

ADVOCATING FOR WOMEN OF COLOR



“I believe corporate America can be the people who save the soul of America.”

—Dr. Bernice A. King

10 Actions to Support Women of Color

Dr. Bernice A. King states in this thought-provoking [interview](#) with Caroline Fairchild, “I believe corporate America can be the people who save the soul of America.” As a corporate gender strategist, I believe Corporate America can play an instrumental role in supporting and advancing all under-represented groups.

In fact, it must.

As Dr. King reminds us, “Corporate America consists of all of us. We’re their patrons. We’re their customers. They have a responsibility to humanity, not just as a corporate citizen and an entity that has the right and the free market enterprise to make money, but also a role and responsibility to invest in the people and invest in the uplifting of that and the fairness of society.”

It’s time for advocates to step up.

The challenge is that most companies and employees don’t know how to start. Most lack truly integrated strategies to advance all women, let alone women of color* specifically. In fact, in my gender advocacy work over the past 20 years, I’m shocked by the number of white men (and white women) in leadership positions who don’t even have 10 women of color in their work or friendship groups, not to mention on their leadership teams.

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I firmly believe that progressive companies are starting to make headway, slowly. The two things that are missing are a sense of urgency and more vocal and visible support for advancing women of color. This is where advocates need to step up. Because even self-proclaimed advocates are not doing enough.



McKinsey & Company and LeanIn.Org recently released their 2020 state of women in corporate America [report](#), Women in the Workplace 2020. This annual report examines more than 350 of the largest companies on the planet and what they are doing to advance all women. Almost 50 percent of this year’s report focused on the unique challenges faced by women of color. One of the most alarming pieces of data was the fact the even self-proclaimed advocates for advancing women of color were falling short.

The research points out that 61 percent of men and 65 percent of women say they are allies for women of color at work. However, when pressed for actions they take, the results came up short.

*The term “Women of Color” in this context incorporates the Catalyst definition from its February 2021 women of color [research](#) and builds on it to be both inclusive and to acknowledge the different experiences and backgrounds of people who are Black, Brown or African American, Hispanic or Latina, Asian, American Indian and Alaska Native, Native Hawaiian and Other Pacific Islander, along with Women of Color who identify as Trans and Gender Non-Binary.

ALLY ACTION	MEN	WOMEN
Actively listen to personal stories about bias and mistreatment	32%	52%
Publicly acknowledge and give credit for work and ideas	34%	45%
Actively confront discrimination when I see it	32%	35%
Take a public stand to support racial equality	26%	32%
Mentor or sponsor one or more women of color	8%	12%



If advocates are not visibly and vocally committing to individual actions, then how can we expect the rest of the organization to do so?

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A [study](#) conducted by the Center for Talent Innovation (now CoQual) in December 2019 found that “Black professionals are more likely to encounter prejudice and microaggressions than any other racial or ethnic group. They are less likely than their white counterparts to have access to senior leaders and support from their managers. Yet few white professionals see what their Black colleagues are up against. Sixty-five percent of Black professionals say that Black employees have to work harder in order to advance, but only 16 percent of their white colleagues agree with that statement.”

Specifically, the study found that:

- Black professionals are nearly four times as likely as white professionals to say they have experienced racial prejudice at work (58 versus 15 percent). Regional differences are stark: 79 percent of Black professionals in the Midwest say they have experienced racial prejudice at work, compared to 66 percent of Black professionals in the West, 56 percent in the South, and 44 percent in the Northeast.
- 43 percent of Black executives have heard colleagues use racially insensitive language in their presence.
- Nearly 1 in 5 (19 percent) Black professionals feel that someone of their race/ethnicity would never achieve a top position at their companies, compared to only 3 percent of white professionals who feel this way.
- Black women are less likely to have access to the same support and advocacy as white women. For instance, 35 percent of white women have individuals in their networks who have advocated for their ideas and skills, compared to 19 percent of Black women.

These issues, of course, are not just focused on Black women. Other women of color are faced with similar issues.

The McKinsey/LeanIn data also pointed out that:

- 1 Latina and Black women ask for promotions/raises as often as white women but get fewer promotions and are paid less for similar work.
- 2 For every 100 men promoted to manager, only 85 women were promoted—and this gap was even larger for some women: Only 58 Black women and 71 Latinas were promoted.
- 3 37 percent of Asian women believe their gender will make it harder to get a raise or promotion in the future.
- 4 Black women are twice as likely as overall women to cover. (Covering is the inability to bring their entire selves to the workplace. This includes elements of language, hair, clothing and dozens of other elements that force them to cover to “fit in”).
- 5 Women of color are 150 percent more likely to say they don’t have strong allies.

