

Breaking Barriers

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Conversation Cards

Guiding principles card

Create a safe and brave space to explore, listen and learn from each other

Be present and practice active listening

Seek to understand first

Be open and authentic and speak from your personal perspective

Let go of the need to be right

Assume good intentions, it's ok to make mistakes

Lean into the discomfort

Stories should be anonymous



How to start the conversation:



Choose a volunteer to select a conversation card and read the topic description aloud to the group.



Flip the card over and consider the questions.



Using the prompts on the conversation card, discuss thoughts, personal experiences, and possible actions.



After a few people have shared, ask others to reflect on what they've heard and share what they related to.



Use the cards to reflect on any insights gained or ideas on how to create a more inclusive workplace.



Let the conversation flow as naturally as possible.

#1 Unpacking The Visible Barriers

Gendered workplaces create both visible and invisible barriers for all women at work, ultimately limiting their advancement. The visible barriers that hold women back at work include any policies, programs, or processes that exclude or discriminate against women because they reflect the values, needs and preferences of men. These may be the lack of parental leave policies or the subtle pressure and expectation that employees will work long hours and weekends or attend work-related social events after hours. What are there visible barriers in your own office or organisation?



Consider these questions:

Who makes the hiring decisions? Are women equally represented as decision-makers?

When you're hiring an open position, do you see as many female candidates as male?

Do women equally contribute and actively participate in meetings and are these contributions respected and valued?

Are there flexible work arrangements for both men and women in your organisation?

Is there a maternity and paternity leave policy, and do both men and women take it? What about leaders?

Does your organisation reward and promote individuals who demonstrate inclusive behaviours, like people who collaborate and include others, work well with colleagues from a wide range of backgrounds and actively work to speak up and tackle inequality at work?

Does your organisation ensure that both men and women are equally represented in teams, projects or group initiatives?

Does your organisation train senior management and board members to foster gender equality from the top down?

Has your organisation made a public pledge to help women advance at all levels, including the board level?

#2 Unpacking Modern Sexism

Today, you are much more likely to witness people engaging in modern sexism, which includes attitudes, beliefs, and behaviours that indirectly condone women and men's unequal treatment. Modern sexism is a lot harder to spot because people often deny having these beliefs or engaging in these behaviours. With this in mind, it's worth taking a moment to consider how these views shape your workplace.



Consider these questions:

Are employees indifferent to behaviours that discriminate against minorities at work, and do they tend to dismiss these situations as harmless banter?

Are employees unaware of how their behaviour contributes to creating cultures of inequality? Consequently, they do not understand how to support marginalised groups at work and create cultures of equality.

Are leaders unaware of the different challenges and experiences men and women have of working life? Do leaders believe that gender equality has been achieved or will simply be achieved over time?

Do leaders and employees overestimate the advancement and number of women in senior leadership positions as well as the success of existing diversity and inclusion efforts?

Do employees believe that gender inequality is a result of biological differences? For example, the belief that because of motherhood women are simply not cut out for corporate life.

Do leaders rely on women-focused solutions or structural initiatives to solve gender inequality rather than focus on the behavioural change needed to create cultures of equality?

#3 Disrupting Your Denial

Leaders are in denial about difference and different experiences of working life. They don't realise that minorities have additional barriers to overcome. The denial of difference is the denial of inequality. How do you know if you are practising gender denial at work? It's hard to believe something exists if you can't see, understand or experience it. Disrupting denial starts with understanding differences at work.



Ask yourself the following questions:

What kind of leaders do you think tend to succeed? Can you describe their attributes? Are they associated with the success prototype?

Do you think women should change their behaviour or do things differently to advance and ultimately lead?

Do you think men and women experience the workplace differently?

Why do you think there are so few women in leadership positions?

What barriers do you think all women face in their careers and as they advance into leadership positions?

How do you think these challenges are different for racial minorities, disabled individuals or members of the LGBTQI community?

Aside from existing diversity and inclusion initiatives, what else can the organisation do to create an environment that supports all women to lead?

#4 Spending Your Privilege

Male privilege at work is the ability to fit into your work environment by default. Men, especially straight white men, rarely have to consider how their identity might differ from the prototype and limit them. Each of us can make an intentional, consistent effort to do this at work.



Consider and discuss which of the following you and your team could take on at work:

Make it a priority to get to know the barriers women and minorities face at work by reading and researching these topics and asking minority employees about their experiences.

Identify how workplaces don't work for individuals who are different from the success prototype and then raise awareness in your organisation about these challenges by sharing or speaking up when you see this happen at work.

Work to identify solutions to these challenges that you can support or champion, including changes to your behaviours.

Be an ally to individuals who share their stories of discrimination or their ideas for solving this. If needed, amplify their message.

Encourage your colleagues to understand how inequality is experienced at work. You could start an employee resource group which focuses on understanding inequality in your workplace.

