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Gender bias essay pdf

Dan McGinn: Welcome to Dear HBR: from the Harvard Business Review. I'm Dan McGinn. And I'm Alison Beard. The work can be frustrating, but it doesn't have to be. We don't have to let conflicts get us down. That's where dear HBR comes in. We take your questions, look at research, talk to experts and help you move forward. Today we answer your questions about sexism in the workplace with Katie Coffman. She's a professor at Harvard Business School. Katie, thanks for joining us. Great to be here with both of you. Katie, what's the biggest misunderstanding about gender equality at work? Oh, that's a big deal. I think more and more there's a common understanding of what's going on, so I think it's getting better over time. But I think a woman can experience something in the workplace, and it might be immediately clear to them and maybe some of their girlfriends that say that sexism played a role. And if you're telling the same story maybe you're a male colleague, a male friend, they wouldn't have the same reaction. What are the good organizations that are doing well? KATIE COFFMAN: A real commitment, even among top executives, to make changes on this issue. Setting the tone throughout the organization, it's going to be a place that takes these issues seriously. Katie, even in companies where you have a female CEO or a lot of executives, are there day-to-day interactions between men and women who still suffer from this bias? Katie Coffman: Yes. Big question. I mean, representation matters. This means that even with female leadership, there may still be gender bias. Some of these things work in really subtle and implicit ways. The prejudices we have about women and men are often held by both men and women, and this will require a change in policy, not just representation. Alison Beard: Dear HBR: I started my company this summer and it will be great, but now I have to decide whether to take on the staff and I hesitated because of my previous negative experience in management. I was with my last company for over 20 years, 15 as a manager. I'm an engineer, so the environment was very male-dominated, and it was always hard to fit in. I feel like it's a tight rope for women. Too friendly and you have no authority. Too assertive and the staff don't like you. In recent years, I have struggled mainly with two underperforming performances. It escalated to HR and I wasn't happy with how it turned out. I wanted to get better. So, over the next few years, I put a lot more effort into connecting with people and being warm. I've done a lot of reading and invested in some courses. Then, shortly before I left I was told that others besides these two heavy subordinates made negative comments about me. They were all people I was trying to raise performance issues with. All but one were women. I wonder if they had a higher standard for female bosses. A few of my male colleagues were quite coerced and raised their voices in juniors, but they didn't seem to suffer the same social punishments as me. It made me very careful to give any more feedback so their performance continued to suffer, which made me less efficient. Now I want to move forward with my new business venture. The logical part of my brain says I need to brush some of what happened in my previous company off because not all the criticism was fair. In my field I have to be a coach leader and do a lot of teaching so juniors finding a way is not really an option. But I want to be a good manager for everyone I hire and avoid the problems I encountered in the old job. What should I do? Katie Coffman: Well, congratulations on this exciting new venture. You know, the question, should I recruit staff? Can I re-assume these management responsibilities? Sounds like it's not really a question. The answers will be yes. You're going down this road. You have to do it. So the question in my mind is, how are you going to do this and feel confident about it going forward? Because you're going down this road. It sounds like a letter writer has already learned a lot from his past experiences and has a really high awareness of possible issues that might come across. I think the reason to feel confident is both because he has this knowledge. She learned her lesson and because she's now leading the show. They can arrange their organization in a way that will make it less likely that these problems rear their ugly heads. yes, I think he's got tremendous power here, and that's the power of hiring. She can interview people and explain what her management style is and ask how these potential new hires like to be managed, and pick people who will gel with her. That's the beauty of running your own company, as you said. You don't inherit employees, you choose them. I was more scared than any of you. It's easier to be a manager in a bigger company because you have more people around you. There's a little less demand for your time. When I think of an entrepreneur who founded his own business, I think of someone who is just stretched completely thin and trying to do everything that has very, very limited bandwidth. So, how about to find time to do all the coaching seems to be needed here? yes, it's a really good question. I think it's worth thinking very carefully about how he will spend his day-to-day. If I were in her position, I would think about what this set of basic duties are and