



# ADVANCING WOMEN IN LEADERSHIP

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*Full Length Research Paper*

## **What's power got to do with it? Seeking gender-equity in organizations through male ally initiatives**

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With the persistence of women's limited advancement into senior leadership, organizations have employed an arsenal of diversity, equity, and inclusion strategies such as implicit bias training, intentional mentoring, and efforts to authentically support work-life policies. Male allyship has emerged as a recent strategy aimed at gender equity. Yet the outcomes of those efforts, usually measured by women's advancement and/or retention, have often been disappointing. As we worked with male allies in organizations and witnessed the time, energy and commitment devoted to their work, our research question emerged: "In what ways might organizational issues around power play a role in the outcomes of male ally initiatives?" Central to allyship is the asymmetry of power between advantaged and disadvantaged groups. This is evident in studies across disciplines, such as sociology, social justice and economics. Management scholars have identified power, specifically the requisite sharing of or fear of diminishment of, as a barrier to men participating in gender equity initiatives to advance women. In promoting gender equity, organizations are essentially seeking to distribute power more broadly to enable both men and women to fully contribute. We draw on the literature, and ongoing work with men and women engaged in male ally initiatives. We use two frames of the Bolman and Deal Organizational Model to understand the collision between well-meaning human resource efforts and the reality of power in the form of organizational politics. We argue that practitioners must understand the role that power plays in both advancing and hindering male ally endeavors. We conclude with recommendations for practitioners, male allies, and women in addressing power while building gender-equitable organizations.

**Keywords:** Male ally, power, gender-equity, HR, diversity, equity, inclusion

With the persistence of women's limited advancement into senior leadership in organizations (Catalyst, 2017; AAUW, 2016), scholars have examined both what women and organizations have done and failed to do in attaining gender equity (Kossek, Su, & Wu, 2017). Women have been admonished to 'lean in' (Sandburg, 2013); to protect their career decision making from the influences of socialized gender roles (Wood & Eagly, 2009; Diekmann, Brown, Johnston, & Clark,

2010) and stereotype threat (Su & Rounds, 2015); and to recognize differences in career goals and values that put them at odds with ascending to top leadership positions (O'Neill, Shapiro, Ingols & Blake-Beard, 2013; Major, Morganson, & Bolen, 2013).

Organizations have also received advice in relation to advancing women in leadership. They have been urged to address implicit and explicit bias, recognizing that women are less likely to be

promoted (Heilman, 2012; Roth, Purvis, & Bobko, 2012); have limited access to social networks (Casciaro & Lobo, 2005); have fewer role models and female mentors (Hoobler, Lemmon, & Wayne, 2011); receive less mentoring (Murrell & Blake-Beard, 2017; Wanberg, Welsch, & Hezlett, 2003); face a hostile work climate as leaders (Eagly, 2013); and work in masculine organizational cultures (Moor, Cohen & Beeri, 2015). Implicit bias training, standardized checklists for hiring and promotions, intentional mentoring, and the authentic support of work-family policies are some of the strategies that have been deployed. Yet the scarcity of female leaders persists.

In organizational behavior and leadership scholarship, male allyship has emerged as a recent strategy in organizational efforts aimed at gender equity (Catalyst, 2009; Sawyer & Valerio, 2018; Trefalt, et al., 2011). Yet in other fields, such as economic development, violence, and social justice, men have long been part of the change effort (Flood, 2011; Karkara, Karlsson & Malik, 2005; Kaufman, 2004). Men have often served as allies to feminists and in struggles led by women (Jardine & Smith, 1987; Digby, 1998; Kimmel & Mosmiller, 1992; Messner, Greenberg & Peretz, 2015). As men have become allies in organizational change efforts, scholars have examined what motivates them to take up that role (Burke, Pratt & Smith, 2014; Connell, 2005); the challenges they face when doing so (Casey, et al., 2013; Dubow & Ashcraft, 2016; Kark, 2018); and the organizational and individual benefits of their efforts (Curtis, Schmid, & Struber, 2012; Woetzel et al., 2015; Salter & Migliaccio, 2019).

