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Editorial

Supporting successful women in dermatology

William D. James, MD*



Life is full of opportunities to attain your goals. Once you have identified where you want to go, how do you get there? Persistent applications of your gifts is necessary. Collaborating with others will help to assure success. Having a loving partner makes the journey a happy trip and ensures an insightful advisor who shares your aspirations. Conventional wisdom emphasizes that the assistance of a long-term relationship with a person more experienced in issues that are important to you and who is committed to your success is also key. The mentor helps avoid dead ends and roadblocks by guiding the mentee through a complex system while sponsoring her through introductions and recommendations (Johnson and Ridley, 2008; Johnson and Smith, 2016; Williams and Dempsey, 2014).

Dermatology is a field in which women outnumber men at the entry level of residency training. However, advancement through the ranks of academia has not kept pace with expectations. The top leadership positions in departments, as well as in our Academy, are still mostly occupied by men. Women supporting women, leading up, peer mentoring, and the steady use of emotional and academic intelligence may eventually allow women to attain the heights they have earned (Byyny, 2017; Grant, 2013; Sandberg, 2013; Zerzan et al., 2009). However, if men in positions of power provide support to successful women, the pace of advancement can be increased.

How can men provide assistance? First and foremost, they need to speak up. Their words and actions need to reflect respect by strongly emphasizing the importance of diversity to the success of the organization (Johnson and Smith, 2016; Williams and Dempsey, 2014). This needs to be stated in selection committees, promotion committees, and boardrooms. Where diversity is lacking, advocates for improvement must be present and vocal. Leaders who consistently bring to the table recommendations for specific women who possess the needed strengths for specific jobs will not only elevate strong deserving women, but also make their organizations better able to solve problems by ensuring expanded diversity on future work groups and committees (Johnson and Smith, 2016; Williams and Dempsey, 2014).

Much has been written about how certain terms in letters of recommendation may be interpreted differently by selection committees if used to describe men versus women (Williams and

Dempsey, 2014). I agree with these concerns and try to use the main gender neutral descriptions outlined in Figure 1. These descriptions are opposed to terms that describe effort rather than accomplishments, such as hardworking or dependable. Other words to avoid include caring, nurturing, aggressive, delightful, compassionate, woman, lady, mother, wife, warm, and helpful. Also of importance is the use of professional titles and keeping the narrative focused on professional issues. Personal life is no topic for such letters. Finally, try to keep letters of similar length; in general, letters for men are longer.

When supporting women for committees of power and influence, editorial boards, and jobs of high visibility, a discussion encouraging them to take on leadership if offered should be held. Women should understand that they have earned your respect and the confidence that they will do a superior job (Johnson and Smith, 2016). In addition, women will provide a new fresh perspective and serve as a role model of success for younger women. Men should also take advantage of other more frequent and public opportunities to sponsor women. Rather than using “this is Yvette” as a supportive introduction, maybe use “you should be aware of Yvette who is doing great work on . . .” (Williams and Dempsey, 2014). Another important point with regard to introductions is that the same degree of respect and formality should be afforded to each person. I think including the title is best, even if Tara or Tim is a great friend of 20 years; others may not necessarily know this and infer bias from differential respect.

Men are often in a position to issue invitations for guest lectures, visiting professors, or speakers at local or national meetings. Upon review of those invited, an even distribution of men, women, minorities, young up-and-comers, and seasoned sure-bets should be evident.

Once women attain leadership positions, efforts should be made to ensure inclusivity in deliberations. Being among the decision-makers is a necessity, but there is often the need for an ally to help ensure an environment where diversity is welcomed. For women to thrive, active listening to each speaker and respect for the worth of women's contributions is necessary. New proposals and recommendations should be properly assigned. For instance, there is the so-called butterfly or stolen idea, where a woman has a great idea but the leader or group does not react until it is restated by a man (Williams and Dempsey, 2014). An acknowledgement that the idea was first Rosario's may be indicated by saying, “I'm glad you picked up on Rosario's proposal, Jim” or could be

* Corresponding Author.

