leaders would be jostling for front-row seats at the presentation; say the subject is women, and most of them head back to their offices, snickering.

Another big challenge is that most leaders want to believe and often claim that their organizations are meritocracies. With few women present, the implication is that men are smarter, harder-working, and just plain *better* than women. A genuine meritocracy aspires to level the playing field of opportunity so that all people—even some with different styles or more flexible schedules—can rise to the top.

It is 2010, not 1950. It is time to see adding and promoting talented women to all levels of one's organization not as something that has to be done but *needs* to be done. Last time I checked, creativity, integrity, innovation, and commitment were not limited to men, and ensuring your firm has the best of both sexes' abilities will be the difference between long-term success and failure. It is time we move beyond diversity and embrace differences to ensure that we are maximizing human capital and allowing talented individuals to bring their whole selves to the workplace.



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People who believe in the feminine “niceness” stereotype don’t care much for women who assert their authority.

from working with women because “women are more conciliatory and conscientious” than men. However, the “niceness” stereotype doesn’t apply to another BBC journalist, Anna Ford, who had just described Buerk as “bonkers” and called him a “poor, miserable old bat.” So much for the conciliatory female. The BBC sex battle was good entertainment, but all these assumptions about gender difference are wrong, and the antagonism they generate is real.

Tout the “female advantage.” Two women who made it to the top in industries where few women succeed were asked to give advice to other women with similar ambitions. One replied, “I see a lot of women who try to be one of the guys, but they usually end up nowhere. . . . It’s best to take a softer approach by listening and observing.” Another woman echoed the sentiment: “I encourage more women to become technologists, because I think we bring a softer style of management.”

The intentions of diversity programming that touts “the female advantage” are good, and the sentiment is sincere, but men and women aren’t on opposite teams. The idea of a female advantage will never be a good enough reason for men to want women on the team. Telling men that women should be allowed on the team or to take leadership positions *because women are so very different and special* will promote group cohesion about as well as telling women that men make better leaders because they have special, masculine leadership qualities that women lack. Tactics such as this erect artificial divisions between people who could otherwise work well together.

Of course, women aren’t necessarily nicer than men, or more vicious. Men aren’t more competitive than women. And neither men nor women are especially good at multitasking. Why would anyone think that women are naturally better multitaskers?

Because women are less likely than men to have jobs and home lives that allow them substantial stretches of time for planning and carrying out single, complex tasks. Some managers use women’s mythical multitasking abilities to justify assigning them to more subordinate positions, those responsible for implementing their superiors’ agendas.

Women’s credibility suffers if they live up to feminine expectations. If women say “yes” to the stereotype, they undermine their own prospects and that of their female colleagues. It’s a fine thing to have “people skills”; the damage comes from assigning women to a special feminine sphere. As for the many women whose abilities and behavior don’t fit an accepted stereotype, they are outsiders. People who believe in the feminine “niceness” stereotype don’t care much for women who assert their authority.

Have fun with the contradictions. Michele Miller’s and Holly Buchanan’s *The Soccer Mom Myth* aims to help marketers overcome various stereotypes so that they can stop driving women consumers away and instead persuade them to buy: “Why do so many marketers lump all women into one category? Why do they believe all women act, think, and buy the same way?” Women constitute over 50 percent of the population and make the majority of purchasing decisions, the authors note; you can’t just tinker with advertising, using feminine pastel colors or showing a woman in an advertisement, and expect women to get on board.