Central to the concept of allyship is the recognition that there is an asymmetry to power: women are in a lower power position and need assistance, and men are in a higher power position and can provide that assistance. Dubow and Ashcraft (2016) explicitly named power when defining the gender equity work conducted by men as “work that aims to mobilize a socially privileged group to work toward dismantling a system that it stands to benefit from” (p.164). Scholars have identified power, specifically the requisite sharing of or fear of diminishment of, as a barrier to men participating in gender equity initiatives (Casey et al., 2013; Flood & Pease, 2005; Mergaert & Lombardo, 2014). A shift in power presupposes a shift in privilege and advantage. We witnessed this first hand as business faculty working with male allies in the university’s executive education programs. In our inquiry with male allies, many were resistant to even acknowledging their current position of power arising from their advantaged position in senior leadership and/or their advantaged social identity position of being male.

To explore our research question regarding the possible impact that power plays in male ally initiatives in an organizational context, we look to Bolman and Deal’s (2017) four frames. Many scholars have used those frames to explore wide ranging topics from building data governance strategies (Fruehauf, Al-Khalifa, & Coniker, 2015) to investigating the leadership capabilities of physiotherapists (McGowan, Elliott, & Stokes,

2018). In this article, we propose that male ally programs as an organizational strategy to promote gender equity are part of the Human Resources frame, which seeks to align people and the organization to the benefit of both. However, the success of these programs depends on how organizations manage the political frame, which examines how individuals compete for scarce resources to meet often-competing interests. In promoting gender equity, organizations are essentially seeking to distribute power more broadly to enable both men and women to contribute fully. By asking men to be male allies as part of that reallocation process, organizations are asking men to give up (by sharing) some of their power. Bolman and Deal’s political frame provides a way of analyzing the power dynamics that surround the role of male allies and a way of identifying strategies for addressing those dynamics.

To examine the dynamic of power when using male ally initiatives, we draw on the literature, situating allyship and power in a broader and historical context. We discuss our ongoing experiences working with both male allies and women in the university’s executive education programs. We extend the extant scholarship that suggests ways to increase the effectiveness of male allies (Metz, 2016; Prime & Moss-Racusin, 2009; Sawyer & Valerio, 2016, 2018) by examining the implications of power through the political frame and offering recommendations that acknowledge power as organizations seek to advance women through gender-equity initiatives.

### **Situating Allyship in the Literature**

The concept of ally is not new in the gender, anti-racism, civil rights, feminism, and social justice literature. Washington and Evans (1991) crafted an early definition of ‘ally’ contemporaneous with the LGBT movement: “A person who is a member of the ‘dominant’ or ‘majority’ group who works to end oppression in his or her personal and professional life through support of, and as an advocate with and for, the oppressed population” (p.195). Subsequent scholars used this concept of allyship across diverse contexts (Almassi, 2015; Casey, 2010; Drury & Kaiser, 2014; Ravarino, 2013; Russell & Bohan, 2016; Salter & Migliaccio, 2019).

Central to the definition of ally across all fields was their advantaged position vis-à-vis those who were the beneficiaries of the movements they supported (Myers, 2008). Myers recognized that allies were, indeed, separate from the beneficiary group because their experiences and belongingness in the advantaged group were different from the beneficiary group. Bishop (2002), however, provided a caveat that such conceptions need to be more nuanced because a person may be an oppressor or an ally in a given setting. Individuals have multiple social identities which, set in different contexts, may put them into an advantaged or disadvantaged position. This concept of intersectionality (Crenshaw, 1997; Collins & Bilge, 2016) suggests organizations implementing male ally initiatives should exert caution: men can be both the preserver and enforcer of norms that oppress women, and an ally in changing those

same norms. Additionally, men's membership in the advantaged group changes based on the situation. In some situations, men may be advantaged, and in others, they may not be.

Ironically, one dimension that can affect men's position in advantaged or disadvantaged groups is the mantle of 'male ally' itself. Anicha, Burnett and Bilen-Green (2015) stated, "Although gender privilege is operative for men when they adhere to gendered norms, when men attempt to interrupt sexism and gender injustice in the workplace by "deploying [their] social power against the system that confers it" (DeTurk, 2011, p.569), they face the same social and institutional pressures as do their women colleagues" (p. 24). Rudman, Mescher and Moss-Racusin (2012) found that gender-egalitarian men suffer stigma-by-association (from both men and women) due to their perceived alignment with women, the low-status group.

More costs associated with working across advantaged-disadvantaged groups are pointed out by Connell (2005) as he wrote, "Globally, men have a lot to lose from pursuing gender equality because men, collectively, continue to receive a patriarchal dividend" (p. 1808). Patriarchal dividend refers to the benefits, advantages and privileges that men gain from the subordination of women (Connell, 1987). Brown and Ostrove's definition of male allies further captures this loss. Male allies are "dominant group members who work to end prejudice in their personal and professional lives, and relinquish social privileges conferred by their group status through their support of nondominant groups" (2013, p. 2211).