which ones I absolutely have and should be in charge of and which things I can safely delegate to other people. And in choosing this list, I would be informed of both the needs of the organization, but also my own preference about what I like to be responsible for, which I think I am good at being responsible for and making sure these are the things that are on your desk. Given her style, given her approach, given her abilities, what is the best way to be her? Are there things you could stop doing or start doing while still really feeling true to yourself and authentic? And again, you'll benefit from a really great selection here. The people who are going to choose and come to work for you are people who will be excited to work for you. And so I would worry less about the fear aspect and focus on the exciting aspect I'm going to recruit a large group of new people to work with. Dan McGinn: I wonder if one of the decisions he needs to make is whether he should hire initially at a more junior level, someone that's going to need a lot of coaching, or whether he should maybe stretch and invest a little bit and hire someone That not only may need a little less coaching at the beginning, but he may have the ability to grow into that coaching role. Do you think there's a decision to be made about a sort of senior year level and how much coaching is needed for who hires? You know, it's hard without knowing more, exactly what the needs of the organization are. So how, for example, in Katie's interview, should she figure out whether these potential new hires, whether junior or senior, will be the types of people who will work well with her? Katie Coffman: Yes. It sounded like a lot of problem areas were around performance feedback. So I would ask really explicitly in these conversations, tell me about the times when you received constructive feedback, where you received criticism. How did you react to that? What was your reaction? How have you received this feedback in the past? And I'd be looking for people who can sort of handle those things. I would say that depending on the position you are hiring and how much time you have with them, you may even be able to go down hypothetical paths OK, imagine if someone came to you with this. How would you react? Now we always worry that people won't be entirely truthful in a job interview, but I think we can read the responses and get a sense of who seems comfortable with receiving direct feedback and criticism and not having it a huge hurdle. And maybe there's a place in the reference letters for that too. A previous supervisor who might be able to talk to some of these qualities. Maybe get more honest stories, more real, more real stories than she will from the interviewees themselves. Katie Coffman: For sure. DAN MCGINN: Do any of the think it is potentially significant that it comes from a technical background? Is there a stereotype true or not that regardless of gender, engineers may not segue as comfortably into driving people as people with different backgrounds do? Katie COFFMAN: I think I'd worry too much about etiquette, and again, we don't know exactly what this new venture is, but I'm guessing it's full of people who are used to working in this space and whose expectations are reasonable about what these environments tend to be like. Okay. good. Alison, what's our summary? So, it is very clear to us that she should not let this negative previous experience hold her back from what she has to do for her business, which brings more people. So we congratulate her on learning a lot about her own management style and how she can improve. She clearly has a lot of self-awareness, and this is a great start. We want you to hire all these problems. Ask really explicitly in conversations for people to tell her about the times that I received constructive criticism and how they responded. Get a sense of how well he will work with these people. We would like it to be strategic in what it has to do and what it asks subordinates to do. And we want her to maintain her authenticity. She may change her approach a little bit, but the key focus here, we think, will be talent selection. Choosing the people who will work with her best to move this new business forward. Dan McGinn: Dear HBR: I joined a small consulting firm three years ago at one of our satellite sites. I've had a lot of opportunities. Within 18 months, I became deputy to my local boss. But now she's resigned from her position with our client. She was the first employee at this place and built this office into the 10-person team that she is today. I was promoted to her position. I have been told that I will have a representative, but this person will be chosen for me. The man they chose is the only person in the office I've had serious problems with. He's been in my account for over a year. He has a history of undermining and contradicting our team. And he failed to complete the tasks on time or at a satisfactory level. I have documented and shared my frustrations with my boss and I have addressed these issues with him individually. It has improved with task performance and our interpersonal working dynamic has improved too, but it is not ideal. I was told he was chosen because I would need help with the workload. I've also received feedback that I can be direct and the company management thinks I need someone to balance it out. So they chose my deputy to deal with people because