#5 Invisible Barrier: Conditioned Expectations

Men and women's expectations of working life are formed early on. But women's expectations often don't measure up to the reality of working life. Because people are conditioned to have faith in the meritocracy myth, it makes it easy to deny gender inequality from the moment we enter an organisation. Only by recognising gender inequality can we can dismantle it, instead of leaving it up to women to discover the hidden barriers for themselves and work around them.



Consider the following questions to help disrupt your conditioned expectations of working life:

Were you aware of gender inequality when you started your career, or did you believe organisations function like meritocracies?

Were you aware that men and women's careers unfold differently? Women have three distinct stages, whereas men's careers have a more consistent pattern as they advance from one position to the next.

Did you know about the invisible barriers that women are likely to encounter at work? Have you witnessed or experienced any of them?

How have these barriers held women back from advancing at work and the impact this may have had on women's mental, emotional and physical wellbeing?

What could your organisation do to better educate employees about the invisible barriers that women experience at work?

#6 Matching Women to The Male Standard of Success

When we hire people, we evaluate them against the ideal standard for employees, which tends to be white and male. Hiring managers are likely to overstate the importance of men's qualifications and understate their weaknesses in relation to the job requirements. In contrast, for female applicants, hiring managers often downplay their expertise and education and overemphasise their weaknesses. The more subjective or ambiguous the hiring criteria is, the easier it is for managers to justify this bias. White hiring managers process white candidates differently than people of colour to justify or rationalise racial bias, also known as aversive racism. Aversive racism happens when white people believe they are not prejudiced but continue to discriminate against racial or ethnic minorities in subtle ways.



Consider how this applies to your organisation:

What is the ideal standard for employees in your workplace?

Is this standard gendered - is this associated more with men and masculinity?

Are women expected or asked to change their behaviour or approach to live up to this standard?

How can leaders ensure that they hire the best candidate for the job, rather than the candidate who best fits the male ideal?

Do leaders provide a clear link for women between feedback, advice and development and the advancement of their career goals?

#7 The Conformity Bind: Fit in or forget it

When we start a job, it takes a few months to learn what the acceptable behaviours, values and social norms are. This process is called socialisation and it continues throughout a person's career. Given that workplace cultures tend to be masculine, it's a lot easier for men to assimilate into them. Women must negotiate around masculine workplace norms, which often exclude them.



Consider how this applies to your organisation:

Do men make up the dominant group in your organisation? i.e. do they set the standard for behaviours, norms and leadership at work?

How does this limit women's access to relationship-building opportunities (social capital) that can help their advancement?

Do you think men and women benefit from mentoring in the same way?

How do you think both sexism and racism limit opportunities for women of colour to access informal networks and mentors?

What challenges do women encounter having to fit into male cultures at work, and what can leaders do to remove these obstacles?

#8 The Confidence/Competence Catch 22

People who get promoted are usually confident – they engage in behaviours to demonstrate their ambition, assertiveness and self-assuredness. When women demonstrate confidence and ambition, they ignore the standards people hold for how women should behave. As a result, employers think they lack the required social skills and are less willing to employ them. But here's the catch, women who are viewed as less confident are also perceived as less competent. The only way to overcome this is to put up with not being liked. This lose-lose situation is even more difficult for African American, Asian and Latina women, who face the triple burden of racism, sexism and classism. Women of colour must display leadership behaviours that do not reinforce any of the various stereotypes related to their minority status.



To understand the challenges women encounter related to the confidence/competence catch 22, consider the following questions:

What type of leader tends to advance, i.e. what types of behaviours get rewarded in your organisation?

Are employees rewarded for being ambitious, competitive, and self-promotional rather than their ability to work with colleagues to achieve outcomes?

Are women in your organisation given access to high profile assignments and development opportunities based on their competence and capability to fulfil the job, rather than their similarity to the prototype?

Do managers and leaders make assumptions about men and women's leadership capability based on how confident, outspoken, extroverted and domineering they are?

How does living up to the success prototype limit women's confidence and access to career development opportunities?

#9 Performance and Pay Inequality aka, the Performance Tax

Even at the start, men are viewed as more competent than women, so women essentially begin their careers with a perceived deficit. To overcome this, women have to pay a performance tax at work and constantly exceed expectations to prove that they are equal to their male peers. The performance tax is a significant barrier to accessing pay and promotion opportunities. Research finds when it comes to evaluating men and women's abilities for a role; women face higher performance standards than white men. While women pay a performance tax, men are given a performance bonus. When men make mistakes at work, it doesn't usually change people's opinion on their competence. Instead, they are seen as trying to develop. The performance tax has a ripple effect, as it limits pay and promotion opportunities for women.



To overcome the challenges related to the performance tax, consider the following questions:

Are the reasons behind reward and promotion decisions clearly understood?

Are the performance and reward process transparent?

Do women and men have a clear understanding of what they need to do to get ahead?

Do women feel like they are required to do more than men to advance?

