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Allied powers

Effectively allying with female colleagues to foment change



Cooper

By Miles B. Cooper

The mediator, an older male retired judge, spoke directly to the lawyer, ignoring the lawyer's boss. The mediator did this despite the fact lawyer's boss was without question the power in the room. While a long time ago, it still should not have happened. It was so off base it took the lawyer some time to recognize the behavior for what it was. The mediator, ignoring the lawyer's boss, talked past her because the mediator saw her as insignificant. Lawyer or not, she was a woman, after all.

Mansplain it, please

What foundation do I have as an older white male to discuss being an ally to women in a male-dominated field? My upbringing and desire to effect change. I owe any successes to my privilege. And by privilege here, I specifically mean support, training, and feedback from powerful women. They've been my mentor, parent, spouse, and business partner. I've been witness to misogyny they've experienced. Men must play a part in being gender equity allies, which leads to this discussion. And it is a discussion. While I've run my thoughts by others, it is a weighted topic. I encourage folks to reach out with their own suggestions and experiences. Without dialogue we'll simply maintain the status quo. In delving into this, two acknowledgements: First, this is not exhaustive. It addresses high impact behavioral changes. Second, the lens is super hetero. There's a reason. Hetero bro culture and its institutional sexist legacy are key to what we must confront.

The first step is admitting we have a problem…

No, this isn't a twelve-step column. Yet we have similar starting points. Some out there are either unaware or in denial. They may even cite statistics: 56.25% of law students are women and 42.85% are men. Hooyah! Unfortunately, 80.4% of law firm equity partners are men and 19.6% are women. Ouch. Here we encounter institutional sexism in myriad ways too complicated to completely unpack here. We must acknowledge differences between men and women.

Women bear children, women breastfeed, and women, statistically, continue to shoulder the bulk of household operations and childcare. Men… work? And are ragged by peers overtly or covertly for exercising paternity leave. The solutions here are known, yet not implemented.

Employers should provide liberal leave policies, both for paternity and maternity, as well as flex time to make the environment welcoming for working parents. Use compensation and promotion models that take parenting into account, without sacrificing case-handling standards or punishing the childless. And fathers? Step the f up around the house. Ward Cleaver is not a role model. *Mr. Mom* could be.

Colleagues are not conquests

This seems self-evident. Yet predatory partners and their variants continue to fester in dark legal corners like bacteria in petri dishes. Ask any employment lawyer. And let's go deep here. Cue *When Harry Met Sally*'s "Men and women can't be friends," scene. It's on YouTube if you need a refresher. Why does the scene still work? Because it hits home for many. How does this show up for workplace non-predators? Overcorrection. Men will lunch, grab drinks, conduct business travel, and try cases with male colleagues without a second thought.

Yet impropriety concerns will have those same men failing to provide similar opportunities to female colleagues, forming another building block in the institutionally sexist wall. Threesomes instead of twosomes can help diminish impropriety concerns. And men in positions of power, given predatory history, must subvert any whisper of sexual tension. This behavior can be so nuanced it defies definition. In evaluating engagements, adopt a familial lens. She's your daughter, your sister, your mother, your firm's future. Not your next mistake. Should this be too challenging, consider saltpeter, monasticism, or neutering.

U mad, bro?

What people do when they think no-one's looking defines them. Those that call themselves allies yet bro it up on testosterone-laden text threads (it's just locker room talk, right?) are not allies. Fauxllies maybe. Since bro behavior continues to permeate, how do we challenge it? Lead by example. Don't say anything about someone that one wouldn't say in front of them. Objectifying, gossiping, and snarking feed our shadow side and damage our soul. Next level allyship? Distancing. Exit misogynist text threads and diminish contact with those fomenting bro culture. Top of game? Call bros on it. But as *Roadhouse*'s Dalton says, be nice. Be nice until it's time to not be nice. Isolate the bros and the bro culture withers. For parallelism look to the homophobic language that was tolerated in recent history and now makes one (in most civilized places) a pariah if used.

Outro

Back to our young lawyer at mediation. "I appreciate you may think I know the case better, but she's in charge," the young lawyer said. Yet the mediator persisted. At the case's conclusion, the mediator was added to the firm's "Do Not Use," list, a list which was frequently shared with the broader legal community. Fast forward a decade, and that mediator's practice has withered. Baby steps.

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