he's popular and respectable. I feel like logic is sexist. I think I should have something to say when choosing my own representative. He's already trying to undermine me. He reached out to a younger person in the accounts and tried to get approval expenses moved to him all without my knowledge. Luckily he was told it would require my consent to do it, and he wasn't pursued further. But how do you suggest I deal with this situation? What should I say to the management and my deputy? Katie Coffman: Well first, congratulations on the promotion. Sounds like the record so far in the company has been exceptional. So it's an exciting place. I think I can totally see where our letter of writer's frustration comes from. To be thrilled on the one hand, that you have this new position with all this responsibility, and yet, be so disappointed that you got a representative without any say, feel that you have no voice in the situation, and on top of that, it's someone who you may have worked as successfully as you could in the past. So, it's a tough situation to be in. I think I'd start by dealing with a deputy. So, regardless of leadership intentions, I think what they're looking for here is to show that she's capable of leading a diverse group of people. And that means sometimes it leads people who are hard at work. And so, so it may not be fair to be in this situation, I think as maybe as uncomfortable as it is when she can work to create the kind of relationship she wants, the kind of working relationship with this agent, and show off the leadership that she's been successful in handling this and really executing, that's going to go a huge way to improve their view of her even more within this organization. I totally agree with you, Katie, but that's frustrating. I feel he is a victim of what scholars call second-generation gender bias. She's accused of being too direct, too aggressive, as if she hadn't done it. Then they gave her this deputy as a way to soften what they see as her sharp edges and now she's going to have to do extra work to get along with him and work with him. And so it's just madness, but you're absolutely right. He's in this position and now he's got to prove he's going to get out of it. And I'd say if possible, and this is one of those hard things. So, I'll say it knowing it's hard to ask, what is it that you can meet him? You can clear the air a little bit and as best you can, can you assume good intentions for the future? And what should she look for in how she responds to it? yes, it's a great question. So I think it's not clear in the dynamics between the two of them, at least from the letter, exactly what drives that kind of tension, or why it's things he did. And maybe that's part of it. In such a situation, I would try my best to set really clear expectations. He's there as a deputy. He's there to help you do your job better. What can you delegate? What could you give him a hand where you don't feel like you need that final approval? To make this type of thing as clear as possible I think will be helpful in reasserting the tone for the relationship going forward. And I think it should be a conversation together. So, it doesn't necessarily come from it with this, that's how it will work. But you can sit down and talk like okay. So we're going to work on it together. Let's split the tasks. Let's talk about what I'm going to be responsible for, what I really expect from you. What's the sound for you? What would you like to do more or less? Put him on board to make you feel like a team that's going into it as much as you can. Frankly, the piece of this that surprised me the most is that it wants to deal with the cost of approving an account. I don't know anyone who wants to do that. If he wants to, he can make mine for me. I'm glad I sent them to her if she thinks it's a high-value role. I think it occurred to me that even things that you might be grateful that a person wants to take over, suddenly take a power grab. I think that's the point. When you're competing with someone, everything they want to seem like something you don't want them to. But my concern is how to make sure, given this guy's history undermines her and his better reputation among leaders, how do you make sure that she's getting credit for being a good boss? Katie Coffman: Yes. That's really hard. And without knowing much about the structure of this organization, or how she actually receives feedback on it, I would say to the extent that she improves her relationship with him, and he comes to see her as an effective leader, an effective collaborator, that it will be helpful in terms of the feedback the organization receives. Because they're almost certainly going to ask for his opinion. I think you want to know who the important people in your organization are, now looking for something over it, and start really developing those relationships as well. So, can she get face time or Zoom time, one on one time with some of those leaders in the next state to get to know her better? And so she has the opportunity to talk about what she's working on, what she's been able to do and learn from them and get feedback from them. And you could have all those conversations I think without your representative involved. So I think that even if it's a little bit to tell a different story in his meetings, create those opportunities You can tell your story in an effective way, with a sort of list, you