

# Staff Eng + Sponsorship

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Lara + Venkat

<https://atlas.etsycorp.com/emcee/36625181003>

closed laptops, no phones, please!

# **Goal- and boundary-setting for this talk**

Today's talk is tightly scoped for a few reasons.

**This is a safe space to  
ask uncomfortable  
questions.**

We want this to be a safe space to ask questions. No question is off the table. That being said, there might be stuff Venkat or I may be uncomfortable answering, so we may ask another staff engineer whom we've spoken with about this stuff beforehand to answer it.

# This is our “second shift”.

I'm comfortable sharing my own story and talking about my experiences as a woman in tech. It's okay to ask me in this room about it. However, because it takes a lot of strength and the right brain space to talk about it, please give me a long heads up in the future if you'd like to talk to me about my personal experience outside of this meeting.

Also: this is not what my job is; we call this “the second shift”.

# **Diversity is a broad topic.**

# **Today is a focused discussion on one small set of actions.**

Our focus today is to talk about why there aren't women in this room, and what the people in this room can do about it. There is a LOT more stuff on the topic of diversity and inclusion, so we'll be working hard to keep this focused on just what we're here to discuss today, and providing more resources if people want to know about other stuff.

Venkat: why are we only focusing on women in this talk?

**You have already noticed  
the makeup  
of this room.**

I think at this point I don't have to explain why this is a problem. I'm not going to go into why diversity is important. There are people in this room who can do that for you; that's not the work that I'm going to do today.

I'm going to focus on women in the next data point, but the work I'm going to talk about later is relevant for any marginalized group.

# How did we get here?

(warning: this may get uncomfortable)

ok, we've established that this is uncomfortable for me, now it's about to get uncomfortable for you :)

these parts may trigger your amygdala. brace yourself for hearing some hard stuff.

# A meritocracy does not exist.

The myth of the meritocracy is why people think that we need to “lower the bar” to let more women into senior positions.

This is patently false. I’m not going to spend more time on this for two reasons: one, this is a job for male allies to do, and two, you can do your own research on it. At this point I’m asking you to accept this point as truth.



# Unconscious bias exists in everyone.

This means that even if we have lots of mentors, and lots of women in senior leadership positions, the same stuff will be at play.

For example: Women are promoted on experience. Men are promoted on promise. The meritocracy does not exist.

There are LOTS of things that unconscious bias includes. There's separate training for this that I'm scheduling for this group; I'm not going to go deep into this today.

You can become better at understanding your unconscious biases, but it's not something you can erase. This is not a one-time learning. This is part of continuous learning.

# Women are over-mentored and under-sponsored.

Mentorship, as I'll talk about in a bit, is about coaching and advice-giving. Sponsorship is about being on the hook to help a woman get promoted or get more advanced in her career. So women have tons of coaching and get tons of advice, sometimes unsolicited. But they rarely have people other than their managers explicitly looking out for their career.

This plays into the unconscious bias. Mentors will have the same stuff at play as anybody else, especially without unconscious bias training.

This is the point that I'm focusing on today.

# What can you do?

We're going to walk through three steps.

# Step 1: Learning

I'm going to say something a bit controversial here: if you are currently having coffee with women in a mentorship capacity, and you haven't yet done lots of reading on things like bias or privilege, please pause having coffee until you've spent more time learning. Otherwise, you may be doing more harm than good.

- 'death by a thousand cuts' that women deal with daily
- over-mentoring means hearing lots more of those microaggressions. "Just speak up more", "be more confident", "ASK for that promotion!" - all of these well-meaning directions can actually be harmful.

Venkat: if companies have diversity efforts but are not being inclusive (sprinkling diversity efforts) - marginalized people who are in the company become alienated and start leaving the company.

# Learn about privilege.

This one really sucks, right? You all have privilege. Were you triggered earlier when I said meritocracy doesn't exist?

Privilege is a factor in how you got into this room. Admitting this is incredibly hard, right? It is REALLY HARD to recognize and admit that meritocracy is not really a thing that exists. That you got here not just because of your hard work or smarts. But taking a step back and learning about how privilege works is incredibly important, not just to solve this problem, but to be a true mentor or sponsor to women.

