

Advancing workplace gender equality:

Assessment of evidence-based approaches



Dulcimer Labs



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**"The opinions and interpretations in this publication are those of the author
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INTRODUCTION

A more equal society is not just a better society for reasons of egalitarianism, it is also a much more profitable society. A recent estimate found that taking measures to advance women's equality could add 11 percent, or \$12 trillion to global GDP by 2025. In a world where women play an identical role in labour markets as men, this figure would jump to 26% or an additional \$28 trillion to global growth by 2025.¹⁶ Here in Canada, increasing gender equality at work would lead to 6% higher than business as usual GDP growth forecast over the 10 years, equaling \$150 Billion in incremental GDP in 2026. Equalizing women's and men's workforce participation to close the gender gap would add \$420 billion to Canada's GDP in 2026.¹⁷

The purpose of this document is to efficiently summarize evidence-based interventions to increase gender equality in the workplace. Currently, gender-based gaps in the workplace impact each level of the employee lifecycle: Women have a harder time entering the workforce, are forced to leave at higher rates than men, and face barriers in progressing to leadership positions that are not faced by their male counterparts – all of which leads to the loss of valuable high-potential employees and associated organizational gains. Accordingly, this document provides tools to close these gaps organized around three main target areas: Hiring, Retention, and Advancement. For each target area, focussed descriptions of a subset of tools (interventions) that can be used to address the underlying issue(s) are provided and scored on three dimensions to allow for an evaluation of their strengths. These scoring dimensions are ease of *implementation*, *strength of effect*, *quality of evidence*.

Scoring System

Each intervention in this document is evaluated along three dimensions. Each dimension runs on a scale from 1 to 5, with 5 being the best score an intervention can obtain.

- **Ease of implementation**

Ease of implementation refers to the relative cost of the intervention, i.e. the resources that would need to be invested for it to take effect.

- **Strength of effect**

The strength of the effect refers to how much a specific problem is addressed by a given intervention. This is based in large part on the statistical results, and researchers' estimations of the amount of change an intervention leads to.

- **Quality of evidence**

The quality of evidence refers to how generalizable a given intervention is. Interventions with a high quality of evidence work in a variety of situations and draw from lab as well as field studies, while interventions with a low quality of evidence only work in situations closely resembling those they were first studied in.

How do I know if my firm has a problem with gender equality?

Discrimination has, in large part, changed. Gone are the overtly discriminatory policies of the early and mid 20th century. Biases involving race, gender, age and more are rarely stated outright by either individuals or institutions. Instead, most employers want to see themselves as meritocratic and unbiased, and acknowledging discriminatory thinking or stereotypes is harder than ever.

Accordingly, diagnosing gender discrimination needs to take a more data-driven and structured approach. This means that leaders wanting to improve gender equality in their organizations must begin by collecting accurate and unbiased data about gender equality, or lack thereof, in their organizations to understand where the problems lie. We suggest you start by answering questions such as:

1. How many women relative to men apply for jobs at various levels in my organization?
2. How many women relative to men are successful at getting a job at various levels in my organization?
3. How many women relative to men do we retain?
4. How many women, relative to men, do we promote?
5. Is there a difference in pay for women and men at the same level of work in my organization?

1. Target Area: Hiring

Despite Canada's position as one of the world leaders in gender equality,¹⁶ both formal and informal barriers to women's participation in the Canadian economy continue to exist, and the issue(s) of women's access to employment remain(s) far from resolved. These lead to gaps in the recruitment of female employees and executives, and the segregation of many occupations along gender lines. The tools described in this section are meant to target these specific issues in hiring.

A. Targeting biased recruitment

Unconscious biases held by employers and hiring managers can lead to the hiring of fewer female employees, even when they possess qualifications and experience identical to male applicants.³ Training employers about these unconscious biases seems to have limited effect, and there is currently no evidence that such training increases workplace equality; indeed, some evidence suggests that it may even back-fire.¹⁸ Instead, strategies that do lead to fairer hiring practices include:

- Resume blinding;⁶
- Including multiple women in shortlists for recruitment;¹⁹
- Using structured interviews for recruitment;^{9, 20} and
- Committing to hiring criteria prior to evaluation.⁴

IN FOCUS

TOOL 1

Resume Blinding **A tool to reduce gender bias in hiring**

Anonymizing resumes by removing the gender of the applicant, as well as any information that might reveal their gender (for e.g. their name), reduces the opportunity for bias to affect the hiring process in its earliest stage by “blinding” hiring managers to the applicant's gender as part of the evaluation process. Instead of using intuitions and biased decision-making, managers become more likely to consider the objective details of applicants' training and previous experience, which leads to an increase in the number of women that are hired.

