

# Men as Allies

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Illustration: Curtis Parker

Years ago, Doug Fisher, senior vice president and general manager of Intel’s software and services group, was asked to speak at an internal forum about how to advance women. Facing the group, the Portland, OR-based leader shared his point of view on what it would take to move the needle of women’s advancement at the tech giant.

Today, Doug politely declines to share what those suggestions were. Suffice it to say, however, they would have been “entirely counterproductive” had they been implemented, he admits. Luckily for him, a female colleague spoke up immediately, and, wisely, he listened. “It was a poignant moment in my career,” he recalls. “Sometimes you have to

pause and acknowledge that, as a male in the workplace, I'm not naturally the expert on this."

That may be true for many male managers. And yet, experts say men might hold the key to reigniting women's advancement.

Recent years have seen very little increase in women's representation, even though the competitive advantages of diverse leadership are clear. (Management consulting firm McKinsey & Co. calculates that if women were allowed to contribute their full potential to the global economy, it could boost GDP by \$28 trillion.) Women remain under-represented at every level of corporate management: We represent roughly half of entry-level workers but hold only one-third of senior management roles and 17 percent of C-suite positions, according to a 2015 McKinsey study of 118 companies and nearly 30,000 employees. Women held a measly 5 percent of CEO spots at the 2015 Fortune 500 companies when that list was announced last summer.

And yet female leadership is good for business. Here's why: Companies with more female leaders outperform their peers, beat stock market averages and have fewer major ethical violations. Companies with female directors generate better financial returns—including return on investment, share-price performance and price-to-book value ratio—than male-led companies, according to the *Harvard Business Review*.

So how can companies unlock this enormous opportunity? The answer, say experts, is men.

Men need to treat hiring, developing and promoting women as urgent, argues John Keyser, co-author of *Make Way for Women*. "C'mon, guys, it's a no-brainer," he says. "Right now, women are 60 percent of college graduates and 70 percent of valedictorians. Business is so competitive, we need the strongest teams leading together."

When male leaders show that advocating for and sponsoring women is important, "the culture and dynamics shift," says Cardinal Health's Robert Pantano, senior vice president of warehouse operations and operational excellence, who has seen the shift in action at the Dublin, OH-based healthcare solutions company. For example, he notes, as male leaders have prioritized female advancement, women at Cardinal Health have received sponsorship earlier in their careers, resulting in more skill development, more stretch assignments—and more promotions.

But the proof is in the numbers. Now in its fifth year on the [National Association for Female Executives Top Companies for Executive Women list](#), Cardinal Health reports that 44 percent of promotions to manager and higher went to women last year, while 38 percent of executives reporting to the CEO are women. "I'm excited about what I'm seeing in the entry levels of my organization [with] female rising stars," says Robert.

One of those rising stars is Rosemary Pitts, who was seven months into a new role at Cardinal Health's headquarters when she learned the company planned a multiyear project to realign its largest segment, the pharmaceuticals business. The project would be high-profile—and, she believed, a good fit.

Intrigued, the mom of three began lobbying colleagues in her network. After she had multiple candid conversations with her manager in which she was, as she puts it, “very vocal” about her desire for the position, Rosemary’s boss took the case to Robert. Impressed with Rosemary’s potential, he tapped her as vice president of strategic planning and execution, a win not only for her but also for him—and Cardinal Health.

Today, Rosemary says she and Robert are forging a partnership that’s positioning her for future growth. “Robert has been incredibly supportive,” she says. “He knows what my unique skill set is on his team.”

What does it take to get men on board as allies to women? For the NAFE Top Companies, the answer is threefold: building awareness of unconscious biases that work against women, collaborating on career paths, and approaching the advancement process with new candor.

## Building Awareness

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Male managers need to recognize and address the unconscious biases that work against women, argues Ray Arata, a leadership coach, author and co-founder of Gender Leadership Group, a consulting firm. For example, there’s affinity bias—the human instinct to trust (read: hire, collaborate with, promote) people who seem “like me.” Because there are relatively few women in top roles, a like-me bias puts women at a disadvantage. And it’s a significant one: A study by Catalyst found that only 30 percent of men who mentor colleagues do so for women.

Then there’s risk aversion, another common bias. At Intel (also a 2016 NAFE Top Company), Doug Fisher realized he was risk-averse, turning to the same few people each time a business challenge arose. “I’d go to them because I knew they could execute; they’d done it before,” he says. “It meant low risk for me, but then it was hard for anyone else to get anything meaty.”

