

PULLING BACK THE CURTAIN

Jean Grow, PhD

"Let's pull back the curtain."

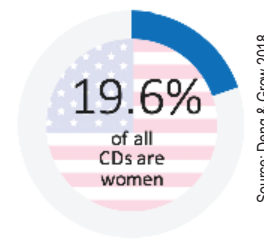
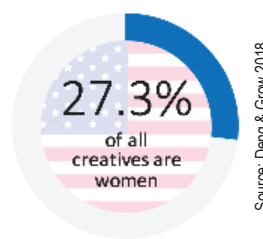
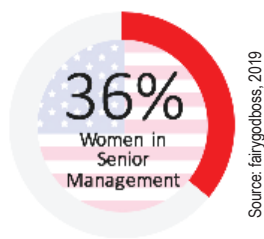
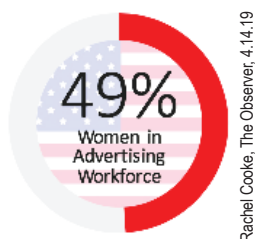
The data that frame this white paper are shaped by interviews with 25 executive women* who signed the Time's Up/Advertising manifesto. Pulling Back the Curtain, the first in a series, is framed by two question streams. First, what drove these women to publicly sign on. Second, what they saw as meaningful next steps. As one woman said, *"Let's pull the curtain back, and let's make sure that everybody knows what's going on and how we're going to handle it."*

"We have to completely reimagine what the industry looks like."

The findings suggest that the systemic structure of the advertising industry is fraying. To address it the industry needs *"to first draw the poison,"* which is what drove many of them to put their names behind Time's Up/Advertising. The need to **create systemic accountability**, shaped by women *"leading by example,"* is for them a foundational underpinning for all future changes. They believe that *"change can only be driven by the most powerful women pushing really hard within their systems."* They spoke passionately about the desire to shape tangible action with measurable, **meaningful outcomes** because *"what gets measured gets done."* These executives are **seeking to diversify** the advertising industry and are fully cognizant that women in leadership are only the beginning. They know, in their bones, that *"the lack of diversity is holding back the creativity in the industry."* They believe that only by **creating a safe and equitable culture** will systemic change take root. For as one woman said, *"It's not just a few bad apples, it's a systematic problem in advertising."* To a person they are frustrated, some are downright angry and, surely, they are *"not ignorant in any way."* They are, however, tired of being viewed as the problem. *"We aren't crazy women."* At the end of the day, to a woman, they believe that **solving the problems together** is the only way forward.

"I just wanted to fucking do something about it."

While each signed the manifesto for their own reasons, the words of one signatory speaks volumes about their communal indignation. *"I just wanted to fucking do something about it."* The only way to accomplish that is to *"keep radically honest."* For the task is large. *"We have to completely reimagine what the industry looks like."*



***ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS:** I extend my deepest gratitude to, and enduring admiration for, the women who so generously opened up and trusted me. All of them agreed to be listed in this acknowledgement, which I do without titles or agencies. For, I'm sure, none of them need introductions. Thank you: Singleton Beato, Kristen Cavallo, Andrea Cook, Karen Costello, Minnie Damle, Colleen Decourcy, Lisa Evia, Jess Greenwood, Sasha Hartman, Sandi Hildreth, Jennifer Hohman, Angie Johnson, Margaret Johnson, Debbie Linder, Laura Maness, Tina Manikas, Yumi Prentice, Nancy Reyes, Tiffany Rolfe, Tricia Russo, Erica Schmidt, Melissa Schoenke, Nancy Vonk, Bonnie Wan and Sarah Watson.

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“Holding companies, mostly run by white men, are holding us back.”

Pushing Boundaries to Create Systemic Accountability

Creating accountability begins with *“modeling character in our leadership.”* That necessitates being *“really clear on where I can contribute”* and having *“deep raw honest conversations.”* To fail is human and thus leaders need to *“take accountability for my imperfections and mistakes.”* However, it is not only women in leadership who must be accountable. Accountability applies to everyone. For too long the advertising industry has *“put them (creative men) on pedestals. We pay them too much money. We give them too much power. That needs to stop.”* Pulling back the curtain means it is time to *“show up in the ways that I expect other people to show up,”* which is not on a pedestal.

