

Strategic Gender Management

Common Ground Consulting's Guide to Going Beyond "Gender Inclusion"

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1. What is Strategic Gender Management?

If the women's programs in your organization are no longer delivering the results you've hoped for, it may be because a strictly diversity & inclusion approach to gender is no longer right for your organization. Strategic Gender Management, by contrast, represents a state of dynamic balance in which a) mentoring and training programs are gender savvy and attuned to the needs and concerns of men and women equally; b) programming builds on common ground between men and women rather than emphasizing divisive differences; c) intelligent gender management is mainstreamed as part of standard management practice. Strategic Gender Management is a programmatic approach to moving toward a state of dynamic, self-sustaining organizational balance in which gender has no influence on who's hired, retained, or promoted, and managers put their knowledge of gender dynamics to work to better access all appropriate markets, deploy talent, integrate career and personal life, create optimal conditions for innovation, build high-functioning teams, and develop leadership.

2. Who benefits from strategic gender management?

Everyone. Twenty years ago, or even ten, little evidence had been compiled to show that supporting "gender equity in the workplace" had anything more to offer than the positive feelings that come from valuing diversity and abiding by principles of fairness. Now the evidence is in, and it shows that companies that manage gender well reap potent benefits beyond what even proponents of "the advancement of women in the workplace" believed would accrue. The business case is solid, but the truth behind it is counter-intuitive: women are not the sole, or even the primary, beneficiaries of their own advancement. Far from being short-changed when women succeed, men gain big advantages, ranging from better health to a better bottom line.

3. Why do organizations need strategic gender management?

It's not that women have special feminine attributes that enable them to be more compassionate, or better multitaskers, or more sensitive communicators than men can be; it's that organizations that manage gender well also tend to do well on most indicators of organizational health. Organizations that are NOT being held back by outdated beliefs about men and women are also quicker to evolve in response to market changes. They value performance over conformity. Their management strategies are more progressive than their competitors. They tend to create new opportunities rather than merely defending old territory. As a result, they perform better than companies that continue to cling to old, familiar, but no longer viable beliefs and processes.

4. Why doesn't old-school "Venus-Mars" thinking work?

A theory of gender difference developed in the 1990s and often called “Venus and Mars” dictates that men and women are hardwired so differently that they are mysterious to one another. This kind of theory colors far too much business strategy, affecting people’s abilities to do their jobs effectively. Venus/Mars is bad science; its popularity is due to its support of comfortable, conventional wisdom. If replaced with a more practical – and truer – vision of gender relations based on a balanced understanding of men’s and women’s differences and commonalities, Venus/Mars gives way to an Insider/Outsider paradigm in which the focus is on developing positive work relations rather than on speculations about innate abilities, encouraging women and men in all levels of management find the success they seek by applying strategies and programming to recruit, retain and promote based on the best person for the job... not the best gender for the job.

5. What Are The Three Most Typical Responses to the Challenges of SGM?: (Note: these aren’t mutually exclusive)

a. Denial / Deprioritization:

What people say: I’ve never been discriminated against as a woman, or I have been discriminated against, but I handled it without making a big fuss, because that only makes it worse. If women wanted to get ahead, they could; there’s nothing holding them back. When women don’t succeed, it’s by choice. Women are their own worst enemies; if they’d just learn to support one another, we wouldn’t have any issues.

Common Organizational Perceptions: If we had a problem, we would address it. Women aren’t complaining. Some women have issues, but their problems are minor in comparison to other things we’re dealing with, and we have to prioritize. HR and Diversity and Inclusion take care of compliance and programming, so the rest of the organization can get on with business. Men, although they wish women well, have nothing to gain, and perhaps something lose, by becoming involved.

b. Change has to come slow:

What people say: Maybe when all the older men and the one or two Queen Bees retire, we’ll have an opening to make some progress. Men just can’t understand what it’s like to be a woman, and they have no motivation to try. Men know they have the upper hand, and they’re not going to give that up easily. As long as women have so much responsibility for child care and domestic work, they’re going to struggle when they take on the time demands and stress of a high-powered job, and none of that is going to change anytime soon.

