Research & Policy Brief

UTAH WOMEN & LEADERSHIP Project

Strategies that Male Allies Use to Advance Women in the Workplace

Although Utah research[1] has shown that there has been slight progress in terms of women and leadership in some sectors, national sources[2] continue to rank Utah as one of the worst states for women's equality. Clearly there is still work to be done to "move the needle" so that more Utah women become leaders. Research continues to show that most managers and top leadership teams do not fully realize the value of having women in key positions.[3] Yet, organizations benefit more when both women and men hold top positions in all types of settings (e.g., business, government, political, nonprofit, education, religious, and community).[4]

One way to support and advance women in organizational settings is to study the elements, strategies, and interventions that appear to be working. One of many critical elements is the role that men play as allies and advocates for women. The purpose of this brief is to share the findings of a recent study that was designed to identify behaviors and strategies men utilize in workplace settings that are perceived to be effective in supporting and advancing women. This is important because as organizations and communities work to address this issue, they can design effective strategies, trainings, and resources that will help more women advance.

Study Background

The Utah Women & Leadership Project (UWLP) research team collected data for this study during July and August of 2018. Participants were recruited through the UWLP monthly newsletter and leads and/or newsletter notices from Chambers of Commerce and women's networks or organizations in Utah. We received 461 responses, but many were not complete. Hence, we utilized 265 completed surveys, with 181 (68.3%) women and 84 (31.7%) men responding.

In terms of demographics, the age of participants was spread fairly equally among those in their 20s (21.2%), 30s (26.9%), 40s (26.1%), and 50 and older (25.8%). Most of the participants had bachelor's degrees (36.7%) or master's degrees and higher (55.3%). Further, 74.6% of those who answered the demographic questions self-identified as married, 88.5% as Caucasian, and 78% as members of The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints. In terms of location, 41.8% worked in the Salt Lake area, 38.4% in Utah County, and the rest in other parts of the state. Next, 43.6% of respondents said they were in education settings, 34.5% in business, and the rest in government, nonprofit, or other types of work environments. Finally, 17.7% identified themselves as top leaders, 25.3% as managers, 35% as professionals, and 9.3% as individual contributors, supervisors, or support staff.

It is important to note that data were most likely collected from individuals who were interested in the topic. For example, men who responded likely consider themselves to be either male allies or those who want to become allies. Women who responded appeared to be a mix of women who already see or would like to see more men engaged in advancing women.

The following research questions were explored, and the sections below will present the findings to the study:
1. [Men]: What behaviors and strategies have you or other men been engaged in that have been helpful in the professional development and advancement of women?
2. [Women]: What behaviors and strategies have men been engaged in that have been helpful to you and other women in their professional development and advancement?
3. [All]: What are the gender differences in perceptions of problems, support, opportunities, and the environment and culture around advancing women in Utah?

Men's Perceptions: How Utah's Male Allies Advance Women

Men's Behaviors and Strategies

In this study, men were asked to share behaviors and strategies they used, or that they had seen other men use, that they perceived were helpful in the professional development and advancement of women in the workplace. Eighty men responded to at least one of three questions in this section of the survey, and their comments were analyzed and coded to separate unique strategies or ideas. Five primary themes emerged from the data (in rank order of the most commonly mentioned):

1. Developmental Relationships. Mentoring was by far the most significant aspect that men identified as supporting women's leadership, mentioned by 61.3% of the respondents. As mentors, men would share their own leadership development stories, were available to answer questions, and conveyed to women confidence in their ability to succeed. One participant noted, "I make sure I communicate my confidence in her ability to accomplish the mission, and how well I believe she will succeed." As mentors, men would help with career planning by identifying possible advancement opportunities and encouraging women to apply for promotions.

   The men recognized they could use their "clout" to ensure more representation of women. One way was through sponsorship of women by encouraging the organization to consider and promote more women into leadership. When men in leadership supported the mentoring and sponsorship of women, they modeled advocacy. People in the organization

noticed this, and it made a big impact on the organizational culture. One participant shared, "You see others notice that he [a leader] is taking an interest in this area, and it causes them to also want to change."

2. HR (Human Resources) Processes. The practices and procedures that organizations use to recruit, hire, promote, and retain employees as pivotal opportunities to support the advancement of women was ranked second at 52.5%. Survey participants frequently called out the need to be proactive in making sure women were included in applicant pools. Some noted how they had personally ensured there was a diverse list of candidates from which to fill open positions, or they made sure qualified women were among the finalists to be interviewed. Some even decided to extend postings for open positions until there were enough qualified female applicants.