What subjective criteria are important for roles, and do they favour men?

Are women allowed to learn and make mistakes in the same way as men?

Is there a gender pay gap, and are employees aware of this?

Does the pay gap exist across the organisation and levels, or is it more noticeable in certain parts of the organisation? How is it being addressed?

#10 The Invisible Load

The environments we work in not only influence the attributions we make about our own performance, but they determine the attributions we make about other people. When women and minorities are successful, companies are more likely to attribute that success to luck. Women who engage in behaviours associated with the success prototype will still be disadvantaged by the attributions people form regarding their success or failure. Female leaders who are more assertive, dominant and outspoken consistently receive more blame for their company's failure compared with women leaders who are more communal and nurturing. When women make mistakes at work, they are seen as "lacking ability," while men are often viewed as "having a bad day." Attribution is something that both men and women do, and it happens because we are holding onto the belief that women are not as capable as men. These challenges are further compounded by race as black women, in particular, have to work harder than white women to prove themselves, and are more likely to have their expertise or judgement questioned.



To understand the challenges women encounter related to the invisible load, consider the following questions:

How do you think women's exposure to marginalisation, whether they witness or experience it directly, negatively impacts their confidence and sense of belonging at work?

How welcoming is your work environment for women? Are women treated negatively or in stereotypical ways and under-represented in leadership positions? What impact do you think this has?

Do you think gender stereotypes influence the judgement of women's competence?

Do you think the organisation makes different attributions for men and women's successes and failures?

Do you think women are required to prove their capability, while also having minimal opportunity to fail? If so, what is the consequence of this?

#11 Negative Gender Norms

Masculine or feminine behaviours are not inherently negative, but when gendered behaviours result in women's discrimination and harassment and become normalised over time, they create cultures of inequality. Gendered behaviours include any efforts to dismiss, undermine, bully, humiliate, (verbally or physically) harass, assault, or over-power women. It also includes any behaviours that result in men gaining preferential treatment. For most women, these behaviours show up in the day-to-day encounters and exchanges with men - what I call inequality moments. This happens every time men try to maintain their powerful position by belittling and devaluing women. Day-to-day inequality moments are often hidden through silence. Patriarchal beliefs come to life in the negative behaviours men and women engage in at work. When these behaviours are repeated over time, they become tolerated, adopted, and accepted as the way things get done. The impact becomes hard to see and often conditions employees into silence.



To understand the impact of negative gender norms in your organisation, consider the following:

Are employees willing to engage in behaviours that support and reinforce the masculine leadership ideal? This includes any behaviour that demeans, devalues, and dehumanises women.

Do employees tolerate behaviours that negatively impact minority groups at work? This includes accepting the preferential treatment of men. Speaking up is not encouraged or supported and may even come at an individual cost.

Overall do employees demonstrate a transactional, authoritative working style?

Do employees value difference, or do they feel pressure to conform to the ideal worker standard by hiding their different identities? This includes not feeling comfortable to share individual identities or differences related to physical or mental abilities, sexual orientation, religion, age, ethnicity or race.

Is it accepted that employees succeed by having a pushy and combative interpersonal style supported by a willingness to exclude others or make them feel uncomfortable? This includes engaging in microaggressions such as speaking over others, dismissing different viewpoints, and excluding minority groups from decision-making processes.

#12 Role Conflict: Manager or Mommy

Women can experience barriers associated with motherhood, even if they never intend to become mothers themselves. The assumption is that women are always less committed to work because they are preoccupied with either looking for a partner, settling down, getting engaged, having children, or caring for dependants. Of course, men generally also take part in every one of these experiences, yet somehow, their career prospects are not affected. Often around the midpoint in women's careers, they are hit with the reality of taking on two conflicting roles, the "ideal worker" and "ideal mother." According to typical gender stereotypes, a man's primary role in life is to work and provide for his family, while a women's primary role is to produce and raise children. The expectation is that women who work will still be the perfect mother, caretaker, and wife - as well as the ideal worker. Men, however, are still largely expected to fulfil their primary role as breadwinner. While organisations have parental leave programs, leaders do not support mothers in their day-to-day behaviours.



Consider the following ways your workplace may make it challenging for women to manage both roles:

Are mothers perceived to be less committed to their work?

Do leaders assume that women cannot manage motherhood and leadership roles? If so, are working mothers demoted to lower status roles by managers who assume they are helping mothers' managing their dual roles?

Do managers ask women about their intention to have children or assume women want to have children and make decisions regarding their development and advancement?

Do leaders give working mothers access to the same challenging assignments and leadership opportunities?

Are mothers overlooked for promotion opportunities because it is assumed they are not as ambitious as women and men without children?