E-mail address: William.james@uphs.upenn.edu

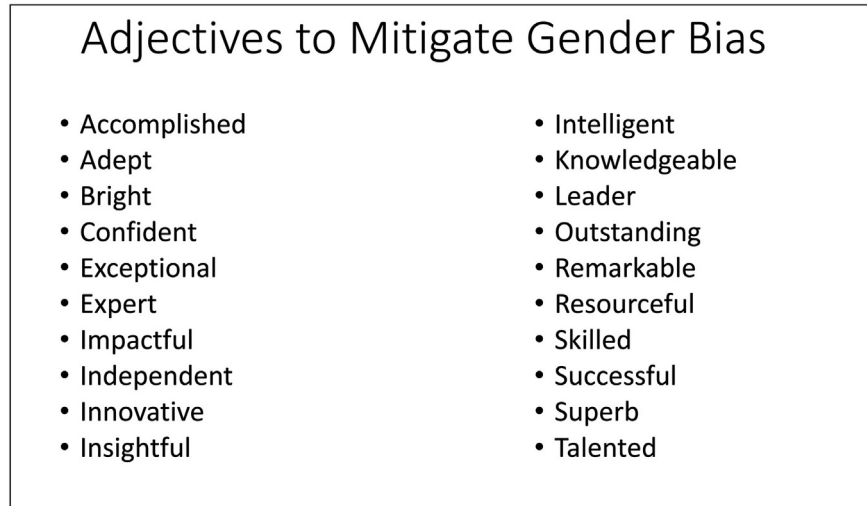


Fig. 1. Adjective to mitigate gender bias.

stated another way: “You are right, Joe, I’ve been thinking about it since Rosario proposed it” (Williams and Dempsey, 2014).

Another method to address the need for inclusivity in meetings is to not tolerate interruptions (men more frequently do this, and often to women). LaShawn should be able to state her idea clearly and fully, just as George expects to be heard. If a discussion is being dominated, a good way to allow quiet attendees with excellent ideas to state them is to ask for input from someone who has not spoken yet, or to ask for comments from one person or from the other side of the room.

When in a public situation, varying gender, minority, or other characteristics in examples, photographs, or stories makes everyone feel included and respected. Likewise, using the pronouns “she or he” when speculating about how a chairperson might react is preferred.

Microaggression, or less commonly overtly disrespectful comments, may not only derail discourse but undermine the current and future progress of a group. Strongly speaking up publicly is necessary. Direct, to-the-point callouts of clearly biased or discriminatory comments, echoed by others in the room, with an admonishment that such derisive and divisive remarks are not tolerated is needed. More common microaggressions, usually brief and commonplace comments, whether intentional or not, that communicate negative or derogatory insults toward any group can often be defused with less direct but still effective strategies. These might include repeating the remark in an appropriate manner, which will allow the often clueless offender to know what should have been said, and also gives him the ability to agree with the restatement. If in an academic environment, the remark may be analyzed by a small group as a teaching moment. Finally, just repeating an insensitive remark back to the perpetrator (i.e., said with an air of disbelief or firmness) may also work at times (Goodman, 2011).

In summary, the main messages I hope to convey are that, by creating a culture of professionalism, respect for the worthiness of each individual and fairness, everyone can flourish. Such a work environment fosters balanced, unbiased decision-making and

empowers everyone to call out microaggressions and other non-supportive behaviors. This will limit their influence. Dermatology is lucky to have many wonderful women who are actively contributing to the successes of our Academy and our academic reputation.. At present, men are in a position to support these successful women to reach the heights they deserve. Diversification of leadership will benefit everyone, and men should take full advantage of this privilege.

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Study Approval

The authors confirm that any aspect of the work covered in this manuscript that has involved human patients has been conducted with the ethical approval of all relevant bodies.

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