The gender wage gap also emerged as a theme. These men were cognizant that an intentional effort was needed by individuals and organizations to ensure gender parity in pay. Some pointed to the wage-negotiation process, recognizing that this may be more difficult for women and could be a contributor to pay inequity.

Male allies also valued a balance of work and personal life. They shared that "regardless of an employee's gender, marital status, sexual orientation, etc., [. . .] we all have family and need to attend to our family needs and obligations." They had adopted family-friendly practices that focused on flexibility. As a result, they felt they were able to better retain talented women as well as men.

3. Leadership Development. Half of the respondents (50.0%) felt a key strategy they had used to support women advancing was providing leadership development opportunities. Some ensured organizational leadership programs maintained at least 50% of the spots for women. Others paid for conferences or made sure women had access to training to advance their skill sets and career opportunities. They consistently encouraged women to continue pursuing their formal education, noting that "education is an undeniably important ticket to advancement."

Providing access to special projects or assignments was also considered important to women's leadership development, particularly if these assignments provided visibility and interaction with members of the organization's senior leadership. One participant noted, "I've found that the accumulation of smaller leadership experiences does more to solidify the person's leadership persona than a single, large-exposure or giant project." Intentionally targeting job assignments that provided opportunities for women to stretch or grow their skills was seen as valuable to their development and advancement, particularly when those assignments were augmented with regular coaching.

4. Recognition. Acknowledging the work and efforts of women was a strategy mentioned by 42.5% of the men. This included publicly acknowledging the contributions of female colleagues on joint projects. When male allies received recognition on successfully completing difficult projects, they made sure to point out the important leadership and contributions of the women on the team. Others would intentionally invite successful women to share their stories to recognize and normalize the presence of women in leadership. They paid attention to the order of names listed for recognition of projects, reports, or academic articles, and gave appropriate credit to women.

Another component of recognition was ensuring that women's voices were heard. One ally shared that he would call out "when the perspective of a woman has not been recognized or has been repeated by a man without acknowledgement that a woman already had said something." These male allies would actively create situations where women would have a voice in decision-making conversations. They noticed how common it was for men to interrupt or talk over women. They made a conscious effort to call out those behaviors to ensure that women had opportunities to talk.

5. Treating Women as Equals. Finally, the intentional effort to treat women as equals was a point 37.5% of the male allies made. Several felt they treated men and women the same, noting it was important to them not to treat people differently because of their gender. Yet, they also realized it was sometimes necessary for them to help other men realize gendered biases and assumptions, such as asking the only woman in the room to take notes for the meeting or questioning a woman's ability to balance work and life (e.g., parenting) without questioning a man's ability to do the same.

The men also noted how organizational culture made a difference, and they were aware of the impact gendered language and gendered management practices had on reinforcing unconscious bias against women leaders. They felt it was helpful when organizations openly addressed situations when anyone (man or woman) suggested that someone was incapable of doing a job because of their gender.

Ideas for Additional Strategies

Men were also asked whether they had any other ideas that men (peers, supervisors, managers, and leaders) could do in the workplace to support and advance women. They offered the following:

1. Fairness Is Key. A significant number of men (43.8%) in this study noted that women in the workplace should be treated with dignity and respect. To help women participate on a level playing field, one respondent stated, "Behaviors such as fairness, openness, kindness, encouragement, and support should be shown to all peers, supervisors,

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managers, and leaders." They appreciated that women just want the same opportunities as their male peers. This included access to mentoring and development opportunities and assurance that workplace discussions are held in mutually accessible locations. It was also suggested that managers could actively support a healthy work-life balance for all employees.

2. Addressing Gendered Perceptions and Biases. Almost a third of male respondents (31.3%) acknowledged the important role they played in helping other men realize how their actions may be discriminating against women. They shared the need to address inherent inequities that are built into the system and to call out unconscious biases that "stack the deck against women." They felt that men should be more aware of how gender impacts women's work experiences and realize that the advancement of women was not a women's issue but rather an organizational issue. They called on organizations to be more proactive by training their hiring managers to understand the impact of implicit bias on hiring decisions. These male allies also acknowledged that peers, supervisors, managers, and leaders need to take an active role in calling out bullying and patronizing behaviors to ensure that women are treated as colleagues and workplace equals rather than as subordinates.

3. Looking to the Long Game. Finally, 26.3% of the men pointed to the future and the overall shortage of good leaders. They called for increasing leadership diversity by investing in the development of women. They recommended that women be intentionally exposed to learning more of the business operations, how decisions are made, and how upper management evaluates business opportunities. Leaders and managers could ensure that women had equal opportunities to chair committees or taskforces, which would provide women valuable leadership experiences while also helping the organization become accustomed to seeing women in leadership roles. As one participant noted, "Leaders and managers need to set the tone for others in the company that women have a place in leadership."