#13 The Part-time Penalty

Many mothers need to work, and part-time employment is often put forward as the solution working mothers have been waiting for. The truth is many women are forced to take part-time work because it is the only way to stay employed while caring for children or earn a living when full-time employment isn't an option. Organisations that allow employees to work part-time treat this as a benefit, but very few women have the luxury of being able to view it in this way. Part-time work is not a benefit, but because it is treated like one, people ignore the various ways it limits women's career advancement. Family friendly policies and programs are often linked to an employee's salary and job status, which means that part-time or temporary workers don't qualify, even though part-time workers often need those benefits the most. It is not just the benefits women stand to lose. Working part-time carries a wide range of penalties that limit careers. For example, when women transition into part-time work, they are often demoted to a lower-level role, carrying out tasks that are well below their capabilities. Part-time workers regularly earn less per hour for the same work as their full-time counterparts, and are often denied promotion opportunities. Removing the stigma associated with part-time employees requires leaders to revalue part-time workers.



Consider the following questions to determine the extent to which your organisation values part-time workers:

Does your organisation pay part-time employees the same (pro-rated or not) wage as full-time workers for taking on the same work?

Do part-time workers have access to the same benefits (pro-rated or not) as their full-time colleagues?

Are part-time workers' capabilities fully utilised in your organisation? For example, does your organisation provide opportunities for part-time workers to job share roles to prevent downgrading them for cutting hours to accommodate parenthood?

Does your organisation provide opportunities to change role requirements to reduce working hours?

Do part-time employees have access to meaningful career development and advancement opportunities?

#14 The Motherhood Tax

When it comes to motherhood, women face an unwritten rule: workplaces will tolerate pregnant women deviating from the ideal worker if they continue to live up to the ideal by hiding their pregnancy. This rule applies throughout motherhood, as workplaces want men and women to work as though they don't have children. Another strategy that women can adopt is to work harder than anyone else. Women need to work extremely hard to overcome negative gender stereotypes regarding their capability. However, when women become mothers, they need to double these efforts to overcome unfair, negative perceptions of their performance. These assessments are unjustified, as research shows that mothers are more productive before and long after childbirth. Mothers are stigmatised, which reduces their opportunities for promotions and advancement. Mothers who manage to fulfil both roles are also unlikely to be rewarded for their efforts. A great example of this is the motherhood penalty. In the United States, mothers suffer a per-child wage penalty of approximately 5 percent per child, on average, after controlling for usual factors that affect wages. Only by creating family-friendly cultures will we stop penalising mothers financially and remove the various barriers they face at work.



Consider the following questions to determine the extent to which your organisation values the contribution of working mothers:

Does your organisation value the contributions of mothers and fathers equally?

Is the motherhood pay gap assessed annually by your organisation?

Do mothers feel pressure to outperform their peers to be deemed as competent?

Do mothers feel the need to hide their pregnancy at work?

Does your organisation actively support mother's advancement through targeted career planning, development, and advancement opportunities?

#15 Carrying the Mental and Emotional Load

It's nearly impossible for mothers to feel like they are doing their best at work and at home. Being a good employee requires putting in long hours at work, which takes away from time at home and being a "good mother." When working mothers need to miss work for a family issue, they feel like they are letting down their company or not living up to the ideal worker standard. Trying to succeed in each of these roles invariably means not fulfilling one of them - there is no win-win. Women persist in trying, and this adds to women's mental and emotional load. In addition to managing the additional mental load, mothers also oversee the emotional needs of their dependants. This is stressful because mothers don't have a lot of control over these challenges, and the potential consequences are significant. When women carry this load, it can lead to feelings of distress and emptiness, and life dissatisfaction.



Consider the following questions in relation to the mental and emotional load:

Do you think couples equally balance domestic and dependent care responsibilities at home?

What challenges do mental stress and overload create for men and women? How is this different or the same?

What challenges does emotional load create for men and women? How is this different or the same?

What do you think workplaces could do to better support men and women with managing the challenges associated with balancing work and home life?

What strategies do you think individuals could use at home to manage this integration?

#16 Access to Quality Leadership Opportunities

One of the biggest challenges women leaders face is simply accessing the same leadership opportunities as men. Women leaders are often presented with lower quality leadership opportunities because organisations don't value women's contributions and capability like they do men. Generally, women leaders thrive in high performing organisations when male leaders, who have been with the organisation for a long time, sponsor them to take on the role. This often happens when the woman has also been with the company for a long time or has worked with a leader for many years, who mentors, encourages, and even possibly nominates her for a leadership position. The same is true for poor performing companies. This partnership effectively sets women up for success.



Consider the following questions to explore whether men and women in your organisation have access to the same quality leadership opportunities:

Have you witnessed or experienced women taking on risky roles to access opportunities to lead?

Do men and women in your organisation have access to the same types of leadership opportunities?

What checks can workplaces put in place to ensure women are given access to quality leadership roles?

Do male leaders in your organisation actively (and voluntarily) coach and mentor the next generation of women leaders because this ensures women have the social support and buy in to lead?

As a leader, what can you do to ensure women leaders are set up for success in their roles?