know your accomplishments, what you were able to do ready to go and ready to show off. I had a related reaction to part of this. This dilemma focuses on the representative, the challenging relationship, and perhaps the gender dynamics between them. It's right that we're talking about this. But part of the situation here is also that she has been given direct feedback from management that suggests that she's not well-liked, that she's not decent enough, that she needs to bring in someone to compliment her because they're not her strong suits. Does he, should you take the view that she should work on those things independent of the deputy and his problems? I think it's a great area for her to ask more questions. So, what did the feedback look like? Who did she hear it from? Does it come from one person and what data does it point to? And again, I'll be what they mean when they say it, and it helps her I think they understand where it's coming from and whether there are things they can do regardless of the kind of fairness of feedback to make a difference in how they're able to see that aspect of it. So, Katie, may I ask? Is there ever an opportunity in these kinds of conversations to suggest that gender bias could be at play? We published a study and it was analyzing performance ratings at high-tech and professional services firms, and 76% of references to being too aggressive were in women's reviews versus 24% for men. So, I hate to tell our letter writer that you're a victim of bias, but now you're trying to figure out how to change your behavior so you can create their stereotypes about what a manager should do compared to what a male manager should do. Is there anything he can do in this regard? Katie Coffman: Yes. It's an impossible situation. Because so much of being able to speak out in a situation like in a situation like a function of power, and power and balance. And there is no right or wrong way to counter gender bias. So, if it's necessary and right for a letter writer to speak up in this situation and say something, you have to do what feels right for you at that moment. And she'll be aware of the potential cost of it, and if that's what feels right for her, we're not in a position to tell her not to do it. But if he decides it's not the right move, whether for strategic or other reasons, I'd say he shouldn't feel like a cop-out. With you progressing through your career and being promoted, you will more and more be in a leadership position where you can make real change. So, choosing to confront one case of gender bias at the moment doesn't mean you're backed out of some sort of solution as a broader problem. You will have many opportunities, especially when you get promoted to make a real difference, not just for you, but for all the other women in your organization. So, Dan, what are we telling her? Well, first congratulations on the promotion. The three of us share the frustration of the audience that we do not choose her representative and, in fact, we feel unfair. We think the best way to deal with it is to treat it like a test. It is a challenge that needs to be overcome. It's annoying. This will require direct and honest communication and clear expectations. Logical division of labour. We think the listener needs to do a better job of managing and developing relationships with people above her who have given her feedback that she is too direct. We think she has the opportunity to ask questions and try to better understand the basis for the impression that she is not decent. If she thinks there is anything there, she should look for opportunities to try and change that perception and realize that she will have to choose her battles. It will be a long effort, but ultimately, if she wants to succeed in this role and continue to be promoted, she will find the need to have a laborious relationship with this representative she wishes she didn't have. Alison Beard: Dear HBR: Six months ago I took a career step from a global public company with tens of thousands of employees to a family-owned company in the U.S. with several thousand employees. It was like I took a step back in time. My new company is dominated by men. Sales and management are 90% male. Executive leadership is 100 percent male. As a woman who worked in financial services, I am no stranger to fighting uphill battles. I've always had to work hard to compete with men. But it's improved over the last 10 years. I honestly saw prejudice against women disappear. Not in my new company though. I immediately joined the Committee on Inclusion and Diversity. The leader of this group will get it. She called out how far we've come and how obvious it is. I was encouraged. She spoke my language. But when we've erd our way into regional boots on the ground meeting, they're centered around telling us about their home town, or sports team, or favorite food. How can I refocus us on what matters without sounding like a stick in the mud? I don't want to just take the ball and go home. I want to make a change. I think there's a lot of encouragement behind this letter. So I'd start by saying that there's someone who leads this committee that gets it. And this is a great place to start. I wonder how they broke out at regional meetings, what was the allocation of duties here? So we have the leader of this diversity inclusion committee who gets What did she say at these regional meetings? What is the program? What's