Not just “a ladies’ problem”

Jane Hilston

In my discipline of computer science (CS) the proportion of women is stubbornly low (Vardi, 2015). In the United States, according to the Taulbee Survey 2015, only 15.7% of the CS Bachelor’s degrees awarded in 2015 went to women, and only 18.3% of CS PhDs went to women (Zweben & Bizot, 2016). In the UK in 2016, 18.7% of CS undergraduate degrees, and 39.8% of CS PhDs, were awarded to female students (HESA, 2017). This is despite at least two decades of efforts and initiatives to try and make the topic more attractive, particularly to female undergraduates (Vardi, 2015).

Sometimes male colleagues find themselves in a situation where the low female participation rate is strikingly obvious, for example teaching a first-year class and being confronted by a sea of male faces. They are shocked and outraged that this should still be the case and feel something should be done. And then take the first opportunity they can to hand the problem over to a female colleague.

In the UK, we have the Athena SWAN initiative which recognises departments which are able to demonstrate commitment and progress on supporting gender equality, through an extensive process of data collection and self-assessment. Many heads of department immediately assume that such a self-assessment team must be led by a woman.

There tends to be a societal norm which expects women to volunteer more. In *What Works in Gender Equality By Design*, Bohnet presents findings which show:

When in same-sex groups, women and men were equally willing to volunteer. But when grouped with members of the opposite sex, the pattern suddenly changed. Women volunteered more and men less. Everyone, including the women, assumed women would volunteer more than men. Accordingly, men adjusted their behavior, expecting to benefit from the women, and women lived up to their expectations. (Bohnet, 2016, p. 196).

This is, she concludes, “a common pattern at universities [and] it is troubling that this pattern appears to be generalizable” (Bohnet, 2016, p. 196).

This is a recipe for trying to counteract the assumption that tackling gender equality is a problem that must be addressed by women. Make it clear that this is not your hobby, and that these roles should be regarded as academic administrative tasks like any others and should be allocated appropriately.

Ingredients

- An outraged male colleague who feels self-righteous for noticing the problem.
- A female colleague (you) who just happened to be the first he thought of, or the first he met, after the onset of his outrage.

Method

1. Bite your lip, count to ten and smile.
2. While counting to ten, try to think of male colleagues who could plausibly take on the role being thrust upon you – you’re a woman, you should have no difficulty multi-tasking! For example, why shouldn’t the colleague responsible for student admissions tackle the problem of female undergraduate recruitment. Of course, his unconscious bias may be the reason for the low numbers, but this is only an opening gambit.
3. When you reach ten, congratulate your colleague on his insight. Be careful with your use of language because you are aiming to be supportive without accepting ownership of the problem yourself. So, for example, do not thank him for bringing the situation to your attention. Instead ask what he plans to do about it, saying that you will be happy to support him, but making it clear that you expect him to take the lead.
4. He will almost certainly present a list of reasons why he doesn’t have the time to take on this extra responsibility. Agree with him that yes, it is unreasonable to be expected to assume additional responsibility by a chance association

At the time of writing, at the University of Edinburgh, seven of the twenty-two Athena SWAN teams are led by men.

with the problem, such as being the one to notice it or being a woman. This should make it difficult for him to pass the problem to you.

5. Now deploy your alternative suggestion and enter into a discussion of how the problem could be seen to fall within the remit of an existing administrative role. There are two alternatives here. Either the problem could be seen to fall within an existing role in which case the colleague responsible should be encouraged to broaden their perspective of the role to encompass this additional challenge. For example, this would be the case for female undergraduate recruitment. Alternatively, if it is a genuinely new role, such as coordinating an Athena SWAN self-assessment team, it should be allocated in the appropriate way, with appropriate recognition for the colleague who takes it on.
6. Aim to close the conversation with your colleague with a clear plan of action (on his part). This can be followed up later on with an email, saying you enjoyed your discussion and copying in the colleague that you jointly identified as being the most appropriate person to take action.

Cook's tips

Try to keep the tone throughout light-hearted and avoid confrontation. It's easy to feel annoyance at the assumption that gender problems need to be tackled by women, but keep this in check. Instead, try sympathy and encouragement.

Warning

Playing this game of academic administration hot potato is not for the faint-hearted or weak willed. Be careful to avoid being overly helpful. A firm hand and firm words are needed to return the potato to its originator.