#17 Stereotypical Typecasting

When people think of a woman leader, they often conjure mental images that society holds of women. The challenge is most of these labels used to describe women leaders are gendered. Terms like “Ice Maiden,” “Bitch,” “Slut,” or “Princess” which are all used to describe gender stereotypical roles society holds for women. They represent the narrow way society views women and women leaders. In patriarchal societies, women leaders are forced to choose between fitting the male success prototype or the gender stereotypical role for women. Often senior women leaders must adopt more masculine behaviours to fit in, even though engaging in these behaviours separates them from other women. When women leaders reject behaviours associated with gender roles, they distance themselves from other women and men. Unfortunately, both options can be a lose-lose for women leaders and results in being typecast and labelled according to a gender stereotype. This can include describing women leaders as “soft” but nice or “bitchy” but competent.



Consider the following questions to unpack how stereotypical typecasting limits women in your workplace:

What labels have you come across used to describe women leaders?

What impact does labelling have on women leaders' effectiveness?

How are these challenges further compounded by labels associated with race, class, sexual orientation, ethnicity, religion, and disability?

Why do you think we label women leaders as “bossy,” “difficult,” “hot,” or “too soft”? Do men encounter these same challenges?

What can leaders do to make employees aware of typecasting and the damage labels create?

#18 Identity Conflict: Leading like Women

Women are still required to live up to today's ideal standards of femininity. While male leaders are judged on the quality of their work, women are judged on their performance and appearance. Women leaders need to "look the part" and strike a cautious balance to ensure they are not too feminine or masculine. Specifically, women who don't conform are met with disapproval, disgust, loss of status, dignity, and respect as both leaders and women. However, women who manage to get it just right are rewarded and viewed as more powerful and in control. Women's appearance plays an important role in how they are evaluated as leaders. The challenges associated with managing the conflicting identities of womanhood and leadership do not stop at appearances. Gender is a core part of an individual's identity. It's something people enact at work through language, behaviour, and even dress. For example, women leaders are penalised for even minor displays of emotions compared to men - especially when expressing anger or dominance. For men, the ideal is to be emotionally restrained, but there is no similar strategy for women leaders. If women are cold and unemotional, they violate gender roles, as women are expected to be warm and soft-hearted. Managing this creates significant psychological strain as women must continually regulate their emotions and reactions to prevent backlash.



Consider the following questions to understand how difficult it is for women to lead in environments that reward one type of leadership prototype:

Do you think women and men are judged differently based on their appearance?

How does this impact perceptions of men and women's performance?

What challenges do you think women encounter managing the conflict between expectations for how women should behave and how leaders should behave?

Do you think women and men are perceived as less effective at work for displaying emotion?

What can organisations do to ensure women are judged for their capability, performance, and competence rather than how they look?

#19 Backlash: Influencing without Authority

When women succeed in traditionally male-dominated roles, they defy society's expectations for women and are punished for it. When women lead teams with only male employees or teams with a mix of male and female employees, their status as a women leader activates gender stereotyping, negatively impacting how they are perceived as leaders. These penalties can include social rejection, personal insults, reduced rewards, and limited career progression. When women are successful, research finds they are assumed to be selfish, deceitful, manipulative, and cold. Women don't have to engage in any behaviour to create these negative outcomes. Simply being successful and occupying a role usually held by men will trigger social penalties.



Consider how this applies to your organisation:

Do you think women are penalised for succeeding in roles typically occupied by men?

What attributes do you associate with successful women leaders?

Do you think employees and leaders support women leaders in their role as much as they do men?

What types of backlash do you think successful women leaders encounter?

What do you think organisations can do to better support women leaders in their roles?

#20 Isolation: In-group Favouritism

While it is difficult for white women to access male-dominated groups at work, it's a lot harder for women of colour. For example, one study investigating the issue found that women of colour have less access to informal social groups than men of colour and white women, resulting in lower promotion rates and increased pressure to assimilate. When it comes to the support, mentorship, and alliances that leaders offer one another at work, a pecking order is built to favour the familiar. As men make up the dominant group at work, they are more likely to receive help and support from other men than white women. However, white women are more likely to receive support and mentorship from white men and women than women of colour. This in-group favouritism serves to isolate all women leaders at work. But for women of colour, this barrier limits their ability to progress to a much greater extent than their white female counterparts.



Consider the following questions to determine the extent to which your organisation isolates women leaders:

Are there examples in your workplace of groups, networks, cliques, and social groups that make employees feel excluded, even if this wasn't the intent?

Are employees comfortable calling out exclusionary practices at work?

Do leaders engage and include a wide range of colleagues at work in all aspects of corporate life from meetings, networking, mentoring, and social activities rather than a select few who are similar to them?

Do men and especially male leaders model behaviours that value women and ensure the people working with and for them follow suit? This includes not participating or tolerating behaviour that demeans women or ensuring your networks and social activities at work include a wider range of people.