their role? Because I think passion, determination, how to do it is great. But without a clear path of action, I'm not sure how useful it will be. yes, that's right. I also don't think it's hard for our letter writer to turn the conversation back into diversity inclusion. That's what everyone's here for. So next time he's at one of these meetings, I don't think he'll ever be seen as a stick in the mud, if he says, oh, that is, you were so great to get to know you all. Now, let's go down and focus on what we're here to do. KATIE COFFMAN: She has a really strong ally here too. And I'm glad he wants to inspire change, effect change. Then go to that ally. Let's just say I was a little disappointed with these regional meetings. And if this happens at your regional meeting, it can happen at other regional meetings. So, maybe you'll bring her as part of the solution. Let's say how can we put a little more structure around this? Give us a set of goals so that it's more likely that these diversity inclusion meetings are actually making a difference. Not only at the regional meeting I am at, but also at regional meetings around the country, yes, that gets to the point I was worried about when I read this letter. Do you think she could trust too much in this special committee? Katie Coffman: Yes. The committee itself is a great first start. But again, I would push. And maybe the place to push is not in the regional meeting, but if there's an opportunity for some sort of broader committee to meet again, or even for her to just keep, touch the base with the leader of that meeting, say, OK it's great that it exists, but

what are our goals? What steps will we take? How do we get there? These are all perfectly reasonable questions to ask, and I would help that the leader has a plan for what is, she cares about that question. We're going to spend all this time meeting. Let's make sure we use that time efficiently. I can't imagine anyone having a problem with raising these types of issues on this kind of more nationwide level. Dan MCGINN: It's a common problem for companies to create an inclusion diversity committee, but don't accompany it with outputs, or don't they make it really clear what the group has to do and what it's supposed to achieve? Because it looks like part of what he's dealing with here. Katie Coffman: Yes. I think that may be true. And certainly, like creating committees or even creating new positions, working groups, programs, all those things are great. But without clear goals and as you say, to hold yourself accountable for any goals or metrics may end up being just for the show. And that I can be from the employee's point of view, in some ways even more demoralizing than never going down that path in the first place. Because you start to see this as a failed effort and maybe it makes you more pessimistic going forward. Dan, I suspect you're right that until now this initiative of diversity and inclusion or push has been a bit of a window dressing. If all men, when they break away from the main speech, say, oh yes, how's your sports team? How's your hometown? This is not something we should focus on. And I wonder if this is because it's a family business, privately held that's not held to public corporation standards, as our letter writer's previous employer was. But I think there's an opportunity to say even though we're a family business, the world has changed and a new generation is calling for gender equality and racial diversity and inclusion. And so, if you look at us in relation to our competitors, we start to lose out on talent. And I think if he's going to work with the allies you've pointed out, Katie, this case can be done by everyone on the team and especially the top management of the company, people will start to take it a little bit more seriously and not treat it like box-ticking. Katie Coffman: Yes. I also think that when hearing the letter, I don't yet know if the committee members are simply not interested in diversity and inclusion goals, or feel interested and compassionate and just don't know how to get there. And again, this is where intentions are useful, but the intentions alone are not going us anywhere. And so we need a clear agenda. We need motivation as to why we will do the things we do and the call for increased efficiency and competitiveness is a great way to motivate people to spend time on these issues and take them seriously. And so I think there's a lot of pressure on society to do that. Alison Beard: I think even the fact that it is was an all-male environment and they did get a little bit away together without a lot of female input or influence. You know, it doesn't mean they're bad people, but that means they haven't thought about the problem. And our letter writer has a great opportunity to say, look, I came from a global company, and that's what it looks like out there. Here are some of the stories I've faced earlier in my career. Here's what I thought when I got here. Here's what I think customers and suppliers might think when we look at our Who We are page where there are pictures of all our executives and they are all men. You know, just educate them in a very friendly way by telling them stories. You can present them with the facts, but then you also just relate to your personal experience of how it really is environment and want to work with them to make it a more diverse place. Katie Coffman: Yes. And it may feel