

A blue button-down shirt is shown from the front, centered on a white background. The shirt has a collar, a buttoned placket, and a chest pocket. The text is overlaid on the shirt. The word "Good" is in large white letters at the top, followed by the subtitle in yellow and white, and the word "Guys" in large white letters at the bottom.

Good

**How Men Can Be
Better Allies for Women
in the Workplace**

Guys

**DAVID G. SMITH
W. BRAD JOHNSON**

HARVARD BUSINESS REVIEW PRESS

**Good
Guys**



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One of the true paradoxes of male allyship is the consistent social psychological research evidence showing that when men advocate for women or call out gender inequities, they are perceived to be more credible because they are not acting in self-interest.²² The research shows that when men advocate for gender equity initiatives, their voice and message are given more weight because they are supporting initiatives that benefit women. Women are all too familiar with these double standards. It's time for men to open their eyes to this opportunity and privilege and use it. As apparent outsiders to the cause, our voices on the topic of gender equity carry considerable weight.

Engaging men at every level of the organization is critical to changing the traditional workplace culture. Rachel Thomas of LeanIn.Org and OptionB.Org warned that “junior men fall into the trap of thinking there is nothing they can do. Junior men can actually do a great deal to partner with women for equality and inclusion. Some of these allyship acts are small but still bring a lot of impact.”

As it turns out, men can do so much more because of their innate privilege—even at the junior levels. Being members of the dominant gender at work, we are free to navigate the system through our knowledge of the culture and use our understanding of women's experiences to disrupt the status quo. To develop our sense of being allies, we learn to see the world through others' experiences. This requires being more aware, challenging assumptions, reading, learning, asking questions, and listening. Without this effort, we risk falling into the trap of silence—doing nothing. We can do better.

Fortunately, over the past several decades, more men have been willing to speak out publicly and act to level the playing field for women. The research evidence is clear: when men are actively engaged in gender diversity, both women and men have a more positive outlook about their organization's progress toward eliminating gender inequities. One international study asked women and men if they agreed that their company had made significant progress in the last three years in improving gender diversity at all levels of the company. These responses were correlated with whether they agreed that men

in their company were involved in championing gender diversity. The results show that in companies where men are actively involved in gender diversity, 96 percent of people report progress, whereas where men are not engaged, only 30 percent see progress.²³

Allyship and support for gender equity must be public, too. It's not enough that we hold ourselves individually accountable—we must be advocating for gender equity in public spaces, even when women aren't in the room, *especially* when women aren't in the room. Marine Corps Colonel Maria Pallotta's advice for men is: "You've got to be out there saying this organization is better for the contributions of the women on our team. If you don't, her male peers will undermine her. It's not enough to be neutral. The entire organization has to know you are a proactive advocate for women."

There are lots of ways that men can deliberately involve themselves in increasing gender diversity. Some include supporting flexible work policies, modeling the right behaviors, communicating fairly, sponsoring high-potential women, and getting involved with company-specific initiatives.²⁴ This book aims to help you get started with just that.

The Allyship Journey

There are three types of male allies. In our conversation with Subha Barry, President of Working Mother Media, she described them as "a small group of men who are already allies, know what they have to do, and do it all the time. A large middle group who are aware of the inequities, but watching the lay of the land, deciding if it is politically smart to act or use political capital. Finally, there is a small group of misogynists with very strong views who aren't going to change."

In this guide to male allyship, we focus on the first two groups: first, leveraging and reinforcing all-in allies into leadership roles; second, motivating the large middle group of men to lean in to the good work of inclusion and equality. Whether you are a leader, manager,

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or a junior employee looking to support your female colleagues, this book will give you practical tips and advice to help you be a male ally—to learn from the women around you, to get over your fears and hesitations, and to make real change in the workplace and beyond.

The skills you need to be a better ally for women at work will also make you a better ally for everyone. Think of them as gateway skills. What makes you an ally to women also applies to being a better ally to someone of a different race, sexual orientation, military veteran status, or generation. This will become clear as you learn how to develop these important skills for today's workplace.

The book is organized into three parts: *interpersonal allyship*, *public allyship*, and *systemic allyship*. The chapters comprise sixty action-oriented strategies that will guide your skill development and personalized ally action plan.