Do leaders take extra effort to develop and include minorities at work by ensuring they are given adequate opportunities, coaching, and support?

#21 Legitimacy: From Token to Trophy

Having one female leader in place is evidence that your organisation is supportive of gender equality. So ironically, when organisations appoint a woman leader, they are less likely to appoint any more women. These efforts give women leaders a token status. Tokenism reduces women's legitimacy, as it requires they become the company mascot for the marginalised. Women leaders are generally encouraged to take on a "trophy status" because showing off women leaders helps companies highlight their diversity achievements. In turn, women leaders somehow become responsible for advancing the interests of all women within their organisation. For women of colour, research finds they are often sought out to take on the role of representatives for diversity. While senior women leaders are aware of the barriers to women's advancement, it's not their responsibility to lead the path to change. And doing this is unlikely to help their career advancement. When women and racial minorities support diversity efforts, their manager and co-workers perceive them as less competent, and they receive lower performance ratings. When white men engage in this same behaviour, it leads to high-performance ratings. Minorities who advance other minorities are perceived as nepotistic, and these actions remind people of their token status, which triggers negative stereotypes. To overcome this, we need those in positions of power to take up the fight because they have the power, authority, and privilege to affect change.



Consider the following questions to determine the extent to which this barrier is an issue in your organisation:

Do men or women largely champion diversity and inclusion efforts in your organisation?

Are the few minority leaders often used as examples in corporate communications of how the organisation has achieved equality?

Are women leaders in your workplace expected to champion diversity and inclusion initiatives?

Who is responsible for diversity and inclusion in your organisation?

Do male leaders know why and how to create a culture of equality in your organisation?

#22 Invisible masculinity: An obstacle to men's identity at work

Despite how pervasive masculine leadership is, gender isn't usually considered an essential part of men's experience of working life. But men have been conditioned to equate their self-worth with living up to the masculine ideal by focusing on power, success, achievements, and status. You can begin to see how this can affect them as much as it does women. Men get to feel good about themselves only if they fulfil these requirements, but the trade-off is there are almost no limits to achievements, success, and financial gain. Even when men have this status, they need to maintain their masculinity by consistently engaging in behaviours associated with the ideal worker, behaviours like marginalising and excluding others. Gendered standards for behaviour are imposed on men and women from the moment they are born, so it is taken for granted as the way things are.



Consider the following questions about how men are expected to live up to masculine standards at work, which prevents them from being themselves:

Do men experience backlash for displaying what is considered feminine behaviours like expressing their feelings?

Do men feel pressure to go along with behaviours that exclude or marginalise others, even if they disagree with them?

To be perceived as tough and strong, are men encouraged to display a lack of empathy with others and themselves? Therefore, men may have trouble expressing feelings or seeking out emotional support at work.

Are male leaders expected to have all the answers, take risks and avoid admitting mistakes? This isolates men, who then lack the emotional and social support to deal with challenging situations.

To be perceived as powerful, do men in your workplace display aggression, dominance, and physical strength? Men are encouraged to display dominance by working long hours or engaging in office banter and bullying.

#23 Femininity Stigma

Masculinity doesn't just set the standard for working hours; it also determines which non-masculine behaviours men need to avoid at all costs. Men are encouraged to reject anything typically associated with being feminine. This femininity stigma, coupled with the need to work long hours, makes work-life balance, particularly fatherhood, challenging to manage at work. When men embrace their identity as fathers at work, they are penalised for taking on the feminine caretaker role. While the femininity stigma may be an issue for all men, it disproportionately affects working fathers. American men have more than doubled the time they spend on housework and childcare between 1965 and 2003. Based on these figures, you might assume that work-life balance has gotten easier for both men and women. But while lifestyles may have changed, the success prototype hasn't. Workplaces continue to believe the ideal worker has no outside interests or dependant care responsibilities and is fully committed to their job. In contrast, men aren't encouraged to take on feminine attributes at work. Men don't have the freedom to explore or choose how to engage at work and instead follow the default standard. This conformity gets rewarded. Take, for example, marriage, which fits the Don Draper prototype. Leaders who best fit the ideal are married, heterosexual males because that lifestyle conforms to the stereotypical masculine breadwinner image. Men need this freedom just as much as women do. The more men endorse the masculine ideal, the more likely they will suffer from isolation and negative mental and emotional health.



Consider the following questions to determine the extent to which men in your workplace are penalised for displaying typical feminine attributes:

Are men expected to comply with the dominant success prototype at work, and in doing so, do men hide aspects of their life outside of work?

Are men aware of the challenges of living up to this standard creates for men at work?

Do men feel comfortable playing a supporting role at work or taking direction from people who do not look, think and act like them?

Do men in your organisation feel pressure to engage in behaviours that don't always align with the organisation's values?

When you see colleagues being marginalised or discriminated against at work, do you feel comfortable speaking up and advocating for them?

