

How Men Can Decenter So Women Step Up



Chuck Shelton

Chief Executive Officer, Greatheart Consulting

Published Mar 29, 2016

[+ Follow](#)

For men who lead as allies with women, *decentering* is a daily choice and a key skill.

Decentering means that we, as male leaders:

- Step out of the spotlight in presentations, when it will position a woman to speak with her own voice
- Organize projects so our female colleagues will lead in their own way and gain credit for doing so
- Delegate responsibility to women, while providing the support they need
- Learn with women who report to us through reciprocal mentoring
- Defer decision-making to our peers who are women
- Do everything in our power to help the women above us succeed
- Pay attention to the ways [women disagree with one another](#), and hold our opinions about their diversity lightly
- Temper our advocacy 'for' women through accountable relationships of trust with women

It's not that women can only step up when men step down. But every professional benefits from having influence partners, so when we, as men, stand down, more women will stand up. As we decide to decenter, we can also intentionally resist the temptation of accepting accolades as a 'male champion' – such credit-taking belies the humility that informs stepping out of the spotlight.

This is gender-savvy leadership – understanding how gender operates at work, and how to get things done based on this understanding. When women and men work together, is everything about gender? Absolutely not. And is it necessary for an inclusive leader to sort out the salience of gender at work? Absolutely.

The concept of male decentering requires an understanding of the 'center' that men still largely occupy. This is the normativity of men in leadership jobs – especially those of us who are also white, highly educated, upper middle class, straight, Christian, and healthy. I call it 'super-normativity', the superpower of a center where we are remarkably over-represented.

This is the normative culture of men in leadership, where our ideas and values define the 'norm' to which women are pressured to attend, for the sake of better opportunities. People who are members of normative cultures assume that they are 'normal': there are prescriptive and often unspoken standards

of correctness for all, and especially an expectation of conformity from those who clearly differ from the norm, requiring accommodation like the pull of gravity. This is the center in which many of us as men still 'naturally' reside. It's only in the last generation that a new 'normal' has emerged, demonstrating how a mix of talent and teams produces superior results.

Decentering is a core competency of the inclusive leader. Intriguingly, it offers us the chance to focus on ourselves while we attend to others: [psychology teaches us](#) that it's not always healthy to believe our own quick-cycling and sometimes biased thoughts. We can choose to listen to women with care, and consider stepping back as an opportunity to build credibility for our colleagues and for ourselves.

Decentering is a direct and capability-building investment in the Other. At Greatheart we hold this statement to be true: *a man is an ally when a woman says he is*. Women will recognize us as allies when we decenter in their direction, with discipline, day by day.

And an extra bit of good news: the competency of decentering also helps us lead more effectively as influencers among other men, which many women expect from us.

Chuck serves as the CEO for Greatheart Consulting, located in Seattle and New York. Greatheart equips executives to transform their performance and results through inclusion - in particular, Chuck focuses on enabling white male executives as inclusive leaders. Find out more about men leading as allies at engagingmenadvancingwomen.com. You can also follow Chuck on [twitter](#).

<https://www.linkedin.com/pulse/how-men-can-decenter-so-women-step-up-chuck-shelton/>