Common Organizational Perceptions: Men and women are so different (in terms of their values, competencies, commitment, and possibly brain structure) that creating a gender-inclusive workplace is just about impossible right now. It’s a good goal, but it has to happen in its own time. The workplace is a reflection of the culture at large, so until big social changes happen in the world around us, what we can accomplish is pretty limited. Slowly, over years or generations, we may arrive at a point where we could have true gender equity and inclusion. For now, it’s a utopian dream.

c. Reflection / Realization / Integration:

What people say: I've been able to see some positive changes as time has gone on, and yet I'm not completely satisfied. From what I've experienced, I don't believe that the differences between men and women are big enough to explain why so few women make it through to senior leadership or why we still have an old boys' club. There doesn't seem to be much outright bias, but I'd rather feel like we are all valued in the same way, and that whether I'm a man or woman doesn't make any difference to my career.

Common Organizational Perceptions: We're frustrated that dedicated diversity and inclusion efforts have not been able to resolve documented or suspected problems with gender dynamics, retention of women, sexual harassment, or the glass ceiling. We're convinced that addressing these issues is the right thing to do and that diversity and inclusion are integral to our success as an organization, so we're considering how to change what we're currently doing so that we can initiate the next stage in our evolution.

6. What can be done to enable Strategic Gender Management?

a. Rethink recruitment and retention:

Despite some remarkable successes with putting gender stereotypes to rest, a few erroneous ideas about differences between men and women continue to affect judgments about who to hire. At the top of the list are beliefs that women are more "risk averse," possess less "business acumen," and are less effective as top leaders in spite of widespread acceptance that men and women are equally likely to have the qualities essential to successful leadership. Because recruiting and retention tactics that recognize and counteract lingering biases will be more effective, it makes sense to address them directly.

Taking risk aversion as an example, there is a great deal of data purporting to demonstrate that women tend to be more risk-averse than men, especially in financial dealings, willingness to enter new ventures, and in making job choices. In some cases, women's perceptions of heightened risk are accurate. For instance, studies show that women in male-majority workplaces really do meet with greater hostility and less cooperation than their male colleagues, and that employers often compound the problem by assuming that women's difficulties arise from "woman-specific" causes like lack of child care or being emotionally ill-suited to a competitive or hard-driving work atmosphere. The combined influence of experiencing a less supportive workplace and being judged the source of the problem drives women's retention rates down and can make them wary of assuming certain high-exposure managerial roles or relocating to take advantage of new opportunities. Similarly, as women's careers mature, many become convinced that the playing field is tilted in favor of men. They question whether their current or potential employers have faith in women's competence and commitment, and they believe that they have to be twice as good as their male counterparts. It's not that women are more risk-averse than men; it's that women often perceive that some risks are actually higher for them.

Numerous studies show that women and minorities are more likely to succeed with employers that follow careful processes for hiring and advancement, apply objective criteria in evaluations, and offer

adequate mentoring. That's because careful, objective processes counteract biases and level out the risks associated with accepting new challenges. Common Ground's past experience with recruiting proves shows that the first and possibly biggest obstacle is perception. In one recent client-case, a major petroleum company based here in the U.S., Common Ground has seen a two-digit increase in new hires of qualified women following implementation of simple, gender-inclusive recruitment strategies. That's a great beginning, but it has to be followed by a retention phase. Growing a network that enables women to forge connections with one another is essential, but even more important is improving women's experiences where they work every day. The key to retention is the creation of a knowledgeable, involved and informed workforce that is encouraged to take ownership for creating successful teams, regardless of gender make-up, with a total focus on maximizing productivity, job satisfaction and profitability.