# Learn about unconscious bias.

I'm working with L&D to set up an unconscious bias training for staff engineers. More details to come after the holidays. But this will help you start to see how, in your daily life, things happen. And you'll be able to start to see how other people behave, and start to see things like microaggressions that women have to deal with.

An example: sometimes, when a woman says something in a meeting, people ignore it until a man repeats the idea. Then people like the idea and applaud the idea. We call this a microaggression, or death by a thousand cuts, because it's incredibly subtle. I have witnessed this happen at Etsy, and by people in this room - no matter how inclusive Etsy is, unconscious bias will still always be at play. Which is why we have to focus on continuous learning and seeing.

# Start to see The Matrix.

(or, the sunlight outside the cave)

This is the most important bit. The more reading you do, the more learning you do, the more you can start to see this stuff happen.

Or, [Plato's Allegory of the Cave](#) (sorry, I was a philosophy undergrad)

# Step 2: Seeing

Step 1 is learning about all the different systems and factors at play that got you all in this room, and no women in this room. The next step is to see The Matrix, and to see what you can do about it.

The first piece of homework is to see, in your daily work, how often you name somebody else's name. Can you give me examples?



## When do you name names?

In a given week, start inspecting how often you mention someone else's name.

- ping someone in team IRC channel
- mention someone's work to someone else
- ?+ or ?endorse someone
- suggest someone for a project or other work  
(like writing for CaC, or speaking at Eng All Hands)

What opportunities are there to lift up someone's name?

**We tend to mention  
our friends.**

And our friends, usually, are people who look like us.

# **We pay attention to names our friends are mentioning, too.**

It really does make a difference. When you start mentioning a new name, people really do respect that person differently. Even if it's a small mention. Humans are social creatures.

Can you find someone new to name, who doesn't look like you?

# The people in this room have influence.

It may not feel like you have as much influence over other people's praise and careers as managers.

But you do. This is a privileged group of voices whom people trust and listen to. I'm asking you today to use that influence in a new way.

# **Step 3:** **Sponsoring**

# Mentorship vs. Sponsorship

Mentoring: coaching, advice-giving.

Sponsorship: you are on the hook to get this person promoted.

# Sponsorship works when it's a partnership.

You should be benefitting from sponsoring someone. That person you want to sponsor, they should be helping you in some way, and you're giving them an opportunity by leaning on them.

This is why sponsorship isn't just for managers. ICs need help from each other, too.

**Sponsorship gives you  
more opportunities to  
name someone.**

you'll have more access to their work  
you'll have more data to voice about them  
and we all know that IC4 promotion packets have a TON to do with peer feedback.



**Go forth and  
become an ally**

## Homework

0. Pause your coaching/mentoring/sponsoring.
1. Read articles on privilege and the other factors at play. Never stop. Take unconscious bias training.
2. Begin to see The Matrix. Find privilege and bias at work. Learn the ways in which you already name, praise, and/or promote people.
3. Find someone to sponsor. Create a mutually-beneficial sponsorship relationship.

Step #1 - we are scheduling unconscious bias training with L&D

In step #3 - shift more towards listening. "One of the most radical things you can do is to actually believe women when they talk about their experiences" - Anita Sarkeesian

# Resources

[Why Men Still Get More Promotions Than Women \(HBR\)](#)

[Resources for allies](#) (it's a long list!)

*including* [Moving past privilege guilt](#) *and* [Bingo card](#)

[Daniel's list of readings](#) *and* [Ian's list of readings](#)

[Unconscious Bias training for this group to be scheduled.](#)

Ask other allies:

Daniel Schauenberg, Daniel Espeset, Moishe Lettvin, and [Ian Malpass](#).

**If you are uncomfortable,  
you will know you are  
making progress.**

*Kronda Adair*

this stuff is really hard and personally challenging.

to see the matrix means living with all of this new information, and to have empathy for the marginalized people who work here.