These days, Doug looks across his organization with an ear attuned to the skills and interests of newcomers. “I’d heard from one partner about a female staffer who was really great. So the next time I had a large assignment, I gave it to her. She ended up doing a fantastic job,” he says.

## Building Career Paths

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“We’ve had so many debates—should I do this, or should I do that? What skills do I need to develop next?”

That’s Donna Walker, IBM’s global skills initiative director, describing her partnership with Bill Kribbs, vice president of IBM Middleware and one of the Austin, TX-based mom’s most important advocates.

More than a decade ago, Donna approached Bill for advice on how to move into his field (technology). She was working in finance (managing Bill’s financial analysts), so it wasn’t a typical career trajectory, but he wasn’t daunted. “We tried to map out what she needed to

do, and we started to look for things that fit,” he says.

The first role was running operations for Bill’s team. It gave Donna “an eagle’s-nest view of his entire operation,” she recalls. “It showed me in miniature how the organization worked.” Once she mastered that, he helped her move into channel technical enablement, her first technical role. Now, in her current position, she works with every division across IBM (a NAFE Top Company for the 18th year in 2016).

It’s worth noting that Bill proposed the operations role to Donna when she was working part-time, with children ages 6 and 3 at home. She jumped at the chance and moved to full-time within six months.

Too often, however, women don’t get asked to step up for a stretch assignment or a higher-profile role. The conversation never happens. “The thinking goes, Oh, she won’t want a travel role, she’s just had a baby or This client is tough, and she won’t want to make waves,” says Keyser. “Men make these kinds of assumptions all the time on the executive floor without even consulting the women involved.”

To be a successful ally and advocate, men must learn what skills women on their teams have, what they’ve achieved in other roles and where they’d like to go, advises Adrienne Hand, co-author with Keyser on *Make Way for Women*.

If the right job isn’t open at the moment, conscientious male sponsors and mentors should suggest lateral moves, volunteer projects that will broaden networks, or opportunities to present results internally. Also, look beyond HR, diversity or marketing roles, which can be the default career paths for women. Says Hand, “Steer women toward finance, operations or other roles in which they get a firm understanding of how the company works and where they can demonstrate that they can generate revenue.”

## Building Courage

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As he’s studied what blocks women from leadership, Intel’s Doug Fisher believes that female managers are often shortchanged on feedback. They don’t get candid information on their strengths and weaknesses and thus can’t make critical improvements.

As a result, as soon as he hears news—whether positive or critical—about a female manager, he relays the information. “In the past, I’d let it go,” he says. “Now I turn around in my tracks and take that conversation back to that particular leader.”

Doug remembers one tough conversation in particular. The next day, the female executive sent Doug a note saying it was the best one-on-one she’d had in a decade. “No one had stepped up before to tell her what was blocking her effectiveness.”

It’s critical “to have the same type of direct and frank discussions with a woman as a male leader would have with another male,” notes Tim Tracy, the Iselin, NJ-based assurance managing partner, Northeast, for NAFE Top Company Ernst & Young LLP. And while such discussions might start with career aspirations and stretch- assignment desires, they

shouldn't stop there. "I would strongly encourage women not to be apologetic for working a different schedule," says Tim, "and rather be proud of the fact they are being a great role model."

## A Winning Combo

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Not so long ago, Doug Fisher spoke again at a professional women's forum. This time, his comments were honest, inspiring—and informed.

Jayshree Athma, a San Francisco mom of two and an engineering director at a technology company, was so engaged by his talk that she reached out to him on LinkedIn afterward for career advice. The two met and reviewed Jayshree's resume. "He invested his time and gave me totally unbiased feedback. I was so impressed by that," she says. "I went away more confident."

She also applied for a position at Intel and was ultimately hired as a senior technical leader—and now is in the process of hiring a team of software developers for a critical project. Such is a model for success, say many experts.

"It's a one-two punch of the business case and the heart," says leadership coach Arata. "First you talk about the competitive advantages. Then you need to move men into their hearts to see the problems—to look at unconscious bias, to see if they're holding outdated norms, to become aware of how male peers get more chances and more airtime in meetings. Then you reframe it so men can see the opportunity—for the company, for their wives and mothers and daughters.

"Men want to win," Arata continues. "And those who *will* win are the ones who realize that the fastest way to do it is to combine the strengths of men and women."