But before Miller and Buchanan begin discussing how to gain insight into customers’ needs and goals, they set up the same contradiction that blights much diversity programming on gender. The authors launch into a long explanation about how different men and women are, and at this point, their message

(“Don’t see women as all the same”) gives way to conventional gender stereotypes. They recount the evolutionary hunter-gatherer gender scenario, and with apologies in advance for sarcasm, I’ll recount how that goes: What’s special about women is that they never felt any evolutionary pressure to use aggression; they survived just fine even though hunting was beyond their abilities, and their best defense against predators was to wait for a man to come home from the hunt and protect them. They were too busy developing “tend and befriend” relationship strategies. Meanwhile, men were fully occupied with hunting and duking it out with one other for alpha-male status, leaving no time for sissy stuff like taking care of their children. To free them from responsibility for caretaking, evolution hardwired our forefathers and their male descendants to ignore children’s “most blatant signs of distress,” according to Miller and Buchanan’s approving quotation from Marianne Legato’s *Why Men Never Remember and Women Never Forget*.

If our forefathers couldn’t take care of others and our foremothers couldn’t take care of themselves, how did we get here? According to *The Soccer Mom Myth*, women’s brains are “hardwired” for multitasking and emotion, while men’s brains are “hardwired” for linear thinking. Nature has endowed women with the need and ability to “connect,” while men go off into their Stone Age caves to brood and watch football—that is, if

they can scrape together enough gray matter to do those two things at once.

Positive feminine stereotypes and negative masculine stereotypes drive a good deal of women-centered marketing, but those images and storylines fuel rather than ameliorate gender bias. Marketing aims to excite people’s emotional reflexes, not urge them to think critically about social bias. So diversity programming that relies on marketing tactics invites distorted decision-making: On the one hand, it says, “Women have a lot to offer in the business world”; on the other hand, “But widespread gender stereotypes are true.” If women are better at connecting with people on a personal level, and those skills are considered desirable in a management position, then women will have an opportunity to move up. But the same stereotype can be used to shut women out: If a well-developed ability to foster supportive personal connections seems less relevant, then men will get most of the leadership opportunities. When highly intelligent people such as Miller and Buchanan think it’s a terrible idea to lump all women into one category and yet turn around and do exactly what they’re discouraging, they are under the influence of a very seductive force. That’s how bias works.

Expect women to be supportive of one another. Partly because of the assumption that women ought to be nice, the



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WHAT PRICE AFFINITY?

BY LYNN CRONIN AND HOWARD FINE

Amanda felt bad. She had just completed a day and a half of diversity training, and though she had started the sessions feeling good about herself, she definitely felt bad now.

Initially, everyone participating in the training had seemed so accepting—until the leader started lecturing about the innate differences between men and women. “Women are naturally nurturing; men are competitive. Women are more understanding; men are more driven.” The list went on and on. The leader then counseled, “Take the underlying nature of men and women into consideration when dealing with the opposite sex at work.”

Amanda wanted to sink into the floor. She had always been highly competitive and driven in nature, and all her colleagues in the room knew it. Being nurturing was not one of her strong points. Now she felt so exposed, so unattractive, so unfeminine. That’s when she started to feel bad.

With the power of corporate America predominantly in male hands, the diversity message to the power brokers has been and continues to be, “Let the women in, and learn to live with them.” As if these women were aliens landing from Mars—or maybe Venus—most diversity training attempts to educate participants on what is inherently different about the sexes, and then preaches tolerance.

Men are competitive; women are collaborative. Men interrupt; women acquiesce. Men are self-promoting; women are self-effacing. Men are analytical; women are intuitive. Men are stoical; women are expressive. One diversity-training seminar displayed six separate sketches of a woman’s face, her eyes widening or her mouth frowning to reflect the various emotions she was experiencing. Whether it was expressing joy, fear, or anger, the female face was easy to read. This was followed by another six slides showing a man’s face meant to express the same set of emotions. Each picture of the man’s face was exactly the same. Fear looked like joy, which looked like anger. It wasn’t a mistake. The six different emotions the man was feeling were clearly labeled on the bottom of each slide.

The well-intentioned purpose of this type of training is to promote understanding and tolerance, but many women tell us that this common approach actually tends to make matters worse for them. First, the training creates a conundrum for a businesswoman: What is she supposed to do with this information? Her personality may or may not conform to these female stereotypes. If most of the “feminine” characteristics apply, delineating them in front of men makes these women feel like misfits. The subliminal message is this: Whereas male workers are naturally endowed with the appropriate traits for business success, women are born different. Real women will never fit into the business world.

