

## How male managers can spread equality

By Alison Maitland

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In private conversations, middle managers are often referred to as “the permafrost” or “the concrete layer”. They are an unloved group, who are blamed for a multitude of organisational failures. Among these is the failure to implement all those good intentions of senior leaders to increase the number of women at the top of organisations.

Since middle managers are rarely in a position to defend themselves in public forums, they make an easy scapegoat for wider cultural problems. But there's no doubt the behaviour of team leaders can make working life either enjoyable or unbearable for those who report to them. Men represent 70% of managers and leaders, so their role is critical if gender progress is to reach the heart of organisations.

How exactly can supportive male managers make a difference? The answer lies in consistent, everyday actions, according to new research\* by Elisabeth Kelan, Professor of Leadership at Cranfield School of Management. Elisabeth spent a week with each of three middle managers in different companies and countries, observing their own and their colleagues' interactions. She found that “gender-inclusive” male managers:

- Celebrate and encourage women
- Empathise with people who are different from them
- Identify and confront bias in others
- Champion and defend gender initiatives
- Challenge traditional working patterns
- Reflect on their leadership style and seek feedback

Take an example: it's well known that women can find themselves talked over, or see their ideas appropriated, by male colleagues. A good manager can deal with this head-on. In a case cited in the research, a woman hears her male colleague telling their boss that he is responsible for a successful idea that they had jointly developed. She is shocked and does not know how to respond.

She seeks advice from a male middle manager who is mentoring her. Rather than telling her she should confront her colleague, which would be awkward, the mentor speaks to him, man to man, pointing out that his conduct is not professional, and asking him to put the record straight with the boss. At the next team meeting, the colleague gives the woman the credit she is due. They end up on good terms again, and their joint success is reflected in their performance reviews.

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Unconscious bias is a big topic these days. Another story highlights how this often plays out, and how a male manager can confront it. In a discussion on the best candidate for a vacant position, a male boss advocates appointing a man who “reminds me of myself at his age”. The manager diplomatically suggests that they focus on the key skills needed and points out that the female candidate exceeds expectations. The boss retorts that the woman “wasn't very assertive” in her interview. The manager persists. “She was not as boisterous as Edward [the male candidate] but I doubt that we would have appreciated this behaviour in a woman,” he says. The boss, realising he has applied double standards, backs off. They hire the woman, who also happens to be the better candidate.

Middle managers who advocate gender parity, whether as a business imperative or for reasons of fairness and justice, remain unusual. According to McKinsey research, only 13% of middle managers in leading European companies support moves towards parity - even though most CEOs do.

What's more, both men and women put obstacles in the way of men who stand up for parity. Elisabeth says one of the biggest surprises of her research was that such men are often criticized or belittled by colleagues. Men poke fun, asking what they've done to deserve being given a diversity role, for example. Women question their intentions or their credentials as “gender champions”.

“I didn't realize it would be such a difficult position to defend gender parity if you're a man in an organization,” she says.

Alex Lowe, an industry head at Google UK, believes the reason most male managers do little to overtly support and encourage women is “probably ignorance”. They need to see clear evidence from the top that gender parity is central to the business strategy. Otherwise “they don't know what they are missing [in terms of better business results].”

Alex, who says he inherited an all-male team that is now 60%-40%, adds that middle managers don't need or have time for a lot of academic research on the topic. What they need is practical examples to follow.

Elisabeth's report provides a useful checklist for men who are aspiring to be gender-inclusive managers. They include:

- Mentor and sponsor a woman, instead of automatically mentoring a man like you
- Find women experts to speak on your panels
- Talk about how you make time for outside/family commitments
- Watch how you and others speak about, and to, women – do the metaphors you use unintentionally exclude them, for example?

It's good advice for much-abused middle managers everywhere.

*\*Linchpin – Men, Middle Managers and Gender Inclusive Leadership:*  
<http://www.som.cranfield.ac.uk/som/dinamic-content/research/Linchpin.pdf>

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