Clearly, the idea of power dynamics between advantaged and disadvantaged groups is central to understanding the male ally experience as men consider taking up gender equity work. It is critical for organizational leaders to recognize that there is no cost-free disruption to the existing power structures as they seek to share power across a greater number of people.

### Exploring the Concept of Power

Consistent with our exploration of the concept of allies beyond organizational research, it is instructive to look at power more broadly. In feminism and feminist literature, the concept of power is central to the system of patriarchy (Anderson, 2009; Becker, 1999; Bennett, 2006; Lerner, 1986). It also includes the power dynamics between white women and women of color, particularly, the 'exclusionary practices' of dominant feminism that is mainly based on the experiences of white, middle-class women (Bulkin, et al., 1984; Caraway, 1991; Garcia, 1997; hooks, 1981; Smith, 1983; Springer, 2005). Power dynamics are also central to the critique of white-Western/Eurocentric feminism vis-à-vis non-white, non-Western feminism (Ang, 2013; Mohanty, 2003; Zimmerman, 2015).

Concurrently, social scientists initially described power with competitive, win-lose language. Max Weber, in 1946, defined power as "the chance . . . to realize their will . . . even against the resistance of others" (Miller & Cummins, 1992, p. 416). Power was also defined as "the capacity to overcome part or all of the

resistance" (Etzioni, 1970); "the ability to introduce force into a social situation" (Bierstedt, 1970); and "to get people to do things they would not otherwise do" (Pfeffer, 1992, p. 30). Other more neutral power definitions evolved, including Kanter's (1977) definition as the potential to achieve goals; power "defines what people are able to do in a particular situation" (Cervero & Wilson, 1994, p. 29); and power is "the potential to mobilize energy" (Valley & Long-Lingo, 2002, p. 1).

In this paper, we pull from Bolman and Deal's definition of power, "the capacity to get things done," grounding their earliest work on their four frames (1991, p. 165). They argue that organizations are coalitions of divergent interests with continuous differences under situations of scarce resources. Because of these conditions, "...conflict (is) at the center of day-to-day dynamics and make(s) power the most important asset" (2017, p. 184). Decisions, they continued, are reached through negotiations and bargaining as people and coalitions jockey for their own interests. Our understanding of the literature, and the consistent link between power, coalitions, and conflict, led the authors to craft this definition of male allyship: *a role that men take up to use their influence and power to build an inclusive and equitable organizational culture*. Consistent with the literature on power, it recognizes that influence is needed to create organizational change. Organizational leaders acknowledge this as they turn to those most likely holding a disproportionate amount of power, namely men, to go beyond moving individual women into senior positions, to changing the actual systems, processes, and culture that have advantaged men and disadvantaged others.

What do men and women involved in male ally initiatives think about power? To explore this question, we offer findings from our qualitative research. In our work with organizations with male ally initiatives, both men and women revealed a discomfort with the concept and definitions of power and male allyship, even as they simultaneously argue for gender equity.

### Methods

For eight years we held conversations with both women and men engaged in a women's leadership development program. The program was sponsored by a global organization, organized by the university's executive education department, and delivered by Business School faculty. Over those years of conversations, the concept of power emerged as a consistent issue impacting both women's attitudes towards male allyship and men's attitudes towards being allies. Those conversations, as they grew more persistent and strident, became both the basis of our research question and the qualitative sources for our work.

The organization's goal was to retain and advance women into senior leadership. Over eight years approximately 700 mid- to senior-level women from across their global footprint participated in a two-week program. After the pilot program, a male ally component was added to both support women individually but also to support their work in breaking down gendered organizational barriers.

*Qualitative Discussions with Women:* During the Women's Leadership Program for the organization, faculty engaged with around 700 mid- to senior-level women. These women came from all functional areas of the organization and across its global footprint. While the curriculum was fairly consistent across the 22 cohorts, during its last eight cohorts, women participants also worked with male allies in identifying gendered organizational barriers, brainstorming how to address selected barriers, and then, during 6 months following the program, implementing change. Following each program, faculty and organizational sponsors shared their observations and insights. These debriefs were captured and distributed to both the faculty and the corporate sponsors. The debrief discussions about the male allies component is salient to this paper.