#24 The Masculine Double Bind

At first glance, gender roles appear to serve men's interests, who have a higher social status than women. However, when you scratch beneath the surface, it's evident that men face hidden costs for conforming to the prescribed gender role. Could men unlearn these rules and create their own standards of behaviour? Not without backlash, like the femininity stigma, men and women who do not conform to prescribed gender roles face social and economic costs. They are considered less competent, likeable, and capable of leading than individuals who conform. Men are essentially confronted with a double bind at work. If they live up to the ideal standard, it comes at a personal cost to their mental and emotional wellbeing - even though they have greater access to power and privilege. If men try to engage differently, they won't reap the same benefits and likely face criticism.



Consider the following questions to determine the extent to which men encounter the masculine double bind in your workplace:

Is the ideal leader in your organisation someone who is dominant, aggressive, assertive, competitive, and willing to do whatever it takes to succeed?

What challenges does living-up to this ideal standard create for men in your workplace?

Do men face any negative consequences for not living up to this ideal standard?

Can men in your workplace display both masculine and feminine behaviour without being penalised?

What can your organisation do to enable employees to be themselves at work?

#25 Gendered Expectations: From Breadwinner to Bread-Sharer

We need to let go of the idea that women's careers are somehow expendable, but men's careers are not. Men can better accommodate their dual identities when their wives work because they get to define success outside of just the breadwinner role. Sharing the burden to provide for the family frees men up to rethink their identity. The greatest challenge men face in straying from the breadwinner role is the risk of losing their self-worth and social status. When men don't work, they forgo their place in society. Men can no longer build their confidence through their work, so they need to find it elsewhere. We look down on men who are not breadwinners because they do not fulfil what society deems men's role to be in life. To realise the positive outcomes of gender equality, we need to change how we see men and women's roles at home. For example, men who view their spouse's roles or careers as merely supportive of their careers, believed that their work and commitment to the organisation was the number one priority. However, men who prioritised their spouse's careers were more egalitarian in their approach at home. If men want to integrate fatherhood and working life, they can start by considering their relationships at home and identities outside of work.



Consider the following questions to determine the extent to which men are generally expected to take up the breadwinner role:

What does the role of bread-sharer mean to you and how is this different from your role as a provider today?

If you are married or in a committed relationship, how do you construct your identity in relation to your partner, if they work? What is your identity outside of your role as the breadwinner?

What can you do at home to transition to a bread-sharer?

If you have children, how do you help carry the emotional load at home?

What tasks, responsibilities associated with domestic and dependent care duties can you take on to better manage the mental load, by supporting the day-to-day management of the household and children?

#26 Bullying: Silencing Men at Work

Men engage in male-only networking, socialising, and behaviours that sexualise or marginalise women as a way to build camaraderie with one another. These behaviours are most common among white, middle class, heterosexual males, and they negatively impact all women and ethnic, working-class, disabled, gay men. When men align with other men who hold positions of power, they can access the privilege associated with that power. This can include having direct access to high-profile people, job opportunities, high profile assignments, and rewards at work. Homosocial behaviours provide men with ways to develop relationships with other men in positions of power. There are many ways these behaviours show up in workplaces, but they tend to result in employees tolerating and even accepting bullying, sexual harassment, discrimination, and exclusionary practices. Organisational banter is an excellent example of this and generally includes verbally attacking colleagues under the guise of joking to maintain dominance over others. It also involves making sexist jokes or derogatory comments based on people's identities that diminish their self-esteem and perceived value. When leaders remain silent, they sanction these behaviours, which also validates the people who engage in them. This can create an entire workplace culture that doesn't support women or men. The experiences employees have of their work environment predict how engaged they will be with their work, which impacts retention and job satisfaction. When men don't voice their experiences of inequality at work, it becomes harder to fix.



Consider the following questions to determine how safe men feel in your workplace to speak up:

Do you remain alert to the many ways women are marginalised and discriminated against in your workplace?

Do you interrupt sexism, bullying, or harassment when it happens by speaking up?

Do you check your assumptions regarding men's and women's career ambitions and leadership capability?

Do you ensure diversity and inclusion policies, programs, and initiatives do not single out women and make inequality women's problem to solve?

Do you ensure men's interests and needs are also represented in diversity and inclusion programs?

#27 The Invisible Load: The Costs of Living Up to The Masculine Ideal

The invisible load that women carry, which is the strain women endure having to navigate the many barriers inherent in workplaces, takes a toll on their mental, emotional and physical health. While this shows up differently for men because their challenges are different and fewer in number, they, too, experience mental and emotional strain from all the challenges they have to navigate. What makes this particularly difficult for men to manage is that masculinity requires keeping silent and denying the challenges they experience at work. When it comes to managing stress, depression, and suicidal thoughts, men are encouraged to play the hero, put the cape on and hide their feelings. Leaders play a powerful role in shaping the work environment and reducing the invisible load for men. A lack of social support from supervisors is associated with mental disorders in both men and women. However, women are more likely to seek out and rely on this support to cope. This isn't surprising given that masculinity requires men to deal with difficulties on their own. Managers are uniquely positioned to provide men with a sense of job security, reduce their role demands, help men integrate work and family life, and provide social support throughout the process. Therefore, leaders need to be more intentional in supporting men with their mental and emotional wellbeing.



