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Gender Metrics: The Solution to Macho Attitudes that Won't Change

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A new study shows that one workforce subgroup isn't likely to add their support to women's leadership equality anytime soon. According to researchers at UNC Chapel Hill, NYU, and the University of Utah, men whose wives don't work outside the home are less likely to treat women with respect in the workplace. In fact, they tend to believe women are unsuited for the corporate world.

Based on a study of 718 married men, the research revealed that men with stay-at-home wives tend to take a more "traditional" view of gender roles, viewing the presence of female coworkers "unfavorably." They more often perceive companies with lots of women as poorly run. They also more frequently deny promotions to qualified women.

What's more, these attitudes about women are implicit – that is, many of the men in this group don't *actively* seek to keep women back. They don't even realize they hold these beliefs or that they can effectively end women's careers.

To make matters worse, the study continues, these men are more highly concentrated in management. In addition to holding more power over hiring and promotion, they also more frequently hold the purse strings for leadership development initiatives and employee resource groups that can be instrumental in helping women advance.

And – the researchers suggest – they're unlikely to change, no matter how much diversity training they sit through or HR messages they receive.

But there is a potential solution for dealing with this macho cohort. The researchers suggest that rather than waste time and energy trying to convince these men of the importance of gender equality, leadership should lay down the law, set diversity targets tied to compensation, and hold managers accountable for achieving their goals. Here's why the gender metrics approach could work.

Implicit Bias

The study, "How Men's Attitudes Impact Women's Careers," was written by Sreedhari D. Desai, Kenan-Flagler Business School University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill, Edmond J. Safra Center for Ethics at Harvard University, and Women & Public Policy Program, Harvard Kennedy School of Government; Dolly Chugh, Stern School of Business New York University; and Arthur P. Brief, David Eccles School of Business University of Utah.

According to the researchers, the report can help organizations navigate the murky waters of unconscious bias, in light of the recent slow-down in gender equality progress. They write:

"We believe that the results of these studies are important to understanding the stalled gender revolution as well as to theorizing about the effects of marriage structures in the workplace and, more pragmatically, effectively targeting efforts aimed at enhancing gender equality in work organizations."

Moreover, Desai, Chugh, and Brief explain that the men in this group probably won't change their behavior or attitudes about women, because they're so intricately woven into their own self-identity and lifestyle. They write:

"…we believe that the posture of these men embedded in traditional and neo-traditional marriages is unlikely to change dramatically until the structure of their marriages changes, an exceedingly improbable event on a large scale. Thus, we do not see that this pocket of resistance to the gender revolution will fade away. Rather, the attitudes, beliefs, and corresponding behavioral tendencies these may bring to work likely will remain a fact of organizational life."

Because these biases are unlikely to change, they suggest enforcing diversity benchmarks and tying diversity goals to compensation.

Gender Metrics

Setting diversity targets is more than a compliance-driven diversity-by-numbers strategy when the goal of the targets is to truly build an inclusive organization – rather than simply to appease regulatory agencies. In this case, the organization's leadership and corporate culture must value gender diversity, even though a pocket of individuals might not.

The metrics-based approach can help compel that pocket of individuals to participate in gender equality practices they wouldn't normally utilize or value. The researchers suggest:

"…(1) assigning accountability for setting diversity goals, devising means to achieve those goals, and evaluating progress, (2) appointing full-time staff members or creating diversity committees or task forces, comprised of people from different departments, professional backgrounds and management levels to overseeing diversity initiatives, brainstorming to identify remedies, and monitoring progress."

They add that the diversity strategy is not about changing the beliefs of this group, but understanding that their biases exist, and finding ways to work around the biases in the interest of achieving greater diversity. They explain, "…they should not focus on men embedded in traditional or neo-traditional marriages but rather, reflect an awareness of where subtle prejudices and negative stereotypes may lie."

By coupling this acknowledgement of gender bias within the workforce with hard goals to increase diversity, companies can focus resources on gender equality initiatives that may be more successful.

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