



THE #METOO MOVEMENT AS AN OPPORTUNITY FOR EFFECTIVE MENTORSHIP

By Hali Anderson and Whitney Hodges

Word around town is the #MeToo movement has had chilling effects on mentor and sponsorship opportunities for female attorneys.

Unfortunately, a recent study released by LeanIn.org (the women's empowerment organization founded by Facebook Chief Operating Officer Sheryl Sandberg) has confirmed the movement has altered the behavior of male executives and managers from a "moderate to very great extent." The survey demonstrated that male professionals are pulling back from active interactions with their female colleagues, due to a knee-jerk concern their actions will be misconstrued or reported as sexual harassment.

Specifically, the survey, which polled a national sample of 5,000 adults, found that 60% of male managers say they are uncomfortable doing "common workplace"

activities with women colleagues (counterparts and subordinates) such as mentoring, socializing or participating in one-on-one meetings. This is up from the 46% reported in 2018. Additionally, the survey reported senior level male managers are 12 times more likely to be hesitant to meet with a woman than a man; nine times more likely to decline work trips with junior women than junior men; and six times more likely to avoid work dinners with a female colleague.

Some men are even taking a more drastic approach by abandoning mentorship altogether. As one CEO put it, "I'm all for women's rights, but this #MeToo movement has just gone too far." For this CEO, the risk of being falsely accused of something improper or even potentially giving the appearance of impropriety is just too great. He decided that the safest approach was to just avoid close work relationships completely. "By

going too far, the #MeToo movement has really been harmful to women because now men are scared to mentor them," the CEO lamented.

Both of these responses — excluding women from the mentorship experience or foregoing mentoring completely — are extremely problematic.

First, they imply the women who have come forward as victims are lying. The men in these stories were apparently not doing anything wrong, but instead got caught up by vindictive women intent on taking down powerful men. Second, these narratives place men in the center as the victims. Instead of listening to what women are saying, understanding their experiences and condemning the misconduct (which has been admitted in several cases — i.e., Harvey Weinstein, Matt Lauer, Louis C.K., Les Moonves, etc.), the focus morphs into "well-

meaning" men being the real victims. Third, these approaches unwittingly punish the female victims. It is the old "this is why we can't have nice things" approach. These responses suggest that women were better off before and, now, because of what they have done (which is to speak up), they will be negatively impacted. The price of having a voice is ostracism. Fourth, taking the drastic move of abandoning or eliminating mentorships altogether is really taking the easy way out. It requires no self-reflection, hard work or growth. It is abdicating your responsibility as a leader instead of reexamining your relationships.

At the outset, it is important to note that excluding women from mentorship opportunities can open employers up to claims of sex or gender discrimination. Because of the acute exclusion, the professional and personal growth of promising female employees will be stunted, resulting in a growing gender divide. Denying female employees the same mentoring opportunities accessible to men — whether inadvertent or done for an arguably legitimate reason — perpetuates a gender power imbalance and is discriminatory. Moreover, this practice works against any company's diversity and inclusion efforts and goals.

Taking the more conservative approach of eliminating mentorship for both men and women may avoid a discrimination claim, but it deprives

both mentors and mentees of critical professional growth.

Dr. Steven Jones, CEO of JONES, a company that specializes in developing leaders who are equipped to counter oppression through diversity, inclusion and organizational effectiveness, says that he has encountered this mindset in his trainings.

Dr. Jones emphasizes the importance of what is called "effective mentoring," which involves a two-way relationship. "Mentoring is not about allowing the mentor to dictate the terms — effective mentoring requires both individuals to say what they want and need to be emotionally and psychologically safe and successful. Setting boundaries and establishing norms becomes even more important when mentoring across gender identities." Dr. Jones explains, "When different gender identities are involved, both the mentor and mentee need to establish when and where they meet, whether the door might stay open, etc.

"The goal is to make sure that both parties are comfortable. The reason some men are feeling uncomfortable is that effective mentoring requires us to scale up and step into the role of establishing safe and equitable relationships instead of leaving it to women. Instead of operating from a place of fear, men should welcome women

feeling more empowered to set boundaries. If women are setting and communicating boundaries up front, they will be going to their male colleagues directly, which should be the goal. The #MeToo movement basically forces men to reevaluate their normal and this reevaluation is part of the evolution of the greater good."

Dr. Jones advises companies who are struggling with adapting to this new norm to encourage their leadership to be clear that they welcome setting boundaries. An effective leader will tell his or her employees: "If I do something that crosses the line or that causes you to feel disrespected or causes concern, please speak up before it becomes a pattern."

In other words, the #MeToo movement should not be viewed as a reason to avoid women or mentorships, but as an opportunity to reexamine assumptions and help guide employees in creating feedback-rich mentoring relationships. The #MeToo Movement is really the natural progression of realizing diversity, inclusion *and* equity in the workplace. Diversity is increasing, women are at the table and now they are using their voices to demand equity. It is up to employers and their leadership to evolve with the times, embrace the growing pains and support this positive change. 🙌



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