Part one, *Interpersonal Allyship*, examines how you show up in workplace relationships with women. Chapter 2 encourages reflection on your gender intelligence (GQ) and employs strategies to expand your knowledge about how women experience the workplace. Of course, you can't be an all-in ally at work unless you're an ally at home, so strategies in chapter 3 will arm you with actions to make you a world-class ally for your own partner and children. Chapter 4 is loaded with strategies to ensure your everyday interactions with women at work are creating a work environment that tells women that they are included, valued, and respected. Part one ends with the importance of developing friendships with women based on trust and reciprocity. The strategies in chapter 5 equip men for the relational aspects that are key to forging a network of women colleagues who are part of your personal board of advisers.

After mastering crucial ally relational strategies, part two prepares you for public allyship by offering strategies on how to be a proactive ally despite the occasional anxiety and some obstacles you will likely face. Chapter 6 is full of strategies and best practices to help you navigate the prickliest of scenarios. Many of these challenging scenarios happen in meetings. Chapter 7 gives you specific strategies to handle

these ubiquitous inequities. Being a public ally requires advocacy, and the final chapter in part two outfits you with ways to boldly sponsor women and promote their excellent contributions.

Finally, part three addresses systemic allyship and equips you with strategies to advocate for allyship and organizational change at any level. Chapter 9 explores the multitude of organizational processes in which systemic inequities are perpetuated and the strategies you can apply to vanquish them. Allies need support too, and we know there's strength in numbers. Chapter 10 contains strategies for growing a robust community of allies and developing a rich culture of allyship.

Whether you work for, alongside, or manage women, deliberately engaging with them in the workplace is the only real solution to overcoming the systemic sexism and inequality that keep all of us from maximizing potential and our organization from thriving.

Making Mistakes Is Part of the Journey

Allyship is a continuous learning process—a journey on which we will need to leverage and learn from each other—men and women in partnership. As Karen Catlin explains in her book, *Better Allies*, even seasoned allies with wide-open minds are constantly learning and absorbing new information about how to support less privileged people around them. Maintaining a learning orientation, a growth mindset, and a healthy dose of humility goes a long way toward being better allies. This is a marathon, not a sprint.

There are no perfect allies. As you work to become a better ally for the women around you, you will undoubtedly make a mistake. You'll be stepping out of your comfort zone and you'll be putting yourself on display as a partner and supporter. Brené Brown, author of *Dare to Lead*, research professor, and Huffington Foundation–Brené Brown Endowed Chair at The Graduate College of Social Work at the University of Houston said, “You can choose courage or you can choose comfort. You can not have both.” In many ways, allyship is a test of

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courage. If it were easy, we wouldn't be talking about it. Allyship requires us to enter spaces and conversations that can make us feel uncomfortable and take the occasional misstep.

Many men have never been in a space where they were a minority; they can find this both uncomfortable and powerful. (Take it from two guys who routinely speak and work in female-dominated spaces.) Most people don't want to unintentionally offend someone or hurt their feelings. And others worry that they'll experience resistance, backlash, or the dreaded *wimp penalty*.²⁵ They fear they'll be stigmatized through association with women's initiatives at work.²⁶ When faced with these uncertainties and fears, they naturally want to step back, rather than push forward.

But men need to get comfortable with these situations and conversations. Allies must immerse themselves in spaces where they can use their curiosity and learning orientation to ask questions and just listen. They must change the prevailing discourse from a wimp penalty. Instead, recognize that it actually takes a stronger, more secure man to support women's initiatives. This requires showing up in spaces where you don't think to venture and in ways you are unaccustomed to, and speaking up when you see backlash behavior. And in the process, make mistakes, learn from them, and figure out ways to improve.

In our experience, we find that when we make a mistake, we benefit from the honest relationships we've developed with women who trust our good intentions. As Catlin said, "[T]he best allies are willing to make mistakes and keep trying. As allies, we must acknowledge when we're wrong or could do better, and correct our course. We resist getting defensive and insisting that we're already doing enough. We listen and learn. We iterate."²⁷

Speaking out isn't easy, and no one expects perfection. But becoming a partner and ally to women is a crucial element of helping them reach equity in the workplace. If you think you're doing enough, you're probably not. Push further.

Jennifer Brown, CEO of Jennifer Brown Consulting, a true inclusion thought leader, provided her insight on diversity and allyship: "I

think the work of allyship needs to be sustained and over time—and you're only an ally when someone says you are. The caution there is that being an ally is a journey and not a destination. Allyship is something you can aspire to, but you have to be careful when you claim it. Acknowledge we have our own work to do. Let's both go together.”

About the Authors

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