

When It Comes to Equal Pay, Even Oscar-Winning Actresses Need Support From Their Male Colleagues

Did you read how Octavia Spencer recently called on LeBron James, and what they worked on together?

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Octavia Spencer may be an accomplished actress, but she is not immune to the gender wage gap. She made headlines when she recently turned to LeBron James, a producer of her upcoming Netflix series (about legendary entrepreneur-millionaire Madam C.J. Walker).

How could a basketball star aid a film star? James helped Spencer negotiate her compensation after she realized she wasn't getting a "fair deal." It was one of the latest examples of how closing the gender wage gap is more effective when men and women work together.

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There is good reason for such male-female collaboration: Next Tuesday, April 2, marks the 23rd year of Equal Pay Day, and a calendar reminder that the gender-wage gap still persists.

When this public awareness campaign was launched in 1996, women were earning just 59 cents for every dollar men earned. Today, the latest U.S. census data shows the female

proportion is now 77 cents.

Clearly, the slight improvement in gender-pay equity that that 77 cent figure illustrates – in workplaces from Hollywood to corporate boardrooms to the factory floor – reflects the need for *systemic* change. Not that change is simple. As a mom, mentor and business owner, I've seen firsthand just how complex the pay challenge is. But one thing is obvious: Women can't reach pay parity on their own.

Related: Tackling Equal Pay as a Female Tech Leader

Not just a women's issue

Women's pay isn't just a "women's" issue. Because the more money women earn, the better things become for families, workplaces and the economy as a whole.

According to the National Partnership for Women & Families, "The economic impact is nearly \$500 billion every year due to the wage gap from women who are employed full-time in the U.S." Still, in spite of this overall benefit, men and women have widely varying perceptions about the pay issue. According to the most recent Harvey Nash (a current client of my firm)/ARA Women in Technology survey:

- Just 30 percent of women surveyed believed their company paid equally, compared to 68 percent of men who believed the same.
- 47 percent of women surveyed said more formal support and mentorship programs would help increase female representation in tech. By contrast, just 32 percent of men believed such programs would make an impact.
- More than twice as many women as men said having a family translates into lost opportunities for advancement or equal pay (57 percent vs. 28 percent, respectively).

Despite these differing numbers, again, gender-pay equity affects both men and women. As we work to close the pay gap, we'll make more progress when men become involved. Here are some ideas on how to make that happen:

Spark a dialogue about gender equality.

During a recent International Women's Day event, I presented on the challenges facing women in tech, and one of the first questions asked concerned pay equity. Why do so many women believe they're paid less than their male counterparts, yet aren't sure what to do about it? the questioner wanted to know. The fact is that frustration often surrounds women's hope that someone will "do the right thing" and level the playing field. Someone else.

But that won't necessarily happen. So, the more men know about women's struggles in pursuing promotions or negotiating better pay for themselves, the better.

Once men understand that women often face different hurdles than they do, they'll more likely help coach and mentor their female colleagues on how to confidently advocate for themselves. This is one of the reasons that when I co-founded ARA, an organization to attract, retain and advance women in tech, we purposefully included men as members, speakers and mentors.

Assess where you are on the diversity spectrum.

Every company is at a different place of the diversity spectrum in terms of its efforts to achieve equality. Some companies merely check off boxes for compliance reasons, but do little else to make meaningful change.

On the other end of the spectrum are organizations that proactively recognize the need for change and get executive buy-in and a budget to align diversity efforts with their business strategy.

Unfortunately, the proactive group seems smaller than the check-off group.

Thankfully though, there are also the unicorns of the diversity realm. These are companies which make pay equity and diverse hiring part of their cultural DNA. Most of the men I meet who advocate for women are from this kind of organization – they believe in diversity and it influences how they operate.

How can we all get there? Employees up and down the corporate ladder need to actively assist their companies to determine where they fit on the spectrum, then act accordingly. The key is to place a broader emphasis on diversity in general, and not just on one-off initiatives that won't make a real difference.

So, if your company thinks its sexual harassment training is enough to achieve diversity and inclusion, that thinking is off base. The same goes for pay parity studies. You can't do a one-time study, right the wrongs, then say "Well, we've solved it."

Instead, diversity needs to be reviewed annually, include stock and equity options and even be considered during the acquisition of other companies. Intel and Salesforce are both excellent examples of organizations that continue to revisit their pay disparity issues. Both shared publicly that the pay gap they thought they'd closed years ago this year actually needed updating.

Find a support squad.

While the main battleground for wage parity is the workplace, the support women receive in their personal lives matters ,too. I am grateful for a husband and partner in life who always advocates for me, who's never jealous, never threatened and never requires an apology for my long hours, evening commitments or my many business trips. I like to think of us as "co-CEOs" of our family.

Related: UAE Passes Equal Pay Legislation To Narrow Gender Gap

Our little boy gets to grow up in an environment where his parents are true equals, and I'm confident he'll take that world view with him as he grows.

No matter what your own work situation, think about how we can all support one another in the continued fight for equality. Think about how like a ripple in a pond, even a small effort can have enormous incremental effects outward.

Role-play a "pay" conversation with a mentor. Bring up the subject in your next review (remember, if you don't ask, you won't get to "yes"). Discuss diversity initiatives with your team. Figure out how to have uncomfortable conversations as comfortably as possible. And, most importantly, take the long view. Because you don't have to be a Hollywood actress or a basketball champion to know we're in this together.

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