

Male Allies Must Publicly Advocate and Sponsor

David G. Smith

Johns Hopkins University

W. Brad Johnson

U.S. Naval Academy

Abstract

Recent evidence suggests that women are under-sponsored and, therefore, don't advance as rapidly as men in many organizations. Sponsorship entails advocating by creating visibility, supporting promotions, and ensuring protégés receive developmental opportunities needed to succeed. Although men often treat women with kindness and offer encouragement, too often, they fail them as vocal sponsors. In our research on men-as-allies for women, we find that public allyship skills include several key advocacy actions that help to overcome systemic inequities in organizations. We provide an overview of these actions and implications for women, men and organizations.

Gender diversity across all levels of organizational leadership leads to better decision-making, more innovation and profitability.^{1,2,3} Research suggests that one of the challenges to increasing women's representation in senior leadership teams is lack of sponsorship.⁴ In industries where women have historically been underrepresented, there is a unique opportunity for men who are in positions of power and influence to advocate and sponsor talented women.⁵ While most men believe in gender equity, many men don't engage in public advocacy and sponsorship of women. The reasons for this omission may include the zero-sum fallacy that advancing women means that men lose, perceiving women as a risky investment, fear of the "wimp penalty", erroneous perceptions that they are already sponsoring women, overemphasizing women's previous experience versus their potential, and gendered assumptions about women's career needs and goals.⁶

Despite these impediments to men's public advocacy for women at work, we find that male leaders who see allyship as integral to their personal leadership brand share a set of best practices. An Ernst & Young study of top male sponsors for women found that these men, "stood up for female protégés in performance reviews and promotion rounds; ensured they were considered for career opportunities; increased their visibility within the organization; helped expand their networks by introducing them to important stakeholders; challenged biased opinions and stereotypes about them; coached them before significant career moves or assessment processes; and took personal responsibility for removing barriers."⁷

The following strategies are based on the qualitative research with senior women across professions and industries and the men they considered to be allies that is the basis for the book, *Good Guys: How Men Can Be Better Allies for Women in the Workplace*.⁸ These evidence-based strategies demonstrate the art of deliberate, vocal, and transparent sponsorship for women. Men's public advocacy is not only good for women, it also benefits organizations—and men! Men who are known for advocating for women are often viewed as diversity champions and find that this positively impacts performance reviews. And in cases where these sponsorships are part of developmental relationships, men can reap increased access to information, more diverse networks and increased interpersonal skills (e.g., empathy, emotional intelligence and communication skills). These "rainmakers and star makers" in companies earn that reputation and are rewarded for having a discerning eye for diverse talent and sponsoring those junior employees for significant advancement.

Be her raving fan.

Public sponsorship requires men to be comfortable being an all-in, loud supporter of women. When men do this well it can be jarring and disrupt status quo perceptions about the way others think about these women. For example, Cindy Gallop, a brand and business innovator said: "I was at a tech conference several years ago, and a man said, 'Honestly, my business partner is amazing. The minute I began to partner with her, I began to see all these possibilities I hadn't seen myself.' He raved about her! I've never forgotten the incident because it is so rare."⁹ Here are six best practices and what they look like:

- ✓ *Give her a ringing endorsement.* Janet Petro of the Kennedy Space Center reflected on her sponsor, Robert Lightfoot, and how he purposefully introduced her and recognized her in meetings to elevate her stature: "He would say, 'JP is really good!' They knew Robert. He

Male Allies Must Publicly Advocate and Sponsor

was trustworthy. So, his powerful introductions gave me instant credibility and advantage.”

