

# HOW WE CAN HELP

*In order for the industry to change, men in every role (not just leadership) need to actively seek out talented women and people of color to become co-workers and partners.*

By *Alan Collenette*



Andrea Reeder, now with Nuveen Real Estate, has been one of the forces behind leasing the massive Bishop Ranch office park, which now houses 30,000 employees, and, more recently, part of the team that leased the legendary Salesforce Tower. She told me, "the most helpful man in my career made a concerted, ongoing effort to teach, listen and advocate for me both internally and externally. He was invested in my career for the long haul and was willing to vouch for me to obtain stretch assignments and new opportunities."

Nature is smart. The chemistry created by the 51 percent/49 percent ratio of women to men in the US population was designed for a reason. Abstract thinking, maybe, but if you have ever worked at a brokerage office where the ratio is more equal than the normal, you will know why it is a wonderful thing.

It is astonishing to me to understand that we are not "there" yet by a long shot, in terms of recognizing the equal value contributed by women (and people who are diverse in other ways from the old standard profile of people in the commercial real estate workforce).



Alan Collenette - Executive Regional Managing Director of Colliers International

Margaret Duskin, the extraordinary pioneer and lone woman who dominated the San Francisco office leasing market of the 1980's and is today a tireless mentor to young women entering the field, tells me that men in the commercial brokerage business "need to recognize that women have multiple life roles to fulfill; brokerage firms and brokerage teams should use all tools (including scheduling sensitivity) so support womens' work-life balance." Items such as mothers' rooms and intelligent pre planning to cover and support their clients during extended maternity leave are just two examples.

From a business point of view, when you realize that less than 20 percent of commercial real estate brokers in Northern California are women, it is very telling how disproportionate their success is. The percentage of female brokers that have reached the very top is out of all proportion to their share of the workforce. Here in San Francisco, a partial list (apologies for the many, many omissions) would include Margaret Duskin, Jerry Haeg, Liz Hart, Karuki Morgan, Hannah Potter, Andrea Reeder, Julie Taylor, Mirella Webb and many others.

# MEN'S ROLES IN HELPING WOMEN SUCCEED IN COMMERCIAL REAL ESTATE BROKERAGE

Kalah Espinoza, the fast rising new phenomenon in multi-family investment brokerage, observes: "We need to encourage a mind-shift in the work place that correlates femininity with strength and ability, in equal measure to the way we relate those traits with masculinity. She believes that, "if we want to see more women choose to work in brokerage, we need men and women in leadership positions to advocate for us when we are not in the room to do it for ourselves."

There are six basic reasons I believe why men are not often involved proactively in helping women enter and succeed in the brokerage business, none of them based on conscious bias or prejudice:

- It is perhaps not on our radar. We are focused on our own careers
- It might be awkward to stand out as a vocal advocate for women, (especially if you are the first one in a brokerage office)
- Perhaps we have a fear of being unwelcome. After all, aren't we a key cause of the problem? It can be intimidating to attend a CREW function focusing on women in the industry, when men are a tiny proportion of those in the room (How ironic that is – women in brokerage know how that feels every day!)
- We do not know how to help. What would we be able to contribute?
- We may be concerned that people may think we are just trying to score points
- Are we genuinely trying to help, or just filling a quota or checking a box?

I genuinely believe that most men in brokerage would truly love to help even out the gender playing field, but we often feel like spectators in a game we don't understand. Perhaps we need to ask our female colleagues the serious questions, and then we really need to listen (which speaking for myself does not always come easily). My mother used to say, "Alan, you have two ears and one mouth – and there's a reason for that ratio."

We also need other men to lead the way and show us how to make a difference. I think it is a case of 'Men Helping Men to help Women.' I think that if every brokerage office had a male advocate who spent time working with his male colleagues to get them involved, it could spread rapidly into real action and results. The obvious possibilities for men to become involved are mentoring, affirmative recruiting and learning how to listen and yield the floor to give equal air-time to our female colleagues. No special favors needed – we are equals.

Scott Addison, president of Canadian brokerage for Colliers and a leading advocate for women in the field, has given the subject a lot of thought: "Men can have a huge influence in promoting more women in commercial brokerage by first recognizing that we men may have powerful unconscious biases [that] surface during the interview process, and we will need to actively overcome those. We also need to make sure the women currently in the industry have a voice, by simply asking them their opinion, particularly in group sessions and meetings. What you hear is enlightening, and you will find new leadership potential from those women that you may not have realized before."

As Andrea Reeder so eloquently puts it, "Men in commercial real estate first and foremost need to admit that there is a massive gender bias in brokerage and on the client side. Some disciplines are better than others, but office leasing stands out among the worst. In order for the industry to change, men in every role (not just leadership) need to actively seek out talented women and people of color to become co-workers and partners. Men need to commit to acting as advocates, mentors and sponsors."

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