

Strength in Numbers: Build Healthy Workplace Relationships to Combat Bias

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Diversity, equity, and inclusion (DEI) programs are becoming increasingly common in aviation and other fields, but are not always effective. This paper uses personal anecdotes to illustrate how sexism in organizations, including those with DEI programs, can alienate female employees. Allyship has the power to unite members of an organization's in group and out group and is proposed as a powerful complement to DEI programs.

Recommended Citation:

Baghdasarin, D. (2023). Strength in Numbers: Build Healthy Workplace Relationships to Combat Bias. *International Journal of Aviation Research*, 15(1).

In 2019, Dr. Stephen Rice wrote an article for *Forbes* making a case for increased female representation in aviation. I read this article for the first (but not only) time last year and nodded in agreement until I got to the paragraph about sexist comments. Rice (2019) wrote,

Sexist comments – explicit or implicit – may be spoken out loud or posted to social media and websites where anonymous bigotry thrives. Such attitudes are, sadly, widespread in our society, and female pilots are constantly subjected to them. Even worse, negative comments about female aviators are not limited to the general public, but may at times take root among male aviation professionals, including even within the education field.

This observation resonated with me in an almost rage-inducing way because of how true it is, even in 2021 when academia and industry tout the benefits of diversity, and because it's true for women in different stages of various aerospace careers. Unfortunately, while research indicates diverse organizations have higher levels of innovation, productivity, and profitability (Nakagawa, 2015), diversity and inclusion are difficult to achieve and many companies spend millions of dollars on diversity, equity, and inclusion (DEI) programs each year in vain (Dobbin & Kalev, 2016; Grobman & Ramsey, 2020). Aviation seems to be an industry in which DEI initiatives are not enough, as sexism prevails and alienates women.

I'm still in what I hope is the early stage of a long career, but I remember being encouraged to drop out of college by a well-respected professor because "engineering isn't for women". I remember being thanked for wearing a dress to work – my first engineering job – because it "gave them (presumably the men in the office) something to look at". I remember the nasty comments from my male peers when I got a promotion or any sort of recognition from our managers. It had to be because I acted inappropriately and not because I worked hard and earned it... right? I remember crying at work on an almost daily basis and questioning if I *was* good enough to be an engineer and if I really did only make it so far because I'm female. I remember the fallout from my one and only complaint to HR about inappropriate supervisor conduct and how unsatisfying the so-called disciplinary action (effectively a promotion) was.

When writing a term paper for a graduate school class, I reached out to former female classmates to hear their workplace experiences and found they were a lot like mine. I was both heartbroken for my friends and reassured by the knowledge that I wasn't alone in my misery. More than heartbreak or companionship, though, I found encouragement. These ladies were *excited* to talk about what they had endured. They wanted to be heard and to hear each other's stories. Unfortunately, I didn't support them as effectively as I could have. I wrote the paper, got an A in the class, and never looked back. I continued to move along in my career, failing to make new female friends or find female mentors because I was too wrapped up in my own narrative to foster relationships. Instead, I charged into every meeting with aggression disguised (I thought, anyway) as confidence but really interpreted by others as abrasiveness and immaturity. I downplayed my femininity to avoid unwelcome comments and in the process lost a little bit of myself.

Then, a couple of years ago, the time came to select the topic for arguably the most important paper I will ever author in my career: my dissertation. With the majority of my classmates writing about trendy topics like urban air mobility, unmanned systems, or AR/VR and my own biases as an engineer, I was certain I'd blow everyone away with whatever borderline-engineering research I could masterpiece. It didn't take long for me to throw those notions away

and decide to revisit that paper from grad school. I won't lie and say it was easy. First of all, gender studies are in a way looked down upon by more "technical" people, like engineers. Why study something emotionally-driven and subjective like feminist theory when you could spend your time on something objective and useful like math? In reality, gender studies are incredibly difficult to perform because they involve real people with real feelings. A researcher therefore must be sensitive, professional, but also emotionally resilient. I have never struggled to write anything like I did my literature review. I read daunting statistics, sad story after sad story from women in various non-traditional occupations, and pleas for gender equity spanning decades. I would have given up on this research in the first month if I didn't have the types of relationships that would be beneficial to more women in aviation.