*Qualitative Discussions with Male Allies:* A group of male allies was identified for each cohort of the women's program, starting with cohort 2. These were men at the leadership level of their global organization's business units, and were from multiple countries. For cohorts 2-14, male allies had two roles: during the program they listened to women discuss organizational barriers to gender equity to hear first-hand the challenges women faced; and then following the program they served as coaches. To prepare for those roles we provided an hour of onboarding: familiarizing male allies with the concepts of leadership and gender that their women colleagues (often their direct reports) were engaged in, and expectations for post-program support.

For the last eight cohorts of the program, the role of the male allies was expanded. During the program, male allies worked with a group of 5-6 women to brainstorm strategies to address a selected structural issue. For six months after the program male allies, with that same team of women, worked on changing policies, expectations, and culture to address that issue. To prepare male allies for this additional work, the short onboarding conversation evolved into a half day workshop that included pre-reading and reflection. During the workshop, male allies explored the concepts of implicit bias, power, advantage and gendered organizational structures; related those concepts to their own experiences; and analyzed a custom-written case that explored the challenges of men supporting other men in the hard work of being male allies.

Following each male ally session, faculty and male allies shared their observations of both what happened in the male ally program and their work in the women's leadership program. These conversations were captured in notes, and used for this paper including all quotes.

### **Results and discussion with Male Allies**

The discussions with the 2018 cohort of seven male allies is particularly informative to this article as they not only repeated the theme of power from the previous seven cohorts, but they were also responsive to our more persistent probing about the concept. Interestingly, male allies revealed a strong reaction to the word 'power'. Some male allies resisted the word 'power' as evidenced by one quote: "women have power too, and this

definition ignores or diminishes that". They spoke of not wanting to be the "benefactors" for women. They did not want to emphasize the hierarchy, stating, "The word 'power' segregates me above others." Some believe that "power is part of the problem" and sought a more 'inclusive' term for power such as 'influence.' The word 'influence', said one, "allows me to be 'on the field', in an active role." Another male ally said, "Using my time and effort are more important than using my power."

These reactions are consistent with feminist scholars' reframing of power from 'power over' (the historical struggle of one person's dominance over another) to 'power to' which is about empowerment (Miller & Cummins, 1992); and 'power with' (Fletcher, 2004; Guinier, 1998). In offering a new paradigm, Guinier (1998) argued that "the notion of power with.... involves people working together as collective actors in a common cause" (p.1). 'Collective actors' or alliances have been part of feminist politics (Scott, 1998), women-related endeavors (Pease, ND; Macomber, 2014), and between feminists and male feminists or pro-feminists (Flood, 2011; Kimmel & Mosmiller, 1992; Schmitt, 1998). They have also been present in many other social movements, including the white southerners in the Civil Rights movement (Chappell, 1996). Given that gender-equity is a vision for the entirety of an organization, both male allies and women need to work as a collective.

It is notable that these 2018 male allies, representative of earlier cohorts, were uncomfortable with legacy definitions of power stemming from formal titles and hierarchy. They were reluctant to 'own' the power that came with their titles, the decisions they alone were authorized to make, and the control they have that impacted individuals and the organization. Instead, by using words like 'influence' or 'being on the field with them', male allies were aligning themselves with the feminist 'power with' paradigm. The question was why? Both faculty and male allies, in exploring this, identified several possible reasons. One, the sample itself most likely was skewed. Given that men were selected (by Talent Development at the organization) to be male allies, and agreed to take up that role, they may have been more likely to recognize the dampening effect formal power structures have on people's contributions and engagement. They also recognized that male allies came from countries all over the world, and in many cultures, an overt direct use of power is not acceptable. Finally, they attributed strong female role models (mothers, sisters, early bosses) as challenging notions that women are incapable of using power to achieve goals.

### **Discussion from our Qualitative Inquiry of Women**

Starting with the second cohort where we introduced the use of male allies, we immediately fielded questions as to why male allies were part of the program. Women shared their concerns about having men in the classroom (usually around issues of confidentiality and potential suppression of candor, and reputational harm) and also about what was implicitly conveyed by including men: that women could not advance their careers

and promote gender-equity without help. This early resistance was addressed by proactively positioning male allies as consistent with the reality of who had the power to make systemic organizational changes. Over time, according to the organization sponsors, as the reputation of the program grew in esteem, the use of male allies became accepted practice.

