Lead Like an Ally

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Why Fixing Women Is Not Working

If you Google "women's leadership books," you will likely find titles that tout confidence, risk taking, influencing, and negotiation. In my first book, *Pivot Point*, I too identified authenticity, confidence, having a plan, connecting with purpose, influence, and negotiation skills as critical gap areas for women that are necessary to propel us forward. Sadly, progress has been stagnant since it was written in 2015. Since the early 2000s we have been subtly telling women to forget that they are women and to act more like men at work, as if years of gender socialized behaviors, ingrained in us, can be forgotten. Impossible!

In fact, gender is not binary. We are not simply a man or a woman based on our given sex at birth. There is a gender spectrum. Increasingly, people are identifying themselves as gender neutral or non-binary, meaning that they do not identify with being exclusively a man or a woman. We have been socialized to behave in a way that aligns with our given sex, yet that is not the only option. For women, this is problematic, because as a society we favor masculine over feminine traits in the workplace. This explains why it is impressed upon women to set aside their feminine tendencies and to present a masculine front to advance their careers.

On the gender spectrum, femininity brings tremendous value to workplaces, especially when mingled with masculine traits. The feminine traits of collaboration, emotional intelligence, and tempered risk taking lead to better business results. Asking women to be more like men is counterintuitive. The natural traits that we offer as women complement those of men, truly creating the ideal balance or the yin-yang effect we are

after. Masculine traits balanced with feminine traits result in better leadership, higher employee engagement, and better business results.

The Workplace Is Built for Men to Succeed

Workplace rules have been defined by men. Today's workplace still somewhat resembles 1950s-era *Mad Men*: plagued with sexual harassment, women toiling behind the scenes in low-paying positions, socially mandated after-hour activities, and rigid in-office hour requirements.

At the time of writing this book, women only accounted for 6% of CEOs at Fortune 500 companies and 20% of C-suite positions. As I referenced in my second book, *ONE*, this statistic is static and shows no signs of improvement. In fact, McKinsey's latest "Women Matter" report claims the number is receding. Recent female CEO departures signal a retreat from the once coveted [leadership](#) helm. Often, women in these positions feel constrained, constantly battling the gender tightrope bias of having to be feminine with the right dose of masculinity. It is exhausting day in and day out. That is the real reason women leave.

Conversely, when the rules are co-defined by women, we all thrive. Education is an area where women have outpaced their male counterparts for years. So why does that success not translate into the workplace? More women than men graduate from college, achieve higher GPAs, and obtain advanced degrees, yet the key leadership positions in law firms and medical institutions are held by men. It feels opposite somehow. *Why?* What if the rules could be defined equally across genders? Taking this into consideration, the solution that presents itself for us to lead together as allies.

I believe we are stronger together.

What Is Necessary for Positive Change

Instead of encouraging women to be more like men, we need organizations to meet women where they are and build a culture that values gender equality, inclusion, and a genuine sense of belonging for everyone.

Critical mass is achieved when women make up at least 30% of a group. This is when underrepresented groups feel a sense of belonging and do not feel alienated being the "only" in the room. One or two token women are not enough to make a difference. While 50% is lofty for many leadership teams currently hovering around 20%, 30% is much more achievable. The chances of women speaking up, being heard, and having influence maximize when this is achieved.

This is why I recommend the following ideas to organizations looking to advance gender equality:

1. **Clean up the culture.** Start with the cultural values of the organization and make sure they are inclusive to all genders. Male language is everywhere. Map out the employee experience and think about both vantage points from recruiting, interviewing, onboarding, performance management, pay, promotions, and separation. Bias creeps in everywhere. I recommend treating this as seriously as any business process. Map out the key areas of your employee experience today and where you want it to be, then brainstorm how to fill in the gaps with a strategic road map of activities. Improving the employee experience has a direct correlation on the customer experience.

2. **Stretch talent equally.** Studies show women do not get as much constructive feedback or access to challenging assignments as men. Men are often judged on their potential, whereas women are critiqued on their

performance. In addition, as a woman becomes more successful, she is judged to be less likeable, while the opposite is true for men. This is illustrated by the fact that women, unlike men, typically are rated in performance reviews based on personality traits. It is important to evaluate your organization's performance management data and mine it for gendered language, do a feedback comparison, and evaluate growth assignments by gender. Chances are, you will find gaps that you will need to close and educate managers on, especially middle managers, who have a huge influence on these decisions. These "little" decisions add up.

3. **Establish ally networks.** We now know that organizations that engage men as allies from the top down close the gap much more quickly—three times more quickly, in fact, according to the experts at Boston Consulting Group. This means educating men and women on how to be allies for each other, and promoting cross-gender mentoring, sponsoring, and coaching relationships. Women need safe places to be vulnerable, share stories, come together, and talk about how we work together as allies too. Being an ally is a journey, and organizations with inclusive leadership and ally education programs achieve more.