SCORE

Resume Blinding**Ease of implementation 5/5**

This strategy is very easy to implement and requires very few resources to do so.

**Strength of effect 4/5**

Some studies have found this intervention to be very effective, while others have noted a less, but still significant effect.

**Quality of evidence 5/5**

The research that supports this intervention draws from both in-lab experiments and in-field studies. This provides a high degree of evidence

Blind hiring software platforms for employers

Applied, and GapJumpers are software platforms that allow employers to easily blind themselves to demographic information on resumes that may lead to hiring biases.

Paradigm and Blendoor are start-ups that helps companies build diverse workforces by increasing the pipeline of diverse candidates, as well using strategies such as resume blinding.

Interviweing.io is fully anonymized technical interview platform that limits bias because no demographic details are revealed until after the interview.

Commitment to Hiring Criteria Prior to Evaluation A Tool to reduce gender bias in hiring

Research has shown that when justifying biased hiring decisions, evaluators conveniently change their selection criteria so as to support their prejudiced assessment. For example, a hiring manager may recommend a male candidate, emphasizing the importance of a particular applicant attribute for the firm (e.g. “he’s a go-getter”) while deemphasizing other features (e.g. “he’s not the best fit”). This same evaluator may fail to recommend a female candidate for the same position in spite of her possessing the same, “go-getter attitude”, citing her “lack of proper fit” with company’s needs. Asking evaluators/hiring managers to pre-commit to a set of objective hiring criteria before evaluating any candidates mitigates this bias, resulting in more equitable hiring decisions. What is more, such candidates are more likely to succeed on the job, because they were hired for their objective merit, not their gender.

Pre-commitment to Hiring Criteria



Ease of implementation 5/5

This strategy is very easy to implement and requires very few resources to do so.



Strength of effect 4/5

Some studies have found this intervention to be very effective, while others have noted a less, but still significant effect.



Quality of evidence 3/5

The research that supports this intervention draws from in-lab experiments. While this provides a higher degree of evidence than many survey-based methodologies, in-field testing is needed to increase the quality of evidence.

B. Targetting occupational segregation

Gender segregation by occupation is a strong influencer of gender balance issues in the workforce. Stereotypically female dominated occupations emphasize creative work, emotional care, and nurturing behaviours, while male dominated occupations emphasize tangible physical or intellectual pursuits. This issue is compounded by society placing more value on the characteristics associated with ‘traditionally male’ jobs, making occupational segregation one of the largest contributors to pay inequality²¹ and one of the most pressing issues to address in the struggle for parity. Strategies that work to decrease gender segregation include limiting the number of required qualifications and using gender-neutral language in job ads. Reducing required qualifications works to increase equality by increasing the number of women that apply because women are much less likely to apply for jobs when they feel they don’t meet all the required criteria (e.g. qualifications), whereas men tend to have a much lower threshold for applying.⁹ Gender-neutral language increases the number of candidates that apply,²² and may in particular increase the quantity and quality of female candidates,²³ while leaving the number of male applicants untouched (i.e. men are just as likely to apply either way).

IN FOCUS

TOOL 1

Gender Neutral Language in Job Descriptions A Tool to reduce occupational segregation

Gendered language in job descriptions subtly adheres to, and advances gender stereotypes.² Job ads in male-dominated fields (for e.g. business, tech, finance, science and engineering) tend to use “traditionally- masculine” words such as “competitive” and “dominate” much more often, resulting in fewer applications from female candidates, perpetuating gender inequality,³⁰ and decreasing the overall pool of talent that a job is able to attract. These problems are pervasive – a recent examination from a recruitment firm considered millions of job ads across industries and found that 70% of them contained male-biased wording.²² Happily, there is a simple fix: using more inclusive or gender-neutral words (e.g. “dedicated”, “collaborative”, “excellent”, “curious”) attracts more female applicants, and increases the number of applicants and by proxy the talent pool that an organization is able to attract.³¹

Gender Neutral Language in Job-ads



Ease of implementation 4/5

This strategy is very easy to implement and requires very readily available resources to do so.