When the role of male allies expanded in cohort 14, the challenge to the need for male allies reappeared. From our review of our faculty debriefing notes across eight cohorts of women regarding male allyship, it became clear that many women were uncomfortable with the power dynamics of male ally relationships. One particularly insightful and representative conversation arose prior to their work with male allies. In asking, “Why do we need men to help us?”, these women’s resistance to male allies echoed one of Kark’s (2018) four primary sources of resistance from women. The “the knight in shining armor” response captures how women may regard male allies as a “paternalistic attempt to take over effecting change toward gender balance” (p. 7). Kark called this larger pattern of female resistance “gender equity gatekeeping” (p. 6). Built on the literature around ‘maternal gatekeeping’ (Allen & Hawkins, 1999; Gaunt, 2008) where mothers limit or control the fathers’ involvement in childcare, Kark proposes that women in organizations may engage in similar behaviors to limit men’s involvement in gender equity efforts.

Another possible source of our women’s resistance to ‘needing’ men to help foster gender-equity may be avoiding the difficult conclusion that they are members in a low power, disadvantaged group. Women who are highly educated, highly accomplished executives, may resist admitting that they still need men, who as members of the advantaged group (being male, holding the majority of leadership positions), have the power to make organization-wide changes. This conclusion reinforces ‘power over’ rather than ‘power with’ interactions.

These qualitative findings prompted us to seek an answer to our fundamental research question: What role might power play in using male ally initiatives to address gender-inequity in organizations? Specifically, how can male allyship initiatives be successful given their prerequisite of requiring those in power to share their power? These questions recognize multiple realities that decrease the likelihood of the success of gender-equity initiatives and preserve the status quo. On the organizational side, power is a dynamic embedded in all organizations. It is codified by the way an organization is structured and who is authorized to make what decisions and control specified resources (Bolman & Deal, 2017). As a result, any structure produces advantaged and disadvantaged groups. While most organizations allocate power and resources by hierarchy, and since most people at the top of organizations are men, women are often in the disadvantaged low power group. An effort to move women into senior positions - by definition - implies a loss of power for those currently occupying those positions. On the individual side, each person requires power to do their job and to

achieve their personal and organizational goals. As a result, it is in an individual’s self-interest to build and hold power.

Given those two dynamics, how might organizations implement male ally initiatives while recognizing the countervailing desires of individuals to hold onto their power? To answer our research question, we turned again to the work of Bolman and Deal (2017).

### **Bolman and Deal’s Four Frames Model**

Since the early 1990s Bolman and Deal offered four frames to analyze both the rewarding and dark sides of complex, modern organizations. They define a frame as: “...a coherent set of ideas or beliefs forming a prism or lens that enables you to see and understand more clearly what’s going on in the world around you” (Bolman & Deal, 2017, p. 43).

They begin with the structural frame which descends from the field of sociology. Drawing on the work of Frederick Taylor, whose “scientific management” sought to design organizations for maximum efficiency, and Max Weber, whose desire for rationality identified many components of modern-day bureaucracies (division of labor, hierarchy, the separation of personal from official property and rights), the authors state that the “central beliefs of the structural frame reflect confidence in rationality and faith that a suitable array of roles and responsibilities will minimize distracting personal static and maximize people’s performance on the job” (217, p.47).

Bolman and Deal’s fourth frame is the symbolic frame which draws from the field of anthropology and asks about organizational cultures with their embedded stories, myths, heroes and heroines, rituals, symbols, and celebrations. This frame suggests that managers think of themselves as directing and/or being part of a play and ask themselves how to influence the situation through the stories, rituals and celebrations that they create and pass on, and the outcomes that they wish to attain.

It is Bolman and Deal’s second and third frames (human resource and political, respectively) which we use to analyze male ally programs. Bolman and Deal’s Human Resource frame borrows heavily from the field of psychology. The assumptions of the HR frame center around the debate of what should be the relationship between people and organizations. One side sees people as expendable cogs who need to perform the work of the organization for their pay. The alternative perspective is that people and their organizations should be closely aligned and that the organization should provide an ideal working environment in exchange for a committed, engaged workforce. Under the latter HR assumptions “organizations exist to serve human needs rather than the converse” (Bolman & Deal, 2017, p. 118). The conditions of employment should serve both the needs of individuals as well as the organization: in short, the organization and its people both get their needs met.