Women's Perceptions: How Utah's Male Allies Advance Women

Men's Behaviors and Strategies

The survey questions for women in our study were similar to those asked of men. Women were asked to share ways men had helped them advance personally as well as behaviors or strategies they had seen men use to help other women. Of the 181 completed surveys of female participants, 163 included answers to open-ended questions, and these were analyzed in order to determine the most relevant themes. Many behaviors and strategies mentioned by women were similar to those mentioned by men. Yet, despite the overlap, there were differences in the frequency that the top themes were mentioned, in addition to some nuances in tone and varied emphases between men's and women's responses generally. The top five themes mentioned by women were are follows:

1. Developmental Relationships. The powerful and positive influence that male allies could have as sponsors and mentors, be that from more experienced colleagues or from peers, was listed in a large majority (78.5%) of women's responses. In addition to many of the behaviors and strategies mentioned above by male respondents, women specifically noted the benefit they received as well-connected men introduced them to individuals within their own networks. One respondent said this was "probably the most crucial and valuable" way a male ally had supported her. Women also mentioned the high-quality, "power" connections they gained with the support of male allies, including influencers and potential clients. These are elements of the role of "sponsor" rather than "mentor."

Access to honest, specific, and timely feedback was another benefit that women reported. Their allies did not hesitate to give praise or correction when warranted, which women felt was key to their learning and growth. This relates to another quality women appreciated from male mentors, which was their humility and willingness to take responsibility for their own mistakes. Overall, women agreed with the men who took our survey that one of the most powerful ways male allies can advance women is through developmental relationships of various kinds and at all levels (e.g., advisor, coach, developer, encourager, mentor, role model, sponsor, and supporter).

2. Recognition. The second most frequently mentioned theme, noted by 73% of female respondents, was the idea that receiving recognition (both publicly and privately) from male allies was key to their professional progress. Women appreciated nominations for awards and promotions, kudos for jobs well done, and clear credit for their ideas (which can easily be overlooked in settings where women have less visibility). They appreciated men who made sure they had a seat at the table so their voices and ideas would be heard. Yet, in addition to public recognition, women also mentioned how powerful it was for men to recognize their ideas and contributions even in private settings. Several women shared feelings of validation when men really listened to them and acknowledged the value they brought to their organizations.

Related to the idea of recognition is the potential male allies have for helping women develop confidence in their professional lives. One woman said an ally supported her by "helping me see myself as the confident and capable leader I am. Women tend not to see themselves in these roles and sometimes lack the confidence." Another said that allies had helped her to "see that my skills could be applied in ways I didn't even know existed." Another woman said, "Because they believe in me, it has helped me believe in myself." Whether the recognition of women's abilities and contributions comes in public or in one-on-one settings, women acknowledged its power in their overall growth and success.

3. <u>Challenging Gender Discrimination and Treating Women as Equals</u>. The third most common theme among female respondents was challenging gender discrimination in all forms and treating women as equals, which was mentioned by 53.4% of women in the study. A number of female respondents stated that they did not want special treatment, and that doing their job very well, being respected and advanced on their own merits, and being judged by the same standards as men was essential for lasting success. However, many comments from women mentioned personal and specific barriers they felt they must overcome in order to be in a position where they could compete on a level playing field. Men in our study also noted this in their responses, but the level of detail and frustration shared by women in telling these stories was significant.

Women's responses concerning discrimination ranged from accounts of seemingly minor slights and microaggressions to serious instances of sexual harassment. A large number of women reported their own personal experiences with gender discrimination and others they had witnessed. A few examples include "be aware of the ways women are perceived as aggressive, emotional, bossy;" "don't call women crazy;" "never make a woman the butt of a joke;" and "men need to stop objectifying us." One woman stated, "Unless men truly understand how pervasive and serious a problem gender bias is, nothing will change." Of course, women's personal experiences with gender bias will differ greatly from men's. It seemed clear from women's responses that they perceived these biases as being both a significant impediment to their success and confidence, as well as an important place for men to use their influence as allies.