Action: Conduct a meeting with leadership to build Strategic Gender Management into the game plan. A two-to four hour time span or more is best, and a brief pre-read would be provided to help maximize the time. Here are some possible topics:

- Providing training for applicable personnel about winning women's business;
- Reducing women's isolation in male-majority workplaces by reducing insider/outsider gender dynamics;
- Creating positive involvements and outcomes for men in the process;
- Promoting opportunities for mixed-gender teams, mentoring & networking;
- Enhancing collaboration between the employee network and a) other relevant diversity efforts and b) general management practices;
- Mainstreaming basic gender management strategies with other relevant diversity efforts and general management practices;
- Taking a brief look at what science says about gender differences AND similarities;
- Assessing the "gender geography" of the organization;
- Examining the Internal Business Case: why Strategic Gender Management is smart, ethically sound, manageable, economical, and profitable;
- Translating Strategic Gender Management into market opportunities;
- Using the employee networks to encourage strategic gender management.

b. Change initial perception:

Women overall are more likely to relocate or take on a new, riskier and more challenging job or career when they believe that a) they stand the same chance to succeed as men and b) the relocation or new job will benefit their family by improving economic security and providing access to other, less tangible benefits, such as better educational opportunities for children, access to cultural events, or a stronger community. When women feel confident on these two points, they are as likely to take risks as men, even when it means moving out of the country or into a brand new set of responsibilities.

Action: It's vitally important to make sure that the organization is a place where men and women get the message, once their foot is in the door, that everyone will be given every opportunity to succeed in an equitable environment. The place to start with fine-tuning the methods used to engage men and women.

c. Revisit women as senior leaders:

Many organizations, regardless of sector, experience the reality that there is a decent, or even good, representation of women in middle management and at a supervisory level in areas like human resources, finance or marketing, but a noticeable dearth of women in leadership roles typically labeled Senior Manager, Director, Vice President or higher in operational units of the organization. This current paucity of women who are senior leaders is an obstacle all in itself.

Both men and women feel more confident about a new challenge when they can identify role models similar to themselves who are meeting the challenge successfully. Further, they learn by observing the role model what personal attributes and skills they need to draw on or develop in order to grow into the new role successfully. One way to overcome the apparent lack of role models for women is to coach potential female middle managers on how to identify role models based not on gender similarity but on shared attributes and skills. Similarly, women working in male-majority pockets of the organization need to know how to cultivate mentors, advocates, and sponsors who will actively contribute to their professional development and their advancement into riskier, higher-profile assignments.

Action: Institute training and mentoring-coaching guidelines. Common Ground can work with the organization and its teams of men and women who can serve as mentors on the most effective ways to do this.

7. How does Common Ground proceed with integrating Strategic Gender Management into the organization?

A. **Assessment.** In this phase, Common Ground gathers information relevant to the organization's challenges and goals:

- Human Resources/D&I supply essential information on gender demographics, recent history of hiring & orientation practices, issues and problems currently being addressed, policies regarding leaves and other benefits, raises, and promotions, and recruiting materials and current recruiting sites & strategies.
- Associates & Ops Management: This consists of confidential interviews, focus groups, and/or custom surveys of women and men about their experiences, perceptions, and attitudes about gender dynamics in the organization. We look for what is working well and for new opportunities as well as identify specific problems that a gender inclusion initiative can address.

B. **Programming:** Based on the results of the assessment, Common Ground will:

- Offer a detailed account of viable recruitment strategies and how to enact them.
- Do direct consulting on the recruiting materials and methods. Offer specific recommendations for adjustments to existing recruitment materials.
- Offer specific recommendations for adjustments to testing and orientation environment to alleviate stereotype threat.

- Design education program(s) for recruitment/HR personnel, the focus of which will be how to locate pools of the best qualified women.
- Design education program(s) for management regarding retention, the focus of which can include:
 - Communicating the ideas and research behind the recommended strategies for recruiting and enhancing women’s successful integration into the workforce.
 - Addressing how management can best communicate with both men and women in the workplace and deal with challenges and concerns by either/both about the practical and cultural impact of the changes.
 - Working with supervisors about how to prevent problems relating to gender conflicts, or identify such problems early, prevent them from becoming entrenched, and resolve them without delay.
 - Making sure that women and men have a clear, well-functioning network of options for how to deal with problems when they do arise.
 - Ensuring that options for training and the path to promotion work as well for women as they do for men.
 - Broadening the scope of the women’s employee group so that it is accessible and welcoming to all employees.
- Deliver pilot classes of all education programs, including “train the trainer” classes if requested or advised.
- Make revisions as necessary after piloting and then deliver the programs on a schedule TBD.