The political frame draws from the field of political science. Here the concepts of power, influence, negotiations, and win-

win or win-lose come to the forefront of organizational processes. Bolman and Deal (2017) posit: “Scarce resources and enduring differences put conflict at the center of day-to-day dynamics and make power the most important asset.” (p. 184). The underlying inference is that all organizations have limited resources over which people may have honest disagreements about how they should be allocated and spent. Although there are undoubtedly a few exceptions, most who inhabit organizations understand precisely the tension around different perspectives and the allocation of scarce resources to strengthen particular goals and paths.

### **What can Bolman and Deal’s Model Tell us about Male Ally Initiatives?**

We suggest that organizations tend to view male ally initiatives primarily, if not exclusively, through the HR frame. Given that Human Resources Departments (and the HR frame) focus on hiring, retaining, training and promoting people, organizational goals, such as moving towards gender-equity, are often in their purview. The use of male allies as a strategy towards those goals are often launched and managed by HR. Organizations often use diversity recruitment, retention and advancement as metrics to measure HR’s success, and as factors impacting HR’s budgets. HR then invests time, focus and budgets to doing all their work to achieve those metrics, such as broadening searches to diverse candidate pools, training managers and employees in diversity and inclusion best practices, building performance appraisal and promotion instruments that attempt to recognize and mitigate the impact of diverse social identities. Even in the face of those efforts, women may still leave as they encounter gendered (and often invisible and unintentional) cultural, structural or process barriers. Their departure represents a painful loss of talent (Nayak, 2020; Oldapo, 2014). The HR frame identifies organizational behaviors and systems that seek to build a mutually beneficial relationship between organizations that need the ideas, energy, and talent of their people, and employees who need jobs, salaries, careers and opportunities to learn and grow. Clearly, gender-equity and male ally initiatives are important strategies in maximizing that relationship.

From our experience working with organizations, we have found that managers often ignore or underplay the importance of the political frame in setting up gender-equity programs. In turning our attention to organizational politics, power and influence, we argue that practitioners and their male ally programs may benefit from a realistic assessment of the role that power plays in both hindering and advancing such endeavors. The political frame (Bolman & Deal, 2017, pp. 179 – 234) is based on a number of assumptions that can dramatically affect any HR initiative. The first assumes that organizations are coalitions of individuals and interest groups. Those coalitions have enduring differences in values, beliefs, information, interests, and perceptions of reality. All of them are competing for the scarce resources the organization has available for current and future operations. Scarce resources, such as finances, time, approval, networks, and visibility, and enduring differences put conflict at the center of

day-to-day dynamics and make power the most important asset an individual can have. Individuals need power to obtain and use their allocated resources. To build power they may seek high status positions, build alliances and networks, and control scarce resources, such as finances and career advancement opportunities.

What does this mean for male allies? Through the lens of the political frame, competition between people for scarce resources is fundamental in every organization. Two examples of scarcity include positions and decision making. The number of senior leadership positions is increasingly limited as one moves up the hierarchy. Decisions become broader and more significant as one moves up the hierarchy. Through the HR frame, often men at the top of the organizations are tasked with acting as male allies, and yet through the political frame, those same men are being asked to either give up some of their existing power and/or step back from competing for scarce resources. Men at the top of organizations may also have abused their power in their interactions with women, now widely exposed through the #MeTooMovement (Carlsen, 2018). As male allies they are now being asked to use their power for the good of individual women; and for the good of the organization rather than their own advancement.

There are significant tensions between the HR and political frames that male allies and gender-equity initiatives straddle. We summarize them below in Table 1. The primary difference arises from the target for accruing benefits: in the Human Resource frame, actions are aimed at benefiting the organization; in the political frame, actions are aimed at benefiting the individual actor.

### **What can Bolman and Deal Tell us about Power?**

Bolman and Deal (2017, p. 192-193) provide a list of sources of power that individuals build, use and maintain in competing for scarce resources. Table 2 lists those sources in the left-hand column. In the middle column we recognize how male allies may have a particular power source stemming from their membership in the advantaged group, based on their position as senior leaders in an organization, and/or by being in the majority social identity group). We also recognize the advantages arising from each power source that men are being asked to give up or share in their role as male allies.