4. <u>Leadership/Professional Development.</u> Just under half (46%) of the women respondents mentioned leadership and/or professional development as a key strategy used by male allies, and many of the specifics they identified were also reflected in the men's responses. Women noted that men had helped them in seeking professional development opportunities, including ongoing training and higher education, and they appreciated men who advocated for them to secure the necessary resources and funding to realize these opportunities. Female respondents also recognized in many cases that men were in the position to assign tasks and projects, and they appreciated men who gave them strategic chances to develop their skills, build their capacity, and take risks. This included presenting at conferences, co-authoring articles, or completing other critical "benchmark" activities within their own fields. Finally, numerous women mentioned how beneficial it was when male allies had given them opportunities to lead, whether within formal leadership roles, or in other, less structured settings, both within their own workplaces and beyond. One woman stated, "[He] has provided me the opportunity to find a passion for leadership in higher education and in my community."

5. <u>HR Processes.</u> Finally, the importance of HR processes and procedures specifically designed to facilitate women's professional wellbeing was mentioned by 27% of women. Women recognized many of the same factors as men did, such as inclusive recruiting; proactive advancement efforts; and transparent, progressive salary goals. Women also noted frequently, and, in some cases emphatically, how vitally important workplace policies surrounding flexible work, childcare, pregnancy considerations, and parental leave can be in retaining and advancing women. Although these factors were also mentioned by men, the tone with which women respondents addressed these issues was much more personal, noting that these challenges usually affect women more than men, as many women bear much of the responsibility for unpaid work in families. Several women shared stories of male allies who had gone to great lengths to support them at work while they were facing challenges in their personal lives, and by so doing had made it possible for them to continue to progress professionally.

Additional Thoughts

In addition to these top five themes, several additional ideas emerged when women were asked if they had other thoughts about male allies in the workplace:

Many women (20.9%) mentioned the need to help male allies be more aware of the wide variety of issues related to women's professional success. One woman stated, "I think a lot of men really want to help women in their organization succeed, but so many of the challenges that women face are invisible to men." Women echoed and emphasized sentiments from the men about needing to be more informed on how to support women at work, stating that many men had good intentions but low awareness of gender issues and how to best address them. Some ideas included creating safe spaces for open conversations about related issues, encouraging all employees to learn more about unconscious biases, and fostering a willingness to change.

A number of women also noted an apparent generational difference when it came to male allies' support, with younger men being more likely to take it as a given that women's professional success was important. Others mentioned how beneficial it is when men publicly prioritize their own work-life balance and "discourage the idea that more hours equals better." Finally, several women also stated they appreciated it when men demanded the best from them: "high expectations [create] a culture in which women excel."

Qualitative Research Summary

The following is a summary of the top themes that emerged from all participants on effective behaviors or strategies men

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can use to support the advancement of women in workplace settings (see Table 1).

Table 1: Specific Strategies Men Can Use to Support Women's Leadership

Themes	Description
Addressing Gendered Perceptions & Biases	Increase awareness of how gender impacts women's work experiences, see advancement of women as an organizational issue, and call out bullying and patronizing behaviors that subordinate women.
Challenging Gender Discrimination	Become proactive in recognizing and working to eliminate all forms of discriminatory and sexist behavior; understand that such experiences can be pervasive and deeply troubling for many women, which can impact their self-confidence.
Developmental Relationships	Intentionally mentor, support, encourage, and advocate for women in the workplace.
Fairness Is Key	Provide to women the same opportunities that are offered to male peers, including mentoring and developmental assignments; support healthy work-life balance for all employees.
HR Processes	Proactively include women candidates in all hiring and promotion opportunities, ensure gender balance on hiring committees, and monitor wages for pay equity.
Leadership & Professional Development	Identify "stretch" assignments that provide women visibility to executive leaders, encourage women to pursue additional education, and support women receiving leadership development training.
Looking to the Long Game	Intentionally expose women to business operations and management decisions, assign women to chair committees and task forces, and set expectations that women have a place in leadership.
Raising Awareness	Make deliberate efforts to help more men understand barriers many professional women face; encourage open dialogue and a willingness to change perceptions and behaviors.
Recognition	Recognize (both publicly and privately) the efforts and contributions of women, including their ideas and work products; actively include women's voices in discussions and decisions.
Treating Women as Equals	Call out gendered biases and assumptions; initiate conversations about unconscious bias and its impact in the workplace.

Many of the strategies found in this study were also highlighted earlier this year by 25 men who gathered for a "think tank" discussion on this topic hosted by the Utah Women & Leadership Project. An information sheet titled "What Male Allies Can Do to Strengthen the Impact of Utah Women in Workplace Settings" is available.[5]

In addition to the strategies highlighted in Table 1, two striking concerns or factors were noted by both male and female study participants. First, Utah's distinct religious culture was mentioned by a number of respondents. Twenty women (12.3% of all those who answered any open-ended question) expressed the notion that a significant source of inequity in workplace settings is an outgrowth of Utah's religious culture specifically, with the idea that meaningful change in business settings would only come as a result of similar changes in public attitudes about women within a religious context. A small percentage of male respondents (2.5%) made similar comments. In addition to responses that mentioned the religious climate specifically, other comments referred more generally to the challenge that Utah's conservative, traditional culture can be for women looking to advance and excel professionally.