Or perhaps a particular woman’s style is naturally more taciturn or intensely competitive, exhibiting characteristics the trainers have attributed to men. Theoretically, this should improve the woman’s chances of success, but having these “masculine” traits is likely to result in her being shunned by both men and women as abnormal or unappealing. And frankly, it usually doesn’t make the woman feel so great about herself. What woman wants to be seen as masculine?

Affinity groups, a relatively recent means of promoting a diverse workforce, can have some of the same inadvertent drawbacks as the classic approach to diversity. The idea behind these groups is to create support networks for employees who share a common bond and face similar challenges of workplace discrimination. For women and members of other minority groups, affinity groups can be effective in providing comfort, advice, and perspective. But they can also be an impediment to achieving the equality that is their core goal. Bonding over what you have in common, ethnically or physiologically, with some people emphasizes what you *don’t* have in common with others. This easily degenerates into the creation of divisive camps within a company. Like affirmative action, affinity groups can be effective in helping to break down barriers. But once a group has broken into the system, maintaining formal affiliations exclusively based on race, color, creed, or sex can actually discourage egalitarian integration.

Business needs to do an about-face. The key to achieving equality of the sexes at work is recognizing that what businessmen and businesswomen have in common far outweighs how they differ.

AFFINITY GROUPS CAN HAVE SOME OF THE SAME INADVERTENT DRAWBACKS AS THE CLASSIC APPROACH TO DIVERSITY.

LYNN CRONIN and HOWARD FINE are co-heads of the Coed Company Consultancy. Adapted from the forthcoming *Damned If She Does, Damned If She Doesn’t: Rethinking the Rules of the Game That Keep Women From Succeeding in Business* (Prometheus). ©2010

popular media overdramatize instances of bullying and betrayal among women. The very nice girl's other face is that of a demon manipulator. The dueling myths (female advantage against feminine fascism) make it difficult to get a balanced view of relations among women at work.

But it is clear that gender-inclusion initiatives can shake up women's working relationships with one another. Because women are concentrated at the middle and low levels of hierarchies, in many organizations they have developed practices of mutual support that are effective only as long as women are grouped together on the same low level. In gender-segregated organizations, relationships among female peers tend to dwindle and sour as individual women advance. Ambitious women often perceive one another (fairly accurately) as zero-sum competitors for the few advancement opportunities open to them. So women in gender-segregated organizations tend to dissociate from other women as they seek to identify with higher-ups, and that means shifting their alliances from one gender to the other.

Gender inclusion transforms relationships among women, and if that transformation is managed successfully, it will create openings for collaboration and mentoring up and down the ladder. Until that happens, smart women who want to rise look for mentors among senior men who are in a good position to help them, and who won't feel personally threatened by an ambitious woman.

Promote unseasoned women into risky positions where failure is likely. And reserve secure, low-risk, promising positions for seasoned men. The question of what to do with ambitious women is sometimes resolved by giving them a chance to prove themselves under conditions of high visibility and risk, but with less preparation and support than their male peers receive. It has been called the "glass cliff" phenomenon, and—like so much else about gender dynamics in the workplace—it has generated a contentious debate. One of the central voices on the issue, social psychologist Alex Haslam, attributes glass-cliff appointments to managers' tendency to appoint people with whom they identify to safe and desirable positions, and to give riskier, less advantageous jobs to people they see as outsiders. Because most senior managers are still male, and because they're often not asked to question why they tend to promote men into the more secure jobs, the glass cliff is one of the most stubborn obstacles to gender inclusion. It's not too surprising, then, that Haslam told an interviewer that men tend to "refuse to believe this exists, despite the overwhelming evidence we have already collected."