- ✓ *Increase her visibility by bringing her to key meetings.* Male sponsors increase women’s credibility by association by providing opportunities for interaction with influential leaders and decision makers. Romy Newman, president and CEO of Fairygodboss, told us how Michael Rooney, senior vice president of the *Wall Street Journal*, publicly advocated for her: “He empowered me more than anyone in my career just by including me in the room. He would bring me to every executive meeting. That provided so much exposure to management. I presented regularly to the CEO because of him. Instead of Michael presenting my ideas, he would have me come and do the presentation.”¹⁰
- ✓ *Put her name forward for visible assignments.* Get comfortable accepting some risk and nominating a highly-talented woman by ensuring she performs key tasks that allow her talents to be spotlighted so that everyone can see her brilliance. Mary-Olga Lovett of Greenberg Traurig Law recalled this kind of sponsorship: “As a first-year lawyer, I had one male boss who would split closing arguments with me, and these weren’t small cases. I was permitted to make those arguments and cross-examine witnesses in my first trial with this much more senior partner.”¹¹
- ✓ *Nominate her for promotions (don’t wait for her to nominate herself).* Token behaviors—behaviors women feel are required as one of the few or the only women in the work unit (e.g., compliance, conflict avoidance, delaying requests for advancement or new opportunities until they believe they meet every listed qualification)—and socialized reticence (e.g., fear of failure, imposter feelings) are just two of the reasons some women may be hesitant to put their names into consideration for promotions or stretch assignments.¹² Sponsors can collaborate to overcome this reluctance by sponsoring women loudly for promotions.
- ✓ *Nominate her even if it means your organization might lose her.* When an opportunity that is in her career interests means she will depart your company, be unselfish. Championing a woman’s career must be unconditional. And remember, excellent mentorship and sponsorship tends instills loyalty and actually lowers attrition on the whole.¹³ Suzanne Fogarty of Chapin School recalled how her boss, Bob Vitalo, made her aware of the head of school position opening at Lincoln School, told her that she was ready and would be a great head of school, and urged her to apply. She explained, “He acknowledged that

he didn't want to lose me, but that this position would be good for me, my career, and I was ready."¹⁴

- ✓ *Talk about her (positively) behind her back.* Consistent and unconditional sponsorship happens even when she's not in the room—especially when she's not in the room. Too often opportunities and decisions about who will be the recipient happens when women aren't in the room. This is true allyship and sponsorship.

Provide cover and share your social capital.

Social capital is situated within relationships and includes resources like advice, goodwill, influence, information, knowledge, and support.¹⁵ Sharing your social capital to highlight a woman's capabilities might include introducing her to someone in your network, including her in an email to other leaders, or inviting her to an important meeting and ensuring people know her name and how brilliant she is.¹⁶ The following four best practices are designed to leverage a leader's reputation and capital to promote the visibility of a rising star.

- ✓ *Send her forward with your coat of arms.* Symbolically, your influence and power can be carried with her to overcome barriers, open doors, and enable access to leaders who otherwise wouldn't even know her name. In an interview with Bill Parsons of the NASA Kennedy Space Center, he said that he brought Janet Petro on board from outside the center as his deputy director. He told the senior leadership team, "You go to Janet for decisions. She speaks for me on all matters. I trust her decisions so whatever she says goes." He told us that there were not many women in leadership at the time and Janet was the first female deputy director. He knew it was important to make it clear that Janet was essentially running the center day to day. People needed to understand that he saw her that way, that what she said was the bottom line.¹⁷
- ✓ *Add her to your network before she asks.* Intentionally connecting a talented woman with a few key people in your network could open a career door, include her in a career-enhancing project, or setup her next promotion or job. Diane Ryan of Tufts University explained how important it was when a sponsor did this for her without her asking: "When men have anticipated that a certain introduction and connection to people they know could be key to my advancement, and they've gone ahead and made that introduction for me without waiting for me to ask, it has made a big difference for me."¹⁸
- ✓ *Use your social capital to open doors.* Annie Rogaski of Avegant Corp. shared that when she was a junior lawyer, she went with a senior male

Male Allies Must Publicly Advocate and Sponsor

partner to a pitch meeting where lawyers would pitch clients why they would be a good fit for a specific case: “I thought we were there to pitch the firm and I was there to support him. Instead, sitting right next to me, he starts talking about me, how I’m really experienced with this type of case, and how long he’s worked with me and admired my work. He went on about how I’d be the perfect lawyer for their case and that they should hire me.”¹⁹

- ✓ *Prevent her from getting mommy-tracked.* Social capital can also be employed to promote a high-potential woman whose caregiving responsibilities or family-medical leave don’t allow her to follow the typical promotion track. Persistently raise her visibility among decision makers.