In the far-right column we offer some possible alternative enactments of each power source based on our work in organizations engaged in male ally initiatives. These include both activities that are either being enacted or are being considered for enactment. We list those practices that offer alternative manifestations of those sources that continue to accrue benefits to the individual holder of that power source while encouraging gender-equity work

**Table 1**  
***The Tensions Male Ally Initiatives Must Navigate between HR and Political Frames***

	HR frame	Political frame
Goal	Alignment between people and the organization to the benefit of both.	The advancement of individual interests. These can be at odds with the organization, or in alignment with and in the service of the organization.
Factors in the decision	What’s best for all people and the organization?	What’s best for my ideas, agenda, and/or initiatives?
Metric of success	Recruiting, empowering, developing, and retaining good people.	Winning resource decisions; capturing scarce resources; getting my ideas, agenda and initiatives funded and approved.
Rewards	Retention and promotion of people; high morale and organizational commitment; inclusive organizational culture; engaged and empowered employees.	My ability to contribute to the organization in a way that is important to me: my budget is resourced and expanded; I am promoted up the hierarchy and amass larger responsibility and control as I expand my sphere of influence and power.
Male allies	An HR initiative in the service of empowering all people, enabling all people to fully contribute, and building an inclusive work culture.	A role taken up by men which requires them to draw on their limited resources (time, energy, focus, social capital, and networks) away from what benefits their own agenda towards what benefits others and the larger organization.

**Table 2**  
***Sources of Power, How Each May Be Enacted by a Senior Male Leaders, and Possible Alternatives to Encourage Male Allyship***

Source of Power	Enactment of power as it benefits the individual as a Senior male leader	Potential alternatives to encourage male allyship
Positional power (legitimate authority)	As senior leaders in an organization they have legitimacy and authority. They can choose to address and make decisions about enterprise-wide and business unit-wide issues, such as gender inequity. They may also choose not to.	Assign new titles of authority, such as “male ally”; formalize that moniker by including a label or indicator in employee databases that permits individuals to ‘find and select’ male allies; have this group report directly to the CEO or Executive Committee so they can showcase their power as they convey progress, make recommendations, and brainstorm new initiatives.
Control of rewards (ability to deliver jobs, money, access, support)	They ‘control’ the rewards by virtue of being at the table where limited resources are distributed; this enables them to ‘reward’ themselves in ways that are meaningful to their own interests.	Provide added collective responsibilities and control of resources to this special cohort such as nominating women to leadership programs, or having a voice in ensuring diversity when hiring senior people. Set aside new funding resources dedicated to advancing women.
Information and expertise to solve important organizational problems	Because of their senior level position, male allies have the benefit of seeing across business units, and seeing the big-picture issues facing the organization. This enables them to anticipate and capitalize upon changes that they choose to make, acting either in their own self interests or in the interest of the organization.	Use that perspective by bringing male allies together to share their expertise, and tackle additional problems that are important to them beyond gender equity. For example, discuss their own struggles to be involved fathers or the challenge to reach and maintain a work-life balance.



Personal and referent power: people who are attractive, socially adept; people want to work with you or be like you	Individual male allies may or may not have this source of power.	Create a 'status' association with being a male ally and part of an important cohort; have a charismatic leader/owner of this initiative who other men want to be affiliated with; provide special opportunities for male allies to get together, to connect, to build their network between themselves and other senior leaders.
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### Recommendations for Practitioners in Organizations

As leaders in organizations contemplate launching male ally initiatives, they often begin by determining the degree to which gender inequity currently exists (Latimer et al., 2019; Madsen, Townsend, & Scribner, 2020). Having looked at the numbers of women present at each level in the leadership hierarchy, rarely are senior leaders surprised to see the decreasing number of women in the top levels of the hierarchy. Many have long recognized and actually attempted to increase those numbers by advancing individual women through mentoring and sponsorship. Organizations may also examine how gender-inequity is maintained by current organizational systems and practices. Every system along the typical career path (from recruitment to hiring to the distribution of high-visibility assignments and promotions) has the potential to be impacted by gender assumptions and unconscious bias. Often practices that appear gender-neutral (i.e., meetings at 7AM or all-nighters to meet deadlines) may disadvantage women in invisible and unintentional ways. "Second generation" gender issues, which include work cultures and practices that reflect 'masculine values and the life situations of men', can create barriers for women and people of color (Fletcher, 1999; Trefalt, et al., 2011). Identifying these practices, rules and norms help identify where the work needs to be done and what changes to the organizational context could lead towards gender-equity.

From the political frame perspective, we urge leaders to add this critical question: are men, who have benefitted from these organizational practices, ready to change those practices and possibly diminish their advantage in doing so?