like a very bold statement to make initially. Maybe it's a tough place to start, especially if you're worried about being stuck in the mud. I tend to share both of your views that I think will not be perceived in this way, even if it leads in this bold way. That said, talk and talk, hey it doesn't look like we're using this meeting time very effectively. Can we get to the same page about why we are here and how are we going to use this time? Who doesn't like someone who helps them be more efficient at meetings? So even this type of leadership approach I think is likely to be both well received and effective. Even if it's a woman? Look, it's always hard to say for sure how something will be perceived. And yes, in the workplace you can sometimes have reservations that a woman who says the same thing a man might say may face more negative consequences than a man can. That said, I think leading authentically, saying that you are trying to help this group achieve common goals and want to be someone who facilitates that and ensures that we are not wasting time seems to be a fairly safe bet in terms of what anyone in this room would be able to push without negative consequences. Dan MCGINN: The fact that society is male-dominated now, on the surface as a woman, is an absolute problem and something that needs to be fixed and addressed. Is there a chance for her to look at this as an opportunity though, that over time all companies or many companies at least will want to fix it, and it could create more opportunities for a woman to advance? Katie Coffman: Yes. I think it's hard to say which way it's going. Sure, there's going to be ways in which being in a very dominated environment will make things harder. But if you're in a male-dominated environment that, as you say, is trying to change, then yes. They might be more on the lookout for promising female talent to support. That said, why are men-dominated in the first place? There might be some hidden or insidious things going on that may not be obvious at first that could contribute to such a culture. So, without knowing more about the organization, I don't know if it's really this kind of hidden opportunity for her or something to be careful about. What if our writer speaks to this leader of diversity, they are both on the same page, but in fact they just don't have as much power and influence in the organization? Then what are Katie doing? KATIE COFFMAN: Yes, this is a challenging situation and it's a great question to ask if the person in charge of this is actually empowered by the company to make real changes. And certainly, the success of these efforts will depend in part on the puy-in of a broader set of executives at the company. At that point, it's time to accept more allies. So, who else in the company seems to be supporting this effort? Maybe the answer at first is not too many people. But then maybe even the leader of this committee and our letter writer, working together, if they both get it, they both feel what might work, what things might help, that they think they're going to deliver as a kind of more efficient and fairer outcome for society, to start doing things that you can do. Look for small wins and maybe small wins are enough to recruit a bigger set of allies and get people on board to produce what may be some of the tougher changes to push for it first. So, Alison, what's our advice? So first of all, we want our listener to realize that he has an ally in this leader of the diversity committee, and we suggest that she talk to her about what the goals of these initiatives are, how the group can be structured to ensure that they progress and what metrics they should use to measure success. We think that at the moment, in these meetings with my colleagues who are not on the side of this matter, we think it is ok for her to say hey, let's use this meeting more effectively. We don't think she'll be seen as a stick in the mud to ask them to focus on what they're here for. And we think she can use some sort of stories and data to make her case. It's possible that dei efforts are just window dressings in this company, but also in an organization that is privately held and family-run, there's still a really strong argument for increasing gender diversity and not least because it expands its talent pool, but also because stakeholders really now are expected. We think he may have to expand his group of allies to people who have more power and influence in society. We encourage her to look at small wins and we are very proud of her for wanting to be a change agent in this organisation and we hope she can achieve that with help. Great. Katie, thanks for being on the show. Katie Coffman: Thanks so much for being me. It was great. That's Katie Coffman. She's a professor at Harvard Business School. Thanks to the listeners who wrote us with their questions. Now we want to know your questions. Send us an email with a call in the workplace and how we can help. The e-mail address is DearHBR@HBR.org. Alison Beard: We also want to thank Louis Weeks and Nick DePrey for composing our theme music. DAN MCGINN: We have you enjoyed tonight's episode, and if you want to get more automatically, go to your podcast app and press subscribe. Alison Beard: And if show, please let us have a five-star review. I'm Dan McGinn. And I'm Alison Beard. Thanks for listening Dear HBR.. HBR..

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