Strength of effect 4/5

Both lab and naturalistic studies found that these interventions increase the diversity of candidates.



Quality of evidence 4/5

The research that supports this intervention draws from in-lab experiments, naturalistic studies, as well as field testing conducted by recruitment and HR firms.

Gender neutral language aids for employers

Textio is an “augmented writing software” company uses artificial intelligence evaluate job descriptions in real time and suggests gender neutral alternatives for particularly gendered words and phrases.

TotalJobs, one of UK’s leading job sites evaluated over 75,000 job ads to create the free **Gender Bias Decoder** which scans text for gendered words. This decoder is adapted from Kat Matfield’s original **Gender Decoder for Job Ads** based on academic research on gendered wording in job advertisements cited in this document.

2. Target Area: Retention

Canada has the world's 4th highest employee turnover rate.²⁴ Employee turnover and replacement imposes significant direct and indirect costs. In addition to indirect costs such as lost productivity, engagement, and institutional memory, Psychometrics Canada estimates that the direct costs of replacing a mid-level employee is 20% of their salary, whereas replacing a high-level employee can cost up to 213% of their salary.²⁵ Difficulties in retaining female talent plague organization even when they are successful at recruiting and hiring qualified female employees. The tools described in this section focus on supporting women in the workplace to increase their continued participation, as well as reduce harassment and violence that may decrease participation/retention.

A. Targetting workplace participation

Women frequently leave the workforce after childbirth due to care responsibilities, and participation in the workforce is generally impacted by a woman's ability to craft a balance between work life and home life. Organizations looking to increase retention of female employees should start here, offering support for a woman's pursuit in finding work-life balance. Interventions for this problem that are supported by evidence include:

- Providing and explicitly encouraging shared parental leave between women and men (e.g. by providing examples of when senior leaders have taken shared parental leave) can lead to significant improvements in women's likelihood to return to work.²⁶
- Work-life policies that improve workplace flexibility for women and men (such as remote working or flexible/compressed work hours), and work-life benefits such as monetary support for childcare lead to higher job satisfaction, and higher commitment to an organization.²⁷
- Re-entry training programs, particularly for industries which are evolving quickly, such as tech, empower female returners by increasing confidence and self-esteem.²⁸
- Pursuing gender- focused policies in general and having a diverse workforce, both of which mean that a company is more likely to benefit from continued participation and lower turnover of female employees.⁸

Higher Gender Diversity

A tool to Increase the retention of women in the workforce

While this may seem, on face, to be a circular solution – have more women in your workforce by having more women in your workforce – analysis has shown that approaching a 50% participation rate for women in a workplace can reduce overall attrition of female workers, especially when combined with other gender diversity policies like those outlined in this document. Various explanations may be provided for this: the higher proportion of women at an organization makes it easier for individual female employees to personally identify with the organization; the higher proportion of women makes individual female employees feel less isolated; the higher proportion of women in upper management allows for more sponsorship relationships to develop, which naturally increase organizational loyalty. Organizations can increase the retention rates of their female employees by increasing their overall gender diversity, and by implementing gender-focused policies and practices.

Higher Gender Diversity



Ease of implementation 2/5

This strategy is resource intensive to implement, since a full commitment to this intervention requires commitment to additional strategies aimed at increasing gender diversity.



Strength of effect 5/5

Although this intervention is difficult to implement, it has wide-ranging and substantive in the effect it has on the issue at hand.



Quality of evidence 4/5

The research that supports this set of interventions has a rich theoretical and empirical background drawing from lab and in-field studies.

B. Targetting harassment and violence

Harassment and violence in the workplace has significant impact on the retention of employees. Thanks, in no small part, to the “Me Too” movement, we are beginning to understand the previously un contemplated extent of harassment in the workplace. Focussing organizational efforts on preventing sexual harassment and violence is a clear and compelling priority.

