

# MAN UP

## How to be a man in today's workplace

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What's happening to men? Action man Bear Grylls thinks modern men have an identity crisis, Jeremy Clarkson's macho days are behind him and suicide accounts for nearly 5,000 male deaths a year.

Websites, books, articles, Simon Pegg's recent film *Man Up*, even a Wiki guide on How to be a Man - it's all out there for the man seeking his identity.

The predominance of men in the workplace is certainly being brought increasingly into question. There's a groundswell of opinion calling for more women on boards. (It's now a truth universally acknowledged that boards with women on them mean better business.) Some men may feel threatened by these changes but others are no longer comfortable with a traditionally male culture where profit and ruthless behaviour rule.

It's futile to talk about culture change at work unless men are also involved in that discussion. Women are well-versed in it but it's new to many men.

For aeons, how to be a man was something men didn't necessarily give much thought to. They didn't need to. In a non-scientific but illuminating survey of men we conducted, one person's response to the question: "What do you enjoy about being a man?" was "Precisely not having to constantly define myself by reference to my gender."

In the process of tussling with the question of how to present themselves, women have discovered and legitimised many different ways of being a woman. But as Ziauddin Yousufzai (father of Malala) says, there is still, trans-culturally, "a single dominant masculine identity" which can be limiting.

Since earliest times, the advice to boys about how to fulfil masculine ideals appears to stay relentlessly the same: "Be strong, and be a man."

This is borne out in our survey results where the centrality of 'strength' in male identity was mentioned again and again alongside a perceived need to 'maintain a façade' and hide insecurities. When we asked our sample of men to cite current models of maleness, the replies focussed on the negative:

"Pretending to have a thick skin"

"Male competitiveness"

"Banging on about football"

In fact men are often annoyed by other men: "Men can be idiots in groups." Many of our respondents went on to say that they are optimistic about the future: "Machismo-fuelled masculinity is increasingly ludicrous and men are increasingly inclined to distance themselves from it."

Grayson Perry, at the Being A Man Festival at London's Southbank, an event organised precisely because men do not have the forums that women have to discuss this stuff, asked for men "to have the right to be vulnerable, to be uncertain, to be intuitive, the right not to know, to be flexible and not to be ashamed."

That question of shame is interesting. Several men we've spoken to are understandably annoyed that any evidence of sensitivity, compassion or collaboration is characterised as them "showing their feminine side." It seems unjust that all the 'good' qualities are

attributed to femininity and men are made to feel guilty about their gender. One man recently let out a wail on an online message board: “Is there anything *right* with my gender?”

If men aren't part of the culture change discussion, there are pitfalls: diversity becomes a women-and-minorities issue rather than the business issue we know it to be and men are shamed into the naughty corner simply because they are men.

Pushing men ever further out from the centre of the debate is counter-productive. Organisational psychologist Mary Sherry says the ‘be strong’ driver embodied in that phrase ‘Man up!’ is “just another way of saying ‘don’t expose your failure to the outside world’ and is a hindrance to the development of the very quality that business leaders increasingly seek in their staff: emotional intelligence.”

But change won't happen overnight and we're still out of synch. At the moment, in offices everywhere, it's often the women who are trying to ‘man up,’ keeping conversations about their children to a minimum, striving to be alpha males, just as their metrosexual male colleagues are dabbing on moisturiser and proudly displaying screensavers awash with sticky toddlers.

Could it be that both sexes are now trying too hard to take on each other's perceived characteristics in order to get on at work? Surely we have to stop trying to be each other. For men and women, authenticity - being ourselves - is key to a more profitable and enjoyable workplace.

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