8. What might a Strategic Gender Management education program look like?

Logistical Detail: The following course content outline represents a program length of 6.5 hours in an 8 hour day. This is just a sample outline, as all Common Ground courses are customized for the specific needs of its clients. Sessions are highly interactive, so “lecture” is minimized in favor of conversation.

Objectives:

Participants will...

- Appreciate that “gender” is not a code word for “women,” and that people of both sexes deal with stereotypes and with stereotype threat.
- Understand that conflicts about gender roles arise between women and between men as well as between women and men.
- Be able to recognize the difference between fair treatment and special accommodation based on gender.
- Become better acquainted with what the most current science really says about similarities and differences in women’s and men’s ability to perform in the workplace.
- Understand better how gender roles and stereotypes affect people’s experience of the workplace.

- Develop practical strategies and greater confidence about dealing with gender role expectations in the workplace.
- Understand the factors that affect the retention of women and men.

Curriculum Sketch:

- The gender quiz: Interactive exercise to introduce terminology and stimulate dialogue
- Facts of the Matter
 - What the major gender stereotypes of both sexes are.
 - How stereotypes affect people's experience at work.
 - What stereotype threat is and how it affects recruiting, retention and individual performance.
 - How the social meanings of gender compare with verifiable biological facts about differences and similarities between the sexes. Examples: a) difference between mothers' ratings of children's performance based on gender and children's actual performance; b) given the same resume with either a male or female name, both sexes tend to rate the male higher.
 - Social meanings of gender vary by cultural background and by generation.
 - You don't have to be a woman to be THE OUTSIDER – this is a major content piece which bears in-depth explanation and lies at the heart of the driving concepts of the entire course.
- Business case:
 - How misunderstandings and conflicts about the meaning of gender affect productivity, job satisfaction, and retention, and what the rewards are of resolving those misunderstandings.
 - What men and women value most about their jobs.
 - The effect of gender on dedication to the job.
 - What men and women need to succeed.
- Practical application – case studies and strategy brainstorming section
- Dealing with female leadership
- Advice to “gender role violators” on the job
- Difficult situations for men and women
 - loss of the male-bonded workplace
 - fear of being perceived as a sexual harasser
 - if you're the “fish out of water”
 - trying to be twice as good as the men.
- Closing: Q&A and evaluations

Bios:

Dr. Alice Adams: Dr. Alice Adams is a Principal of Common Ground Consulting. She is a recognized gender expert and one of the few scholars researching and actualizing meaningful, research-based, peer-tested gender inclusion and women’s leadership strategies and programming. She is the author of “Playing to Strength: Gender Inclusion at Work” and her work has been featured in The Conference Board Review (April, 2010) as well as in and on numerous other publications, websites, and podcasts. Alice’s work is forming the foundation of a year-long initiative by Watermark of San Francisco (formerly the Forum for Women Entrepreneurs and Executives), and she also does significant work involving successful mentoring initiatives and sexual harassment prevention in the workplace. She can be reached at AAdams@common-grnd.com, and more information about her work, podcasts and interviews, as well as order info for Playing to Strength is on her website at www.common-grnd.com.

Dr. Michael Kimmel: is among the leading researchers and writers on men and masculinity in the world today. The author or editor of more than twenty volumes, his books include *Changing Men: New Directions in Research on Men and Masculinity* (1987), *Men Confront Pornography* (1990), *The Politics of Manhood* (1996), *The Gender of Desire* (2005) and *The History of Men* (2005). His documentary history, *“Against the Tide: Pro-Feminist Men in the United States, 1776-1990”* (Beacon, 1992), chronicled men who supported women’s equality since the founding of the country. His book, *Manhood in America: A Cultural History* (1996) was hailed as the definitive work on the subject. His most recent book, *Guyland: The Perilous World Where Boys Become Men* (2008) is a best-selling investigation of young people’s lives today, based on interviews with more than 400 young men, ages 16-26. Kimmel is a Professor of Sociology at SUNY Stony Brook.