A final interesting factor was the number of women who reported (in some cases with explicit regret) that they had never received any support from male colleagues themselves or witnessed this in others. Thirteen women (8.0% of respondents) said they had no experience with support from men professionally, and four men (5.0%) also said they had never helped women specifically. Conversely, there were comments from a few men (6.3%) expressing some frustration with women's advancement efforts in general, such as, "I have found it offensive when my gender or race has been held against me in corporate trainings," and "the focus on women should not be so strong that men start to feel discriminated against."

Gender Differences in Perceptions

Ten quantitative questions were asked about the problems, support, opportunities, and culture around advancing women in Utah. The questions and statistical means for females (F) and males (M) are found in Table 2. The scale used was 1 (strongly disagree) through 7 (strongly agree). After running statistical tests, we found that there was a significant difference between the means for the women and the men. For all questions, women and men as a whole responded differently, with women believing there is a more serious problem than do men. For example, for the question "Men in Utah are supportive of women in workplace settings," women slightly disagreed, while men slightly agreed. For the question, "Utah men care about advancing women in workplace settings," women slightly disagreed while the mean for men was about neutral.

According to the results of this study, Utah women believe that there is a greater problem with women's advancement in workplaces than men do. Women feel men are less supportive, care less about the issues, and are engaged less than men think they are. It is important to remember that the men who took this survey were some of the most supportive men in Utah related to these issues. Hence, if the sample had included a broader representation of the general population of men in Utah, there most likely would have been an even greater spread between the statistical means highlighted in Table 2. Including a broader representation of women could have changed the overall statistical means for the women as well.

Table 2: Gender Differences in Perceptions of Support and Efforts Toward Advancing Women in Utah

Questions	F	M
1. Men in Utah are supportive of women in workplace settings.	3.51	4.48
2. Utah men care about advancing women in workplace settings.	3.12	4.24
3. Men in my organization are engaged in efforts to advance women.	4.10	5.51
4. Men in my organization feel threatened (or would feel threatened) by efforts to increase the number of women in leadership.	3.95	2.83
5. Lots of work still needs to be done in Utah to raise awareness of the importance of women in leadership roles.	6.23	5.66
6. I see positive changes in the state in bringing awareness to these issues.	4.20	4.93
7. I see positive changes in the state in terms of providing training and development on these issues.	3.79	4.43
8. More men will care about these issues if more training and development opportunities are provided.	4.46	4.93
9. I think things are fine in the state in terms of gender issues.	1.71	2.54
10. More public policies (laws) need to be created or changed to address these types of issues in Utah.	4.71	3.60

There were some interesting statistical correlations as well. *First,* married individuals had statistically stronger views for questions 1, 2, 3, and 9. This means that married people felt men were doing better to support women than single, divorced, and widowed participants. For example, married respondents were more likely to agree that things are fine in the state in terms of gender issues (question 9). Single participants were more likely to agree that men in their organizations feel threatened by efforts to increase the number of women in leadership (question 4). *Second,* in terms of religion, respondents who were *not* members of The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints agreed more strongly that there is lots of work to be done to raise awareness of the importance of women in leadership roles (question 5). Members of The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints did not agree or agreed less that Utah needs more public policies and laws regarding these issues. *Third,* the higher the leadership position the participant had, the fewer changes they have seen in the state in bringing awareness to these issues (question 6) or in providing training and development on these issues (question 7). *Fourth,* the more education a respondent had, the more he or she agreed that there is still lots of work to be done on these issues (question 5) and that things are not fine in the state on these issues (question 9).

Conclusion

This brief has shared the results of a recent study that explored the behaviors and strategies that Utah men use in workplace settings that effectively support and advance women. Past research has clearly shown that organizations of all kinds will increasingly thrive when both men and women hold management and leadership roles and work together.[6] Yet, this will not happen in Utah unless more men become thoughtful and strategic allies and advocates for women. Just as in the late 1800s and early 1900s, when Utah men were some of the most supportive of women's advancement in that era (e.g., suffrage, education, sharing opportunities with women to speak in public), Utah can again become nationally recognized for the way men and women work together for the common good. And as we join forces to improve the status of women in the state, we will benefit families and strengthen the positive impact of both women and men in their communities and the state as a whole.

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