

# Managers beware of gender faultlines

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Do you have gender "faultlines" in your organization? New research suggests that such fissures appear when gender differences solidify into cliques. And this tends to occur when members of one gender share other demographic traits and professional interests, such as age, job responsibilities and time served. For example, the men in one organization might be young techies, while the women might tend to be middle-aged marketers. Or vice versa. What's important is that several qualities align in addition to gender, creating a stronger sense of in-group identity among men and women.

When such faultlines appear, the research predicts that employees will be less willing to take on new tasks that help their company—or more generally to put in extra effort at work. "A [gender](#) faultline has a negative effect on people's loyalty to a firm," says Hui Liao, a professor of leadership and management at the University of Maryland's Robert H. Smith School of Business and one of the co-authors of the study. But it's not inevitable that gender faultlines create problems. "If the general environment is supportive of [diversity](#), we don't see a significant negative effect," she says.

Liao and five co-authors studied 1,652 managerial employees in 76 work units at an unnamed Fortune 500 global manufacturer of consumer durable goods. They noted the age, gender, job descriptions and tenure of the employees, and surveyed them about loyalty and diversity policies. Loyalty was measured by the degree to which the managers agreed with statements such as, "I always volunteer for projects that are likely to help this organization." The effectiveness of diversity policies was measured

by whether employees agreed with statements such as, "My manager ensures that I always feel included at work."

In addition to gender divisions, the authors looked at a more benign kind of faultline: Those created by cliques centered on job types (that is, when people with similar job duties share not only that trait but other demographic qualities such as gender, age and time served.) When the diversity environment was positive, that kind of group identity actually led to stronger feelings of loyalty toward the firm. But the positive effect of job-function cliques disappeared when the diversity climate was unsatisfactory.

Many diversity studies look only at one attribute at a time, and so fail to explore how these traits interact with others. "That ignores the fact that people have multiple identities," Liao says. "And when people decide whether to identify with a group, they look at multiples attributes at the same time."

The study did not look at race or ethnicity, but Liao says she suspects the dynamics of faultlines based on race or ethnicity would be similar to those based on gender.

**More information:** Chung, Y., Liao, H., Jackson, S., Subramony, M., Colakoglu, S., & Jiang, Y. (2015). CRACKING BUT NOT BREAKING: JOINT EFFECTS OF FAULTLINE STRENGTH AND DIVERSITY CLIMATE ON LOYAL BEHAVIOR. *Academy of Management Journal*. [DOI: 10.5465/amj.2011.0829](https://doi.org/10.5465/amj.2011.0829)

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