- “Create some light where you know you can make people’s lives better.”
- “Try not to run from hard conversations.”
- “Work with C-level and HR to ensure that we approach things differently.”
- “Don’t turn the volume down on the conversation.”
- “Agency leaders need to hold clients more accountable. That sometimes means addressing bad client behavior.”

“Go beyond unconscious bias training.”

Shaping Tangible Tactics with Meaningful Outcomes

It always seems to begin with talk of unconscious bias training, no matter the industry. But unconscious bias training, in and of itself, may not work. In fact, there is a need to *“go beyond unconscious bias training to conflict resolution training”* because alone unconscious bias training can actually reinforce bias. Then there is the raft of ways to talk, share and explore change, as agencies *“invest heavily in our ideologies.”* But really none of this works if decision makers, at the highest levels, are not changing along with the employees they are targeting. And that, the insular world of the creative kings, has been the advertising industry’s perennial problem. What it takes to move the needle on meaningful transparent change is this, *“I have to show up in the ways that I expect other people to show up.”* This is the attitude that needs to transcend agencies from top to bottom, starting at the top.

- “Sign 3% Pledge for Pay Equity.”
- “Stay interviews, not done by your boss.”
- “We launched electronic feedback and a performance tool.”
- “Internal art exhibit that rotates culturally relevant topics.”
- “We created ‘Walk in My Shoes,’ to shed light on microaggressions in the workplace.”
- “Invest in programming like Black Employee Network, Woman Up!, and our LGBTQ Network. Then we pitch ideas to clients from each one of these groups.”

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"A diverse mindset = achieving the adjacent possible."

Seeking Diversity

"Take ambitious steps" to change the culture of advertising agencies by diversifying them. That means *"checking my own human desire to be comfortable."* Because at the end of the day a diverse workforce gives us *"a greater chance of achieving the adjacent possible,"* which greatly expands creative possibilities. These women have dedicated themselves to making that happen, from *"50% diverse candidate pools"* to *"hiring diverse talent into"* every new role to taking *"names off resumes."* Yes, diversity is possible, but the commitment means going deep early, with initiatives that pull in youth from underrepresented communities and training them; and continually going broad, by seeking creative talent from other industries. In short they advocate to stop *"fighting each other over who you can hire. Start building and growing more talent."* It's time for the industry to get serious about its lack of diversity and that includes women in leadership. Clients are already beginning to say they won't *"give us business until they see a more diverse a group of people at the table."* But, the bottom line is this, once you have the talent, they better feel welcome or they will walk. As they well should.

- "Make sure that I am hiring as much diversity into my department as I can and that I'm checking my own human desire to be comfortable."
- "(Re)pledge to Free the Bid (Work)."
- "Fast-track development for women and of people of color."
- "Create a database of great diverse talent."
- "Require 50% diverse candidate pool."
- "Shake shit up."

"Zero tolerance. Even microaggressions."

Creating a Safe and Equitable Culture

Agencies need to promulgate a *"holistic desire"* for ending the culture of silence that has allowed sexual harassment and gender bias to be normalized. Only then will an industry-wide cultural shift happen – a shift from a closed homogenous culture, which protects those in power, to an inclusive culture, which supports mutual respect and thus equity and safety. Leaders who reject the current culture of silence are likely those who embrace, and encourage, salary equity, equitable treatment of women and people from underrepresented communities, and gender-neutral paid parental leave. Now is not the time to *"turn the volume down."* *Now is the time to "create some light where you know you can make people's lives better."*

- "Have real open conversations (where) people can raise their hand and speak out about the issues that they're facing without being silenced or worse, not believed."
- "There's a holistic desire for the agency to stop hiding things."
- "Equal leave to all our parents, without negative consequences."
- "Do audits on pay equity and change pay accordingly."
- "Make a pledge to reach pay equity."

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“Regulators are asleep at the wheel.”