Additionally, the “Only” experience is still common in most companies. One in five women say they are often the “Only” women in the room in most meetings and workplaces in general. This is an even greater challenge for women of color. More than 80 percent of Onlys report significantly higher instances of microaggressions and sexual harassment.

The data is overwhelming and can be no longer ignored. It is time for everyone who calls themselves an advocate for women, or who is a member of some affiliation of an employee resource group to stand up and be active advocates.

It's REALLY time for advocates to step up for women of color.

I'm calling on all advocates to step up. If you're a member of any type of employee resource group, it's time to step up. If you're a self-proclaimed advocate for women, it's time to step up. If you're a father, brother, spouse or parent who wants a better future for your daughters (and sons), you must step up and realize that if you're not advocating for women of color, you're hurting the chances of all women to advance, including those in your life.

Also, realize that staying silent or choosing to do nothing is not a choice. If you do, you are, by the nature of this work, complicit in holding back not just women of color but all women.

Finally, I'm asking you to share this information with a friend or a colleague whom you believe wants to help. Each of us has a sphere of influence. The people in your sphere watch your actions (and inactions), value and respect your opinion, and look to you for social and professional cues.



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I am asking advocates to take 10 key actions built on four simple themes; Listen, Learn, Lead and Have the Will. These actions are described below. They are also attached as a stand-alone pledge for you to print out and display in your workplace to remind yourself of your commitment.

Advocating for Women of Color

A program from YWomen Corporate Gender Consulting

LISTEN

- **Reach Out and Listen** – I will actively seek out and listen to personal stories about bias and mistreatment in our company. I will be sensitive and genuine in my approach, realizing that not all women of color will be ready to share their experiences. I will resist the urge to compare her experiences with my own experiences at the company.

LEARN

- **Engage With the Research** – I will seek out and examine the research done on the experiences that women of color are having in the workplace. I will find and share current research with my team once a month during the coming year.
- **Mentor and Sponsor** – I will seek out both formal and informal opportunities to serve as a mentor for a woman of color, realizing I will learn as much from her as she will from me. If applicable, I will sponsor her for roles with greater responsibilities.

LEAD

- **Understand My Privilege** – I will acknowledge my privilege as part of a majority group. I will choose to read and learn more about the privileges that I have and talk to other men about privilege.
- **Set an Example to Correct Bias** – I will be mindful of the impact words and actions can have on other people. I will act visibly and vocally to correct microaggressions, such as women being talked over or interrupted in meetings or other actions that serve to exclude or diminish women from conversations and work activities.
- **Actively Confront Discrimination When I See It** – I will support and embrace a workplace of inclusion and zero tolerance for racial discrimination. I will have discussions around the concepts of “Covering” and the “Only” experience. I will support fully inclusive work environments where everyone can bring their whole self to work. I will create teams with diverse members to reduce and eliminate the “Only” experience.

HAVE THE WILL

- **Support Equitable HR Practices for All Levels** – I will deepen my understanding of my company’s HR practices, specifically gender pay equity, hiring and performance reviews. I will investigate whether all levels of the organization are using diverse hiring slates and panels, paying particular attention to first-level roles, and I will work to correct any issues I discover.
- **Encourage Qualified Women to Apply** – I will urge qualified women of color to interview for positions when they become available and champion them with the hiring manager. If I cannot find a qualified candidate, I will commit to developing a woman of color for the next opening.
- **Engage Men and White Women** – I will engage others in the discussion about advancing women of color. I will invite men into the conversation and work to be a constructive part of the solution to secure their interest, engagement and commitment.
- **Be an Advocate** – I will demonstrate my commitment visibly and vocally to support racial equality by committing to all the advocate activities outlined above.



Jeffery Tobias Halter is a gender strategist and the President of [YWomen](#), a strategic consulting company focused on engaging men in women’s leadership advancement. Jeffery is the former Director of Diversity Strategy for The Coca-Cola Company. He is a two-time TEDx speaker and author of two books, including [WHY WOMEN, The Leadership Imperative to Advancing Women and Engaging Men](#). His clients include IBM, Amazon, Bristol-Myers Squibb, and dozens of other Fortune 500 companies.