To ascertain male readiness, the organization needs to engage in conversations with senior men in three capacities. The first is to help them see and understand the contextual practices that disadvantage women; and to help them see and understand the organizational benefits of removing those barriers, not just to women but to all employees. Doing so contributes to motivating them to act on behalf of gender equity so that it's not seen as a zero-sum game (Salter & Migliacco, 2019). Kimmel (2018) wrote about his work in a global insurance company where he worked with men focused on supporting one another. They encouraged each other to acknowledge, strategize and get emotional support for dealing with family issues, such as sick children. A year later the men reported higher levels of job satisfaction. Kimmel proposed that concurrently these men also developed a critical insight into the context women found themselves trying to exercise leadership while dealing with

families, and the organizational practices (i.e., no sick care days) that prevented them from doing so.

However, explicit conversations also need to address the issues of power, privilege and advantage. It is only when men recognize their power in both maintaining the status quo and in changing it that their commitment to foster gender-equitable practices will be authentic (Salter & Migliacco, 2019; Lund, Meriläinen, & Tienari, 2019; Warren, Samit, & Warren, 2021). We have found that just providing our definition of male ally that overtly names power elicits an unsettled reaction and discussion: what is your response to being named as having power? what does the word 'power' conjure up for you? what power do you have? from where does it originate? in what ways does your power advantage you? what may happen to your power as the barriers to senior leadership are reduced?

A final suggestion for male allies is to encourage them to use an intersectionality lens not just to understand the experiences of women; they may also look at their own work experiences with a more nuanced perspective. An intersectionality lens requires that men acknowledge their multiple identities. Some of these identities (like gender) confer privileges but there are identities that handicap them too. For example, in our work with senior executives, identity dimensions that they believe may possibly put them at a disadvantage are the type of school they attended, their socioeconomic status, and even their height. Reflecting on the experiences when they have felt in a "power under" position may allow them to empathize with women and better understand their organizational experiences. This kind of understanding is a necessary catalyst to communicate the importance of male allies using their power to interrupt systems that lead to gender inequity.

Our last recommendation is to include women when launching male ally initiatives. Organizational leaders need to have conversations with women who need to be receptive collaborators with male allies in working towards gender equity. As we learned from listening to the women in the university's executive education programs, women need to wrestle with 'gender gatekeeping', and not see men as benefactors, white knights or saviors, all of which reinforce their low-power position. Instead, women need to recognize that while male allies bring the necessary power to change the institutionalized systems of advantage/disadvantage, it is women leaders who need to embrace, support, and validate those efforts.

## Recommendation for Future Research

Our work with men and women in gender-equity efforts has prompted us to explore, through qualitative research, and the use of established models, such as Bolman and Deal, as platforms for critical thinking, what role the concept of power plays in male ally initiatives. However, as with most research, the more we learn the more questions arise. Some of the questions that will guide our future research, and we anticipate the research of other scholars include: How might we understand both the men and women involved in gender-equity efforts in more nuanced ways? How does the dynamic of intersectionality push us to recognize people's multiple social identities and the subsequent conveying of advantage and disadvantage to male allies and women inside organizations?

How might power as a component in male ally initiatives be regarded differently across world cultures? In our own work we found that U.S. male allies felt slightly more comfortable with both the concept of their power as well as the responsibilities for change being placed on those at the top of their organizations. With the great variability of the concept of power across world cultures, global organizations implementing male ally initiatives may need to identify how to appeal to men to step up into the male ally position differentially based on how gender-equity is perceived and enacted in their culture.

Finally, our contribution to the literature has been to explore and emphasize the need to pay attention to the political frame (with its acknowledgement of power and competition as an inevitable dynamic in organizations) when rolling out HR initiatives, such as male allies. Yet we also anticipate that there will be implications for the symbolic and structural frames as well. How might leaders shift the culture to one more gender-equitable through the use of narratives, symbols, and structure? How might they use changes in structure to 'freeze' organizational changes that prevent the inevitable backsliding? And overarching all efforts, how might we measure the impact of different strategies?

## Conclusion

The use of male allies as a strategy in fostering gender-equitable organizations provides great promise in chipping away at the stubborn gap in female leadership. In this paper we propose that organizations cannot overlook the need to address the power and political dynamics when rolling out male ally Human Resource initiatives. Ignoring the power that male allies are asked to share for the good of the entire organization while still rewarding individual contributions (achieved through a dogged commitment to their own agendas) will not result in organizational change. HR good-for-organizations initiatives must be balanced by political issues and power. We ignore those dynamics at the peril of ineffectiveness.

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