4. **Manage meeting behavior.** "Man-terruptions" and mansplaining are still pervasive in today's workplace. Women are far more likely than their male counterparts to be interrupted in meetings. These microaggressions or small incidents—taking credit for an idea, over- or underexplaining an idea, and exclusionary body language toward women—signal that women do not belong and take a big toll over time. This is really why women leave their jobs. I recommend monitoring meetings for these behaviors. Hold leaders accountable for ensuring inclusiveness in meetings by making sure everyone participates, commitments are documented, and note-taking roles and leaders are diversified.

5. **Promote belonging.** Abraham Maslow introduced this theory

in his 1943 paper "A Theory of Human Motivation." It is so relevant in today's workplace. Once our basic needs (air, food, water, shelter, security) are met and we feel psychologically safe, the next need we seek is to belong. As women, we do not have that many female role models to look up to. Be sure to equally engage men and women leaders in speaking roles and ensure they are equally recognized in the organization. It is important that men and women are both acknowledged for success of the organization. Increase visibility of women leaders and model what good looks like for others finding their way.

6. **Measure success.** This means paying attention to the numbers of women at each level of the organization, tracking the number of hires, promotions, and exits and pay gaps by gender. It also includes measuring inclusive values and behavior alignment through employee engagement data and performance review data. If your organization's leadership teams do not reflect your customer base, you are in trouble. You cannot be anticipating the needs of your customers if you do not mirror your customer base. We measure all kinds of important data in business, like profits, engagement, and customer satisfaction. The same should go for gender equality. Consider metrics like applications, hiring, promotion, and separation and hold leaders accountable to them. Finger pointing is commonplace, but it's hard to run from data.

I believe we learn best from our own ideas. To help you formulate your own ideas, I am going to tell you a story of a woman who works in today's workplace, detailing her experiences, with insights and ideas on how an ally could have made it better for her. It is based on the treasure trove of stories I have personally collected in my 15-year career of speaking, consulting, and training leaders on equality and inclusive leadership. It is personal for me, because I am

telling it through the eyes of my daughter, Jane, as if she were in the workforce today. I hope this story remains a fable, one that she never has to live. Without further ado, meet Jane.

Lead Like an Ally Skills Checklist

- Know your ally "why"
- Set a vision for what it means to be an ally for you (mentor, sponsor, advocate, coach, challenge)
- Prepare your ally SWOT analysis (strengths, weaknesses, opportunities, and threats)
- Have an allyship plan (goals and action steps)
- Practice empathy
- Strengthen emotional intelligence
- Be vulnerable
- Seek to understand versus to be understood
- Challenge with care
- Give and take feedback
- Conduct candid conversations
- Unpack privilege
- Identify the ally continuum (apathy, awareness, activity, advocacy)
- Mentor different people
- Step up as a sponsor
- Coach to success
- Advocate for others
- Stay open to input
- Be curious
- Have inclusive meetings
- Practice perspective taking
- Help others be seen and heard
- Think of a time when you were different
- Understand covering
- Write out your ally story
- Share your ally story
- Know when to ask versus to tell

- Delegate
- Know the GROW model
- Give to give versus give to get
- Identify strengths in others
- Bolster the confidence of others
- Check unconscious bias
- Call out microaggressions
- Know the science of bias
- Limit "othering" people
- Stop benevolent sexism
- Know gender bias
- Model inclusive parental leave
- Be clear about sexual harassment policies
- Own your role in the system
- Address not seeing color
- Focus on cultural diversity
- Use the term *people of color*
- Learn about the gender spectrum
- Facilitate being out at work
- Use the term *partner*
- Ask about others' experiences
- Ensure interview slates are diverse
- Measure progress on equality
- Broaden diversity to more than race and gender
- Set expectations for leaders to lead like allies

About the Author: [Julie Kratz](#) is a highly-acclaimed leadership trainer who led teams and produced results in corporate America for nearly two decades. After experiencing her own career "pivot point," Kratz developed a process to help women leaders create their winning career game plan. Focused on promoting gender

equality in the workplace and encouraging women with their "what's next" moments, Kratz is a frequent keynote speaker and executive coach. She holds an MBA from the Kelley School of Business at Indiana University and is a Certified Master Coach. Kratz is the author of [Lead Like an Ally: A Journey Through Corporate America with Proven Strategies to Facilitate Inclusion](#), [Pivot Point: How to Build a Winning Career Game Plan](#) and [ONE: How Male Allies Support Women for Gender Equality](#). She currently resides in Indianapolis.