Solving Problems Together

The overriding message here is two-fold. First, the industry needs to “wake up.” There needs to be more “channels to share from discussions in boardrooms” and “open industry conversations” need to become normalized. It would further behoove industry leaders to work toward an industry “code of conduct,” one with teeth. Second, industry is “not policing ourselves,” and that includes HR, as will be discussed in undercurrents. The trade press too, “you have a responsibility” to cover these issues with more vigor. Together with the trade press, leaders must help create a space for dialogue. Then the press must more fully cover the issues at hand and commit to tracking change initiatives across time.

- “We have to keep ourselves honest about what the changes are going to be and that they come from the grassroots. It is still a very young conversation, and it needs to mature a lot.”
- “Look at the opportunities where you can have the industry have a conversation as a whole.”
- “Holding companies have needed to have this conversation for a while.”
- “We need to be honest about what people were fired for.”
- “The trade press, you have a responsibility.”
- “We need a code of conduct.”

UNDERCURRENTS

Having explored the five themes that represent the focus of these women advertising executives, as they signed on to Time’s Up/Advertising, I close with three undercurrents that threaded their way across nearly every conversation.

“HR works for the organization, not the women who report.”

HR is Broken

Across the interviews, there was a sense that HR in advertising is broken. Many of these women spoke of women’s fears about going to HR, because HR too often “protects those with power.” Too often, “HR works for the organization, not the women who report.” Ultimately that structural orientation will be the undoing of advertising agencies. For the few women who felt that HR successfully supported employees they still saw a clear need to, “make sure that people really, really understand how HR works. We are dragging HR out of the back office and into the light.” But more often than not, their hope was to “make sure everybody knows they have recourse because now they don’t.” The findings strongly suggest, a fraying systemic structure within the advertising industry where HR is, indeed, broken.

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Some “men have been living in bubbles for decades and are willfully blind to a lot of broken systems.”

The Importance of Men

The fluid, and important, role of men was a consistent tension. On the one hand, most of the women see men as assets and often allies. Yet, other times men act as fearful roadblocks to change. Generally, these women feel they walk a tightrope. They must “*be a strong voice for women, but not alienate men.*” Some “*men are afraid and they are not going step up.*” Many men don’t know how to navigate what they perceive as a minefield. Yet, there was a fervent belief that men need to be partners in the change-making that must be done. There are “*vocal male allies who speak out and often put extra care into their reporting and colleague relationships.*” On the other hand, women, particularly those working within agencies that are part of holding companies, often resent the what they see as men having a strangle hold on the systemic structural power. “*These are old white men that have been living in bubbles for decades and are willfully blind to a lot of broken systems.*” The bubbles have created systems where “*men don’t want to hire women, because they don’t know how to talk to them anymore.*” Yet, these women, feel like they “*need to have some good conversations with guy friends about those things.*” Indeed, “*radically honest*” conversations.

“I hope we took some accountability for a world that we let happen.”

A Generational Gap

The final undercurrent is the ever-present, but largely unspoken generational gap. “*Women need to take ownership,*” for what some of these women leaders believe was their contribution to the problems. Because some women, especially younger women and women of color, view older executive women as having participated in creating this “toxic culture,” or at least turning a blind eye. One woman acknowledged as much. “*I was raised on sexual harassment, John Hughes films, and Me Too. We all have it. You know, it is in our bones.*” Another woman brought it back to where we began, accountability. “*I hope we took some accountability for a world that we let happen.*” Between this generational gap and the human propensity to look for “*the next shiny thing and I hate to use “shiny” as defining a crisis. But it’s true. I hope that the industry stays committed.*”

I too hope the “industry stays committed.” To that end, I have published **Pulling Back the Curtain**, the first of three white papers reflecting the views of executive advertising women. These will be followed by a set of white papers revealing the perspectives of executive advertising men. Finally, a third set will compare and contrast the views of women and men, with an eye on reshaping the advertising industry. To learn more about me and my work or contact me for consulting, you’ll find me at jeangrow.com or jean.grow@gmail.com.

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