Positive and meaningful relationships are critical in our professional lives as much as they are our personal lives. This may be especially true for women, who view relationships as a source of support while men may see them as a source of competition (Bickel & Clark, 2000). In fact, relationships, in particular mentor-protégé relationships or the presence of role models, consistently emerge in research as contributors to women's decisions to enter or stay in aviation (Clark et al., 2015; Federal Aviation Administration, 1994; Foster, 2003; Germain et al., 2012; Korn Ferry, n.d.; Lancia, 2017; Lutte, 2020; Newcomer et al., 2016). There's less reference in literature to a slightly different relationship, *allyship*, in aviation.

Wells and White (2021) describe *allies* as members of the in group who lobby for the fair treatment of members of the out group. Allies may be motivated by sincere interest in supporting members of the out group, desire to maintain some status for the in group, personal agenda, or personal moral beliefs (Radke et al., 2020). Unlike members of the in group, who could be seen as acting in their own self-interest when calling out discriminatory behavior, members of the out group may be effective in highlight discrimination because they have nothing to gain from doing so and challenge others to think critically about the discrimination (Drury & Kaiser, 2014). Research by Salter and Migliaccio (2019) indicates allies are powerful influencers of organizational culture and, in some instances, have the ability to educate others on minority issues more effectively than minorities. Arguably, anyone with referent power can be an ally, but allies in leadership positions can affect organizational culture through enforcement of zero-tolerance policies and procedures (Schneider et al., 2017).

In the context of this article, men can be very effective allies to women. I can attest to this. I've encountered more allies so far in my career than I have mentors or role models. Some of those allies have actually eventually become mentors or role models. In my time as an undergraduate, I had a handful of professors who encouraged me to continue and excel in such an effective way that no comment about women not belonging in engineering could deter me. I know they will still support me if I reach out for help. My supervisor at my first job is one of the most patient and generous people I have ever had the pleasure to meet and, years after I left the organization, still answers the phone to provide guidance and wisdom. I probably would not be as far along on my doctoral research as I am if it weren't for the advice I received during our conversations. The leads I had in my last team had a very different career start than I did and weren't always comfortable working with women. However, they were the first to set aside whatever they were working on to help me with whatever technical or personnel issue I was struggling with, including that uncomfortable situation that resulted in me talking with HR. Just the other day a senior engineer I had been working with noticed some prejudice I had become accustomed to and stood up for me, resolving an ongoing technical problem that was actually

rooted in personal bias. Strangers and new acquaintances have helped share my current study with their female colleagues who might be interested in participating. All of these individuals are older white men – three very different demographics from my own. Yet, all of them share that sincere interest in improving the aviation workplace for women through not only listening, but acting. This is something I wish I had been better at when I wrote that first paper in grad school.

I'd like to leave you with one last thought. In perhaps one of Aesop's most well-known fables, a father challenges each of his quarreling sons to try to break a bundle of sticks. When the sons are unable to break the bundle, the father hands them individual sticks, which the sons easily snap. Through this analogy, the father (and Aesop) illustrate strength in unity. Many people learn the allegory of the bundle of sticks as children, but fail to apply it as adults. In the workplace, a lack of unity among employees can lead to conflict and adversely affect an organization's performance. Unity is therefore conducive to positive work cultures and productivity, and every organization would theoretically benefit from achieving unity. The aviation industry is attuned to the benefits of unity, and DEI is a prominent feature in the corporate values statements of companies like JetBlue (2021), Lockheed Martin (2021), and United Airlines (2021). This is great, but it's not enough. In 2021, women have opportunities to share their stories as social networking, industry support of gender equity, and research into gender equity in aviation increase. So too do men have opportunities to listen, alter behaviors, and advocate for women. We all share responsibility for creating positive and healthy workplaces; we're each a stick but we must actively choose to be part of a bundle.

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