Present work/life programs as lightweight, feminized alternatives to a serious career. "Women need choices," announced one diversity executive during the rollout of her company's generous package of work/life options. True enough:



Women certainly do need choices. So do men. The family-friendly options are officially available to everyone, but what was intended to be a gender-neutral program will now forever be perceived as a "mommy track." Coloring work/life programs pink entails some brutal consequences. An audit of employers showed that simply identifying job candidates as mothers caused employers to downgrade their competence and offer a lower salary. To put it baldly, an organization that misrepresents parental leave and flextime as special options for mothers risks associating those programs with incompetency. Meanwhile, men at higher levels in organizational hierarchies are in a better position to negotiate individualized solutions, allowing them to maintain a safe distance from stigmatized programs while enjoying some of the same flexibility. Why be downgraded to the status of a dabbler—a mother!—if you can avoid it?

Hold mothers to a higher standard. One upshot of thinking that mothers are less competent is that they are expected to perform better than everyone else. Numerous studies show that fathers are "held to more lenient performance standards" than men without children or mothers. Mothers are expected to meet the highest standards. This is why talking up mommy-track



options has such serious consequences for women's careers: The perception that mothers opt out is already powerful, and creating a separate career track for mothers only exaggerates that perception.

ARE WOMEN REALLY FROM VENUS?

What most of these sure-to-fail strategies share is that they make a big issue of gender difference. They reinforce the perception that members of the "minority" gender are so different that they don't really qualify for membership on the team. Being marked as the odd person (or minority group) for any reason means more stress and less support from others, and the failure rate—measured by absenteeism, poor performance, and/or short tenure—rises the more the "marked" person or group is excluded. It's an organizational failure, and considering what it costs to hire, train, and pay employees, implementing a strategy that intensifies insider/outsider dynamics is remarkably expensive.

However, organizational insiders avoid responsibility and maintain a positive sense of identity by ignoring or even blaming the excluded person. The desire to feel safe and preserve self-esteem can be far more powerful than the influence of the

principle of fairness to others or concern for the organization's economic health. Fortunately, appealing to the desire to feel good about oneself and one's company is also part of the solution, as we'll see in the next chapter. For now, it's important to recognize that the overriding desire for group affirmation and a positive personal sense of identity explain why the solutions most organizations reach for first are also the ones that don't work. To sum up, we keep trying strategies that fail because we do the following:

- Tend to have confidence in the theory that best fits our worldview. It feels right, so it should work.
- Pick the strategies that require the least commitment or seem to entail the least risk to our status quo.
- Find ourselves attracted to strategies that we believe will receive the most popular support (or at least produce the least resistance).

Creating genuine change means resisting what feels comfortable, familiar, and intuitively right. For many, that in itself is the most powerful reason not to try. Most people like innovation, but they like it after the fact, when the new practices have come to feel comfortable. Most have to be persuaded, nudged, or outright pushed to take a new direction.

Positive change can be difficult to effect even when the evidence is clear and the motivation to move forward is high. What makes it hard to follow the evidence is that once a particular theory and way of doing things has been accepted by the group, it feels like an assault to make a radical change. It's as if the possibility of change challenges the integrity of the group and the personal integrity of each of its members. Moving toward gender inclusion may make some people feel as if the organization's true identity and reason for being have been nullified. As a result, the organization becomes something unrecognizable: perhaps a touchy-feely place where everyone cares about their relationships with one another more than they care about profits or getting work done; or a politically correct hell where women and men have to pretend they're just the same and a man can be persecuted for telling a woman she looks nice; or a second-rate organization in which unqualified people are hired and promoted, dragging down corporate performance; or just a place where the old certainties about what kind of person would be in charge and what kind of people would follow have all been overturned.

Some of these fears are hard to voice; it feels personally dangerous to challenge standard practice. But when change has to happen, it's much less dangerous—and generates far less trouble and expense—to take it on than to stay with the status quo. ■