

Women in eLearning - We're Bringing Women into Tech the Wrong Way (Apr 15)



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“Think about your personal stereotypes about people involved in technology. Make it your own mission to destroy those stereotypes through your leadership. Have courage to not stand idly by while casual or overt sexism occurs around you. If you’re a woman in tech, make sure that girls and young women get to meet you. Share your successes and your challenges and do your part to encourage women to be a part of STEM fields.”

While listening to Belinda Parmar’s DevLearn 2014 keynote presentation about helping girls and women get more involved in STEM careers, I thought: she’s right, but she’s wrong. She’s right that the numbers of girls choosing STEM careers is too low. She’s right that Silicon Valley is a relatively hostile environment for women. However, I believe there are a few things that she and everyone engaged in this discussion consistently get wrong. Here are four things I think we can do to be more inclusive and encourage women to enter and stay in STEM fields.

Clearly define the problem

It’s tough to find a solution to a problem when we don’t have a clear definition of it. Consider the statement, “We don’t have enough women in ‘tech.’” What exactly is “tech” and what defines if a woman is in it? One [Harvard Business Review study](#) frequently cited in articles about women in STEM actually focuses on women in computing. However, STEM includes all the sciences. Where the United States absolutely has a shortage of women majoring in computer science, we have a [glut in biology](#) (60 percent of degrees in biological sciences for women vs. 40 percent for men). Women are also well represented in chemistry, mathematics, and earth sciences. Statistics quoted for the rate of women leaving the tech industry (OMG 42 percent!!!) actually only apply to the [IT industry](#). Don’t get me wrong, I believe we have a problem, but until we present it clearly people who *don’t* believe there is a problem will continue to tell us to get over ourselves.

I propose that for The eLearning Guild, we define “tech” as any technology that supports learning. “Women in tech” should include women leading companies that deliver that technology, women who create eLearning (whether they code or use rapid development tools) and women who provide technology consulting. Using those factors, we should look at our statistics and see where we actually stand on this diversity issue.

Look critically at your organization

A spate of articles and twitter campaigns ([#questionsformen](#)) recently have highlighted overt and casual sexism in the workplace. Jessica Williams is a comedian who preemptively turned down the opportunity to replace Jon Stewart on *The Daily Show*. A writer subsequently described her as a “victim of imposter syndrome” and failing to “lean in.” Would your organization support a woman who turned down a promotion, or would it assume that she has no confidence in herself? According to research, this type of sexism is exactly what is running women out of many workplaces—not just tech.

Does your organization value what women bring to your team, or do you stand by while they are doing [corporate housework](#)? Managers have to assign as equal a value to the act of taking notes as to the act of showing up at an optional meeting. Along with minimizing the bias in your organization, do you proactively encourage women’s participation by creating a welcoming culture?

Research shows that most companies do have gender bias issues, ranging from pay gaps to hostile work environments. Observe the behaviors in your organization and consider the changes needed.

Stop telling people to code

Inevitably, most articles on the problem of girls and women in tech include the same coda: *learn to code*. Not really.

Learning to code is not actually a solution to our problem, as so many organizations and activists posit. Coding is a fantastic way to learn to think and to solve problems. And it may help get more girls to consider computer science. However, for our problem and our set of women, learning to code won’t help much. The solution to keeping women in STEM careers is more complex than having women learn one technical skill. You don’t have to know a line of code to be a woman in tech.

Look critically at yourself

Sheryl Sandberg, author of *Lean In*, has been both praised and criticized for her position on women at work, but she is undoubtedly right on one thing: *Be your authentic self*. Bring who you are to the table and make sure that your organization knows what you have to offer. There’s nothing wrong with creating eLearning [#likeagirl](#). Be a [#girlboss](#) if that’s you. The women who are interested in STEM careers need to see women being themselves.

Think about your personal stereotypes about people involved in technology. Make it your own mission to destroy those stereotypes through your leadership. Have courage to not stand idly by while casual or overt sexism occurs around you. If you’re a woman in tech, make sure that girls and young women get to meet you. Share your successes and your challenges, and do your part to encourage women to be a part of STEM fields.

Now, let’s get it right.

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