

Management

Reducing Gender Inequality at Work, One Small Step at a Time

Modest, daily actions that target bias are the “building blocks to larger change.”

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The most effective way to vanquish stereotypes is to do so incrementally — and on an organizational level. | iStock/Tinpixels

At a time when many companies are feeling pressured to report on and reduce gender inequality within the workforce, a Stanford sociologist is finding success with a step-by-step method for eliminating the bias at the root of the problem.

In a [recently published paper](#) in *Gender & Society*, [Shelley Correll](#), director of the [Clayman Institute for Gender Research](#) and a professor (by courtesy) of organizational behavior at Stanford Graduate School of Business, explains the method, which she and her team piloted and found successful while working with several technology companies over the last three years.

The method, which Correll dubs “a small-wins model,” focuses on educating managers and workers about bias; diagnosing where gender bias could enter their company’s hiring, promotion, or other evaluation practices; and working with the company’s leaders to develop tools that help reduce bias and inequality in measurable ways.

“The change we can realistically expect to produce in any one instance will be small, imperfect, and incomplete,” Correll writes. “Step by step, I believe that these small wins are the path to achieving our larger goal, which is the transformation of our organizations.”

When Bias Training Backfires

Over the past 30 years, research has shown that stereotypes about what men and women are capable of and how they should behave cause people to evaluate the genders differently, especially when the criteria for evaluation are ambiguous. This bias puts women at a disadvantage in workplaces, where they get hired and promoted at lower rates than men.

Women are usually subjected to a higher bar, requiring more evidence than men to be seen as qualified. In addition, if coworkers judge a woman to be competent, they often judge her as less likeable, a correlation that doesn't hold true for men.

Because of this research, many companies in recent years have invested resources into reducing the kinds of bias that lead to gender imbalance. The two most common approaches have been unconscious bias training and instituting achievement-based criteria for hiring and evaluating employees.

Correll says that although the two approaches help companies with diversity, they are not complete solutions.

While unconscious bias training is important and helps improve short-term behavior during hiring and promotion decisions, the effects wear off over time and can be threatening to people in power, leading to more bias rather than less, Correll says.

“We need to shift the target of change from the individual decision maker to organizational processes.”

— Shelley Correll

Formal procedures for hiring and promotions also haven't been entirely successful. For example, Correll writes, fire departments previously used height as a criterion for screening applicants. Despite height being an objective benchmark, its requirement screens out more women than men and a person's height isn't

directly related to one's ability to perform the job of a firefighter.

“Bias training can backfire, increasing bias; and formal procedures can be misused by decision makers or, worse, have gender biases built into their design,” Correll writes. “In spite of these limitations, I argue that educating about stereotyping and bias and formalizing evaluation processes are two key building blocks crucial for producing sustainable change.”

Small Wins Add Up

Although neither approach alone has been entirely successful, Correll argues for combining the two in a way that measures small incremental changes within the organization.

In this model, a company would provide workers with bias training and experts would analyze the company's procedures to understand where bias might be creeping in. The experts would then work with managers of the company to develop and implement better procedures and to evaluate what changes they produce.

The process focuses on creating objective performance checklists and other tools that eliminate ambiguity and the chance for bias from people using them.

“To create sustainable change, we need to shift the target of change from the individual decision maker to organizational processes,” Correll writes.

Correll and her team tried this model with several companies over the past three years as part of Stanford's [Center for the Advancement of Women's Leadership](#). They found measurable improvements in gender equality at those companies.

For example, at a mid-size technology company in the western U.S., Correll helped to put in place a new employee scorecard that managers could use to evaluate their staff during “calibration meetings,” in which managers met to align their ratings. Before the new scorecard, comments during these discussions criticized 14% of women for being “too aggressive” and 8% of men for being “too soft.” A year later, after rolling out the new scorecard, those figures dropped to zero and 1%, respectively.

“The small-wins approach gives people results and something small they can do daily,” Correll says. “Those small wins start to add up. They are the building blocks to larger change.”

Correll says she has been inspired by the number of managers and leaders dedicated to equality in the workplace whom she has met over the past three years. Although eliminating bias and inequality will take a long time, she's optimistic.

"It's encouraging to see that many people genuinely want to be more inclusive," Correll says. "These companies didn't have to open up to us researchers. And I can't stress enough how valuable working with them and evaluating their data has been."

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