

Expanding Gender Equity in the Workplace

By Ann N. Gatty, Ph.D.

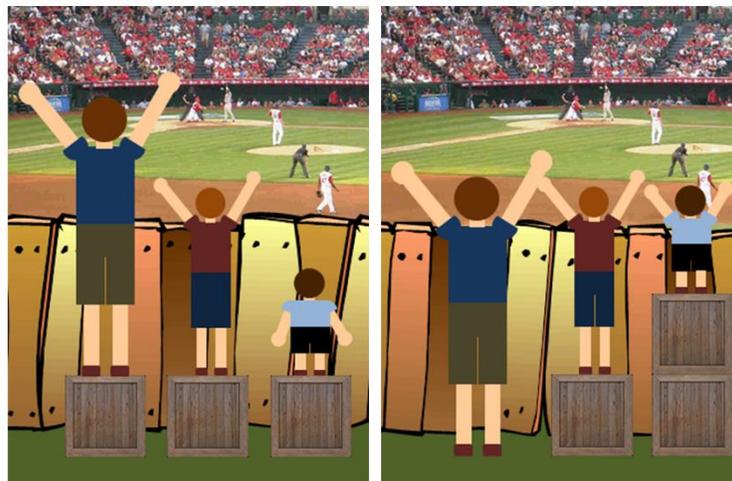


There is much talk about expanding gender equality in the workplace, but the more relevant discussion should focus on expanding gender equity in the workforce. What's the difference between equality and equity? When we speak of equality, we are assuming that everyone starts with the same abilities and encounters the same barriers. Such an assumption denotes that everyone should be treated exactly the same. But is that fair?

Yet, no one brings exactly the same set of attributes to the workplace. Providing a single approach to everyone can cause problems. If you are establishing a one-size-fits-all approach to problem solving, the equal approach produces unequal results. When we speak of equity, we are referring to offering variations of support and/or treatment to achieve greater fairness of outcomes. Goals set in the workplace focus on outcomes, not starting points.

Study upon study indicate that women are equally competent in leadership skills and in productivity achievements. The challenge is not whether women can achieve, it is whether the barriers are removed or adjusted so that they have the opportunity to achieve.

Here is an illustration created by Craig Froehle in 2012. It has been shared thousands of times on the internet. It compares the difference between treating individuals equally and treating them equitably.



In the left image, three people receive the same level of support to watch a baseball game. In other words, they are being treated equally. In the right image, the individuals are provided different levels of support allowing them equal access to watch the game. The desired outcome for everyone's ability to watch the game is achieved. This is equity. But what if we eliminate the fence all together. The fence is the barrier which is causing the accommodations to be necessary. Without the fence, the cause of the inequity would have been removed.

We know that life in the workplace cannot be reduced to viewing a baseball game. The barriers for gender equity in the workplace are usually not limited to physical structures. Many studies document the stalled career trajectory women experience if they take time away from their jobs to have and raise children. This time away from their careers makes re-entry into the workforce difficult as advances in their industries have continued and left the mothers behind.

In the corporate world, the institutional working structures and rules were designed by men throughout the 20th century. As women enter the male-dominated world, some accommodations have been made such as the provision for lactation rooms for nursing mothers—now a requirement by the U.S. Department of Labor. More companies provide extended maternity and paternity leave to their employees. More are revising these to be labeled family leave to allow for those workers who are taking care of their elder family members.

Yet, if business leaders are serious about building organizations that are highly successful over the long run, then there needs to be a shift in how we define success. Millennials are continually pressuring businesses to not only provide reasonable and equal pay for all workers—regardless of gender, race, or creed; they are interested in working for companies whose values include making a positive impact on the world around them.

Establishing a healthy workplace culture includes removing existing barriers that are seen or unseen. Such barriers include work schedules, work locations, value alignment, and project assignments. For example, is it necessary that everyone start work at the exact same time? Do workers always need to work in the same office location or are their possibilities for working remotely?

Obviously, developing a culture that is aligned with the company values is essential; however, that does not require all workers to think and act alike. Diversity in the workplace is healthy. However, for steady growth and continuous improvement, workers need to be offered opportunities to increase their skill sets with stretch projects.

Stretch projects need to be offered to women as well as men. Don't judge women solely on the competence they show, but consider their potential. Unfortunately, many women are averse to ask for such opportunities because they don't want to be seen as self-promoting. One opportunity for career improvement that is in danger for women is mentorship. All professionals benefit from mentors, yet with

the #MeToo movement, there is pushback. Studies are now showing that men are wary of mentoring women because of the possibility that they will be accused of workplace harassment. Such a mindset is bad for everybody.

To enhance gender equity in the workplace, barriers must be eliminated and how work gets done should be rethought. Considering gender equity in the workplace offers business leaders and all professionals a healthy opportunity to improve workplace habits so that we can provide better products and services for our customers and provide model institutions that offer a prescription for others to follow.

About the Author

Dr. Ann Gatty is a business development strategist. She helps her clients clarify the vision for their businesses, boost their leadership capabilities and add quality talent to help the clients reach their goals. Through a collaborative mentoring process, she and her clients create workable strategic business plans and success initiatives, while improving their workplace processes. Dr. Gatty is a frequent writer and contributor www.AllBusiness.com, www.MarketingInsiders.com, and www.WomenOnBusiness.com. Her interactive speaking engagements assist participants in discovering new-found talents and skills that they can immediately apply in the workplace. Join her [Facebook Group, Strategic Thinking Summit Elites](#) for strategies you can implement to grow your business success and enjoy camaraderie with others entrepreneur members.