At the same time, sexual harassment – and harassment in the workplace more generally – is difficult to address for a variety of reasons. The first of these has to do with the fact that harassers actively hide their unacceptable behavior,²⁹ often making it so that their harassment has no direct witness. This means that most instances of harassment are, to use the cliché, cases of “he said she said,” which on the surface makes them difficult to adjudicate. Victims of harassment understand this, which leads to the second issue: victims are taught to be passive in the face of harassment. Victims do not expect a meaningful response to follow their reporting of harassment; they do, however, expect reprisals from their harasser or even their management.⁷ A Human Rights Commission prevalence report on sexual harassment found that a little less than 1 in 6 respondents who indicated that they had been the victims of sexual harassment had formally reported it to their organization.³⁰

While harassment is difficult to address, it can be addressed, and addressed substantively, and indeed it must be. The most obvious solution which could not be underscored more: believe victims, and take swift and genuinely punitive action against harassers. Additionally, leading research in the field has come to a broad conclusion: successful harassment policies are comprehensive harassment policies. This is to say that companies should develop a plan for dealing with harassment before it happens, immediately after it happens, and in the long-term after it happens. This allows organizations to address the issue of harassment in a continuous, proactive manner, rather than simply reacting to each individual instance which does not bring about sustained betterment, if any.

Bystander Interventions

A tool to reduce workplace harassment and violence

Research has begun to identify a promising way to work around the reluctance of victims to come forward: encouraging bystanders of the harassment to advocate on their behalf.^{31, 32} Reflecting the need to address harassment from a holistic perspective, programs meant to foster bystander intervention focus on the time before, immediately after, and in the long-term after harassment occurs. In the time before, this means targeted training that makes clear the important role that bystanders play in preventing and responding to sexual harassment. This training should leave employees assured that their own complaints or reports will be acted on in a timely and serious way and that, should they intervene, their anonymity will be preserved. To address the time immediately after harassment occurs, organizations should think about creating a specific “voice system” for bystanders to encourage their reporting of harassment and to expedite the response these reports receive. Finally, in the long-run, companies should acknowledge that harassment doesn’t only affect those who are direct victims of it, but also those who witness it: both victims and bystanders should be offered counseling and training on coping skills in the period after harassment takes place.

SCORE

Bystander Interventions**Ease of implementation 2/5**

This strategy is not easy to implement, since it is by design a very comprehensive, requiring company-wide frameworks to be effective.

**Strength of effect 4/5**

Although this intervention is difficult to implement, it can be substantive in the effect it has on the issue at hand.

**Quality of evidence 3/5**

The research that supports this intervention is supported by laboratory studies, and field studies of other contexts in which bystander interventions have proven effective.

Resources to increase women's workplace participation and retention

Allie, is a Slack bot for inclusion at work. It helps employees report bias and microaggressions to human resources and receive tips on how to handle similar future instances, shedding light on issues that are often difficult for employers to track until it's too late (i.e. in exit interviews). Employers that use Allie can identify trends in their workplaces using these data and focus their interventions accordingly.

InHerSight is an online platform that allows women to anonymously rate their workplaces based on how they treat women across 14 criteria including work environment, equal opportunity, maternity leave, family support, opportunities for advancement, salary satisfaction, etc.

3. Target Area: Leadership

Just 5% of S&P-500 CEOs and 21.2% Board members are women.³³

Here in Canada, among the 100 most influential companies within the S&P/TSX composite, there is currently 1 female CEO, and only 6 of these companies have a female board chair.³⁴ Globally, these numbers are even smaller for women of colour. And they belie the fact that companies with greater representation of women in senior roles generate stronger market returns and superior profits.³⁵ Companies in the top 25th percentile for gender diversity on their executive teams are 21% more likely to experience above-average profits.³⁶

Despite this, women face barriers to advancement not just at the stage of formal interviews for leadership positions, but also along the pathways to advancement, such as developing sponsorship relationships with senior employees who have genuine clout that can help them advance. The tools described in this section focus on providing strategies that support women's advancement to leadership positions, as well as remove barriers that prevent them from advancing.