Take a risk: Nominate her for stretch opportunities.

See her talent and unrecognized potential, believe in her ability to succeed, and then, have the courage to take a risk in sponsoring her publicly for that critical promotion. Such deliberate nomination may cause people to take notice. But that’s not enough—you also have to provide her with the support to be successful. Otherwise, this amazing opportunity is just a glass cliff. These next six best practices ensure your out-loud advocacy is successful.

- ✓ *No risk, no reward.* In an act of risk in sponsorship, in 2015, then Arizona Cardinals head coach Bruce Arians hired Jen Welter as the NFL’s first female coach. After being hired, Welter said, “Bruce is known for saying ‘no risk, no biscuit,’ and that statement definitely applied to his decision to hire me. His courage in hiring me, a woman, has now opened the door for many other coaches to follow.”²⁰
- ✓ *Back her on the basis of potential, not just past performance.* The prove-it-again-bias—causing women to be evaluated on prior performance and men on potential—that women commonly face creates a double-bind in having to prove themselves before someone will hire them.²¹ Evan Smith of the Texas Tribune contends that we have to push back on this thinking: “I am not a proponent of people needing to prove they have done the work before they can move into a new position. Lack of experience is not a disqualification. We have to recognize talent and then provide women with the opportunity to grow into a job while ensuring they are successful by providing resources and support.”²²
- ✓ *Don’t wait until she feels ready.* Too often, men fail to push, dare, and challenge women in the same way they do men.²³ Challenging a talented woman to recognize her own talent may require a willingness

to advocate for stretch assignments before she sees herself as ready or earning them.

- ✓ *Provide support with the stretch opportunity.* Kirsty Graham, senior vice president at Pfizer explained how important this support was to her: “The key to his allyship and championing for me was ensuring I was successful in the opportunity. He was prepared to sit down and discuss what to expect, what I needed to know, and even to walk me through ‘dry runs’ of important things I might face.”²⁴
- ✓ *Trust her and don’t micromanage.* Be ready to dispense advice, but let her “do her,” which could include learning from mistakes. Janet Petro of the Kennedy Space Center cautioned against token sponsorship: “Don’t undermine her by not giving her full support, appropriate resources, and genuine decision-making authority. If you’re only offering superficial support, you’re not really sponsoring her.”²⁵
- ✓ *Sponsor her for “men’s” jobs.* Brigid Schulte, Director of Better Life Lab at New America shared that her sponsor, a newspaper bureau chief, was willing to sponsor regardless of how he would be questioned: “I was a regional correspondent, and Rich pushed me forward to be on the Pentagon beat, which was a very male beat. He saw something in me and pulled me up into a position I hadn’t sought out. He took a lot of heat for doing that.”²⁶

As inclusion-minded male leaders move forward to engage in more deliberate and equitable sponsorship, it’s often helpful to do an honest audit and ask, “am I boldly sponsoring some high-potential employees?” If so, “does everyone I sponsor look like me?” Be intentional about diversifying those you pull up and push forward. Become creative and deliberate about finding junior women to sponsor. It’s not only good for women, it sets up your organization for success.

Authors

David Smith, PhD, is co-author of the book, Good Guys: How Men Can Be Better Allies for Women in the Workplace and an Associate Professor at the Johns Hopkins Carey Business School. A former Navy pilot, Dr. Smith led diverse organizations of women and men culminating in command of a squadron in combat and flew more than 3,000 hours over 30 years including combat missions in Iraq and Afghanistan. As a sociologist trained in military sociology and social psychology, he focuses his research in gender, work, and family issues including gender bias in performance evaluations, dual career families, military families, women in the military, and retention of women. He is the co-author of Athena Rising: How and Why Men Should Mentor Women and numerous journal articles

Male Allies Must Publicly Advocate and Sponsor

and book chapters that focus on gender and the workplace. Learn more about David at: workplaceallies.com
email: David.g.smith@jhu.edu