Consider the following questions to determine the extent to which this is happening in your workplace:

Do leaders in your organisation regularly check in with both men and women to ensure they have the emotional support they need?

Do men feel like they can share their challenges, fears, and concerns at work without being penalised?

Do male leaders in your workplace share their challenges and concerns with their teams?

What can organisation do to make it easier for men to speak up and share the daily challenges they encounter?

#28 How to Build Awareness

This starts with making awareness a practice. Every leader can begin to do this by implementing an upward mentoring program in their organisation. Outside of this, all leaders can build awareness into their day-to-day management practices by regularly checking in with employees to understand what barriers, inequality moments or difficulties employees are experiencing. Understand how employees experience the team culture and what behaviours might be happening that they feel uncomfortable with, like the Negative Gender Norms. Leaders need to make time for one-on-one conversations with managers and employees regularly. They also need to build trust by promising confidentiality and that any actions taken are created in partnership with the employee. This will ensure employees feel heard and valued because the organisation is taking steps to remove the barriers they encounter. Doing this will help managers and employees maintain an awareness of the inequality problem in their office. If we want to build workplaces that work for everyone, we need leaders who are willing to work for everyone and are committed to become aware, understand, and act on the issues of inequality that affect their co-workers, their organisation's culture, and ultimately their livelihoods. This is something that every leader can do regardless of whether you lead a start-up, multinational or public-sector organisation.



Consider the following questions to determine how leaders can build awareness in your workplace:

Do leaders understand how inequality works and what invisible barriers women encounter in your workplace?

Do managers pay attention to inequality moments and address these experiences as they happen?

Are leaders personally invested in taking action to remove the barriers women face?

Can every team member outline how they practice equality as part of their day-to-day actions?

Do leaders treat inequality like a business problem to solve in the same way they do safety, productivity, and costs?

#29 How to Practice Equality

Inequality is something employees do, and leaders need to manage it continuously. When leaders see sexist, discriminatory, and exclusionary behaviours, they need to tackle them and address the issue directly with the employees present. Give employees feedback and outline how their behaviour marginalises other employees - whether they intended this or not - and the impact this has. The employee can also identify how they will commit to change. When inequality moments happen in a group setting, leaders have the chance to reset the team's norms. When colleagues openly share sexist jokes, dismiss women's contributions, or speak over them, it's an opportunity for leaders to take a moment to stop the meeting and point out what is happening. When employees practice equality, leaders can use this as an opportunity to publicly recognise these behaviours and encourage employees to make them a habit. For example, one of the managers I used to work for would start each team meeting by asking all team members to share a recent example of how colleagues had behaved in a supportive and inclusive way. A simple routine like this can remind all employees of what good looks like when it comes to equality.



Consider the following questions to determine the extent to which leaders and employees commit to practicing equality in your workplace:

Does every leader and employee understand their role in creating a culture of equality?

Are managers focused and committed to creating a culture of equality within their teams? If not, what do you think leaders could do to demonstrate this commitment?

Do leaders address inequality moments as they happen? If not, what could leaders do to address these issues in the moment?

Do managers actively support and reward employees who practice equality? If not, what types of behaviours do you think currently get rewarded?

What is one action you think every leader can take to create a culture of equality in their workplace?

#30 How to Remove the Barriers Women Face at Work

To get more women into leadership positions, we need managers to actively enable women's advancement, which is what a leader is supposed to do. While many leaders have career development conversations with their employees on a semi-regular basis to understand their career interests and ambitions, it's not enough when it comes to women. Men and women's careers unfold in different ways. Managers have to start with understanding the career objectives women on your team have, knowing what current and anticipated barriers they are likely to encounter, and working with them to remove these obstacles so they can progress. Career conversations should be an ongoing dialogue that starts with an initial entry interview but continues with regular one-on-one meetings to review the different challenges women encounter.



In these conversations, leaders could include the following questions:

How would you describe the organisational or team culture?

Do you have any needs that are not being met at work?

What aspects of the team do you enjoy?

Do you feel leaders in the team are living according to corporate values? Can you share an example?

What is the most challenging aspect of your job?

Have you witnessed or participated in an inequality moment recently that you feel comfortable sharing?

Do you see a career path for yourself in this organisation, and what does this look like? What career goals do you have for the next six to twelve months?

What are some of the barriers that you experience or anticipate experiencing in the next six to twelve months?

What solutions do you think could be put in place to overcome these challenges? Is there anything I can do to remove some of these barriers?

How do you think the team can make more of an effort to value the contributions of everyone?

What is the one thing you would change about the culture if you could?