A. Targeting advancement

Developing female talent and helping women advance can provide significant economic benefit to organizations. Mentoring and networking programs can prove to be helpful for some women, but more work is needed to understand if these programs need specific features in order to be useful for all women.³⁷ Active sponsorship programs in which sponsors in high impact roles advocate for the targeted advancement of their protégés are more likely to lead to the advancement of women in the workplace,³⁸ as are joint evaluations of candidates for promotion.¹³

IN FOCUS

TOOL 1

Formal Sponsorship Programs for Women

A tool to increase the advancement of women

An important aspect of the promotion process is assistance from other, more senior members of the company. Although mentorship programs aim to help “high potentials” develop the skills and connections they need to advance abroad, surveys of these employees have revealed that men benefit disproportionately from an aspect of the mentor-mentee relationship that is not regularly offered to women: sponsorship. More than being trained and advised, men are actively advocated for by their more senior mentors, helping them advance higher at a faster rate. In order to develop and advance female talent, organizations need *sponsorship* programs that match high potential female candidates with senior employees whose explicit goal is to advocate for their advancement (and not just offer advice).¹⁴

SCORE

Formal Sponsorship Programs



Ease of implementation 3/5

This strategy is resource intensive implement and needs time and attention from senior executives as well as detailed planning to create effective sponsor-protégé pairs.



Strength of effect 3/5

Multiple individual level factors can affect the success of this intervention, and the lack of sponsorship isn't the only contributor to the lack of women's advancement.



Quality of evidence 2/5

While this intervention is supported by several industry pieces, these use looser survey-based methodologies. It needs further study in in controlled laboratory or field studies.

Joint Evaluation of Candidates for Promotion

A tool to increase the advancement of women

Evaluating candidates for promotion jointly (i.e. choosing between multiple candidates) rather than separately (i.e. judging only one candidate at a time), helps employers choose based on past performance, irrespective of the gender of the applicant. On the other hand, considering candidates individually leads employers to depend more on stereotypes than performance, leading to gender biases in promotion decisions. Of particular note, since joint evaluations lead employers to focus on more objective performance-based attributes, they also end up choosing the best performing candidates, (presumably) maximizing profits.

Joint Evaluations



Ease of implementation 5/5

This strategy is easy to implement and requires minimal resources.



Strength of effect 4/5

The strength of this effect is very high as employers in the joint evaluation condition stopped being gender biased in their decision making.



Quality of evidence 4/5

While tests of this specific intervention for this problem are limited, the intervention itself is located within a well-established literature on decision-making, and follows an in-lab experimental design.

Where to get help with addressing gender equality

In addition to resources such as this document, there are also organizations that help companies learn about gender discrimination and how to address it. One of the most widely used resources is the **EDGE Certification** which uses data science to diagnose gender discrimination in organizations and help them target interventions to fix it. EDGE is aimed primarily at large organizations, as the statistical techniques used in their analyses needs a large number of observations to make valid conclusions. Some recent recipients of the EDGE Certification include the International Finance Corporation (World Bank Group), UNICEF, and L'OREAL.

The **30% Club** is a campaign that started in the UK in 2010, with the initial target of 30% representation of women on boards. Today, they have spread to 11 countries, including Canada, where they strive for better gender balance at all levels through targeted initiatives that engage with organizations to provide actionable recommendations and road maps for change.

The **Women's Empowerment Principles** are a partnership initiative of UN Women and the UN Global Compact. Informed by current business practices and inputs gathered from all over the world, they offer 7 steps to guide private sector businesses on how to empower women in the workplace, marketplace, and community. While they were developed for the business community, other civil society stakeholders and governments have also embraced them as a tool for gender equality and women's empowerment.

4. Putting It All Together: Gender Pay Gap – Cross Cutting Across Hiring, Retention, and Advancement

The gender pay gap has been documented throughout history, and cuts across all the issue areas discussed in this guide. Today, based on the average hourly rate for workers, Canadian women earn 86.7% of men's wages.³⁹ This gender wage gap increases throughout a woman's time in the workforce, as she has children or works part time, and is even more drastic for women of colour. Alarming, the last 20 years have led to a less than 6 percent drop in the wage gap.⁴⁰ The pay gap has ties to occupational segregation, gender responsibilities in childcare, and overall implicit biases held by current leadership. Indeed, the gender pay gap results from a collection of causes; its solution may not lie in a single intervention or target area, but in a combination of interventions that aim to increase gender equality in the workplace. Hiring more female employees and retaining them in long run; desegregating traditionally male and female occupations; equalizing the number of men and women in high-paying executive positions and boards—all of these actions move the needle towards eliminating the gender pay gap. At the same time, organizations can make specific and dedicated strides towards closing the gender pay gap by:

- introducing transparency to pay, promotion, and reward processes;⁴¹
- adopting practices such as equal pay for work of equal value;⁴²
- providing structural support to female employees to increase work-life balance;⁴³ and
- promoting female leaders to high status positions, which in turn benefits all women working at an organization.⁴⁴

IN FOCUS

TOOL 1

Pay Transparency and Accountability

A tool to close the gender-wage gap

Establishing pay transparency and accountability are direct ways of addressing the gender pay gap.¹⁵ While pay transparency entails making the compensation of employees visible to one another, pay accountability entails making some person or persons responsible for pay being fair. These two strategies used together strongly disincentivise improper or biased decisions about compensation because they increase scrutiny – decision makers/institutional bodies feel that they may be asked to explain their decisions, and thus make better ones. In turn, employees are more willing to bring concerns to their supervisors, because the ability to compare compensation provides them with the data they need to do so.⁴⁵ Based on these and other data, a number of countries, including Iceland, Australia, Germany, and the UK have instituted mandatory pay transparency, with Iceland leading the charge by vowing to completely close the gender wage gap by 2022. Here in Canada, Budget 2018 announced proactive pay equity for federally legislated workers, as well as measures around pay transparency.

SCORE

Pay Transparency and Accountability



Ease of implementation 3/5

Pay transparency is fairly straightforward to implement; pay accountability often requires the creation of new positions to be effectively implemented.



Strength of effect 4/5

The largest field study of these interventions found that pay disparity between equally qualified employees feel markedly.



Quality of evidence 5/5

The intervention has been put to several field trials, lending it a high degree of scientific validity.

CONCLUSION

Companies in which women make up a greater proportion of top management or decision-making roles generate greater returns on equity and enhanced sales growth³⁵ i.e. companies with more women at the top do better. Employers who want their companies to do better, and/or are committed to creating an actual meritocracy, should not have to be deprived of some of society's best available talent. This document has attempted to summarize evidence-based strategies to aid the creation of those more equal meritocracies, and the organizational success and profits that go along with them.

Gender discrimination is a manifest drain on businesses and society because gender biases lead to sub-optimal decisions. The same way that individuals fail to make profit-maximizing choices because of heuristics and biases embedded in everyday decision-making,⁴⁵ hiring managers and executives in charge of personnel can and do make decisions that fail to maximize organizational gains when their decisions are clouded by gender biases. Devoting organizational resources to outsmarting gender biases is therefore in the interest of any firm committed to realizing its full potential.

Tools cut across issue areas

While it is useful to organize tools and interventions into target areas like hiring, retention, and advancement, many of them have the potential to impact gender discrimination in target areas other than the one they are placed in. For example, including multiple women in shortlists for recruitment is a strategy that may well also help when considering employees for advancement within the firm. So it is worthwhile considering the implications that the tools presented here may have for issue areas outside of the categorization they have been placed in.

An important characteristic shared by the interventions summarized here is that they focus on the institution, rather than the individual. For example, consider the issue of gender disparities in hiring. An individual-focused solution to this problem aim to teaching hiring managers about the existence of gender bias, and the problems caused it, with the hope that individuals trained as such would be better able to recognize gender discrimination in their thinking and put a stop to it. By contrast, the changes proposed by this document – using resume blinding, having evaluators commit to evaluation criteria before the fact – are changes

to *the hiring process itself*. Although the ultimate goal is indeed a change in the biases of individuals, these interventions focus first on designing the systems that are less susceptible to the attitudes of individual employees in the first place. This focus on institutions is due to two reasons. First, human beings are notoriously difficult to change. On the other hand, changing systems to become more egalitarian is easy and low hanging fruit that can allow us to make significant gains in gender equality.

Second, if they are successful and more female employees are brought on board, biases against hiring women will be challenged by people's everyday experience of female workers and become less prevalent in the world i.e. changing the system might change the biased attitudes in turn, while allowing for quicker gains for women's equality in the meanwhile.

The final core commonality shared by these interventions are all grounded in evidence derived from data. Just saying that we want a more diverse workforce is no longer enough. We need effective tools to advance women's equality in the workplace. And it is only through measuring the current state of the world and comparing it to the outcomes of attempted strategies such that we can measure the effectiveness of what we're doing, either so we can do more of it if it works, or so we can try something different if it doesn't. Measurement is crucial, because we can't change what we can't count. And the world is counting on us to make things better.

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