W. Brad Johnson, PhD is Professor of psychology in the Department of Leadership, Ethics and Law at the United States Naval Academy, and a Faculty Associate in the Graduate School of Education at Johns Hopkins University. A clinical psychologist, Dr. Johnson is a mentoring expert specializing in developing gender-inclusive mentoring cultures for organizations around the globe. Dr. Johnson is the author of numerous publications including 14 books, in the areas of mentoring, professional ethics, gender inclusion. Recent books include: *Good Guys: How Men Can Become Better Allies for Women in the Workplace*, *Athena Rising: How and Why Men Should Mentor Women* (both with David Smith) and *the Elements of Mentoring 3rd Ed.* (with Charles Ridley).
email: johnsonb@usna.edu

Endnotes

1. Bogan, V. L., Just, D. R., & Dev, C. S. (2013). Team gender diversity and investment decision-making behavior. *Review of Behavioral Finance* (2013).
2. Cassells, R., & Duncan, A. S. (2020). *Gender Equity Insights 2020: Delivering the Business Outcomes* (No. GE05). Bentley, Western Australia: Bankwest Curtin Economics Centre (BCEC).
3. Ruiz-Jiménez, J. M., & del Mar Fuentes-Fuentes, M. Management capabilities, innovation, and gender diversity in the top management team: An empirical analysis in technology-based SMEs. *BRQ Business Research Quarterly*, 19(2), 107-121.
4. Ibarra, H., Carter, N. M., & Silva, C. (2010). Why men still get more promotions than women. *Harvard Business Review*.
5. Ramaswami, A., Dreher, G. F., Bretz, R., & Wiethoff, C. (2010). Gender, mentoring, and career success: The importance of organizational context. *Personnel Psychology*, 63(2), 385-405.
6. Smith, D. G., & Johnson, W. B. (2020). *Good guys: How men can be better allies for women in the workplace*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard Business Review Press.
7. Ernst & Young Global Limited. (2014). *Shaping the Future Together. Male Champions for Gender Equity: Experiences, Drivers and Lessons Learned*. Stuttgart, Germany: Ernst & Young GmbH.
8. Smith, D. G., & Johnson, W. B. (2020). *Good guys: How men can be better allies for women in the workplace*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard Business Review Press.
9. Ibid.
10. Ibid.
11. Ibid.
12. Mohr, T. S. (2014). Why women don't apply for jobs unless they're 100% qualified. *Harvard Business Review*.
13. Eby, L. T., Allen, T. D., Evans, S. C., Ng, T., & DuBois, D. L. (2008). Does mentoring matter? A multidisciplinary meta-analysis comparing mentored and non-mentored individuals. *Journal of Vocational Behavior*, 72(2), 254-267.
14. Smith, D. G., & Johnson, W. B. (2020). *Good guys: How men can be better allies for women in the workplace*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard Business Review Press.

15. Ragins, B. R. (2007). Diversity and workplace mentoring relationships: A review and positive social capital approach. In T. D. Allen & L. T. Eby (Eds.), *The Blackwell Handbook of Mentoring: A multiple perspectives approach* (pp. 281-300). Malden, MA: Blackwell Publishing.
16. Johnson, W. B., & Smith, D. G. (2019). *Athena rising: How and why men should mentor women*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard Business Review Press.
17. Smith, D. G., & Johnson, W. B. (2020). *Good guys: How men can be better allies for women in the workplace*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard Business Review Press.
18. Ibid.
19. Ibid.
20. Ibid.
21. Williams, J.C. (2014). Double jeopardy? An empirical study with implications for the debates over implicit bias and intersectionality. *Harvard Journal of Law & Gender*, 37(1), 185-242.
22. Smith, D. G., & Johnson, W. B. (2020). *Good guys: How men can be better allies for women in the workplace*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard Business Review Press.
23. Johnson, W. B., & Smith, D. G. (2019). *Athena rising: How and why men should mentor women*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard Business Review Press.
24. Smith, D. G., & Johnson, W. B. (2020). *Good guys: How men can be better allies for women in the workplace*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard Business Review Press.
25. Ibid.
26. Ibid.