



Gender  
Communication

in the  
Work  
Place

BY SHAWN ANDREWS

People do things that make sense to them. Both men and women are trying to do the right thing, but by different sets of rules. It is not about right or wrong, good or bad, or Mars versus Venus. It is simply about difference. We also see gender differences in both emotional intelligence and leadership styles between men and women, which can have a profound impact on one's career advancement. By having an awareness of these differences in the workplace and understanding the intent of the other gender, it can make a significant impact on your success as a trainer, as well as your organization's ability to manage the talent inherent in its employees.

#### **GENDER DIFFERENCES**

Men and women live in different cultures. It starts at birth and carries into adulthood. In her bestselling book, "Hardball for Women," Pat Heim outlined the different rules that men and women play by, and noted some key differences between the genders. Let's take a look at how children play. Boys play games centered around conflict and competition (think GI Joe, cops and robbers, or any sport). In these games, boys learn how to win and lose, get to a goal, take risks, and play with people they do not like. In contrast, girls play games centered around relationships and getting along with no conflict (think tea

parties, dolls, or jumping rope). In these games, girls learn how to negotiate, avoid conflict, and do what is fair for all with an even distribution of power.

#### **BOTH MEN AND WOMEN ARE TRYING TO DO THE RIGHT THING, BUT BY DIFFERENT SETS OF RULES**

As adults, we carry these lessons into the workplace in the way we work within a structure, the way we hold meetings, the way we work in teams, the way we talk, and even in the way that we lead others. First,

let us examine organizational structure. Men prefer to work in a hierarchical structure. This structure is both goal-focused and linear-focused, with a directive communication style. Women prefer to work in a flat structure that is process-focused and multifaceted. Talking it over through discussion and involvement is the preferred communication style in a flat structure.

Second, the way men and women conduct meetings is different. Men tend to get their “ducks in a row” and build alignment before the meeting, so when the meeting actually occurs, it has already happened. Women, in sharp contrast, bring their ideas and discussion points to the meeting expecting to dialog with everyone involved, but unbeknownst to her, the substantial part of the meeting has already occurred. Another key difference is how men and women conduct themselves during a meeting. Men speak at length in a declamatory voice, tend to interrupt and dominate the conversation, and resist being influenced in public. Women generally speak briefly, phrase their points as questions, wait their turn, and smile more.

Another area of distinction between men and women is the way we talk in the workplace. Men tend to make things up and women tend to provide too many disclaimers. For example, a man may look at a job description, see one thing that applies to him, and tell the hiring manager that he is qualified and can do the job. A woman, on the other hand, may look at a job description, see all but one thing that applies to her, and tell the hiring manager that she does not have experience in that one area. Of course, this is a simplified example, but it is effective in illustrating general differences.

In addition, men and women talk about their success and failures differently. When it comes to success, men tend to point inward (taking the credit themselves) and women point outward (by giving others credit). When it comes to failure, men point outward (blaming others) and women point inward (blaming themselves). As you might imagine, these differences

can lead to very different perceptions of employees by both co-workers and leadership at an organization.

There are two key contrasts between men and women’s communication styles. Men tend to pick up verbal cues more than women do, and women tend to pick up non-verbal cues more than men do. In addition, something to observe next time you are in a discussion, is that women nod during the conversation to tell the listener “I hear you” - but they may not necessarily agree with what is being said. Men nod during the conversation only when they are in agreement with what is said.

Lastly, men and women lead others differently. Men tend to have a command and control leadership style, which is consistent with the preferred hierarchical organizational structure that is directive focused. We see examples of this style in the military, in emergency situations, and when there are tight time constraints. Women tend to lead by involvement, which is consistent with a process-oriented flat structure. This style is important when collaboration, creativity and stakeholder buy-in is needed.

### **EMOTIONAL INTELLIGENCE**

There are other factors at play that you should understand to be able to fully interpret the complexities of gender differences in the workplace. Emotional intelligence assessments have found women and men to be equally as intelligent emotionally, but they are strong in different areas or attributes that are gender specific.

For example, women score higher than men do in areas of empathy and social responsibility, which are generally considered female-specific emotional intelligence attributes. In contrast, men outperform women on stress tolerance and self-confidence measures, which are generally considered male-specific emotional intelligence attributes. Examples of other types of emotional intelligence attributes include self-awareness, assertiveness, independence, flexibility, problem solving, impulse control, optimism, and happiness. Some of these

attributes are considered gender-neutral; however, gender-specific attributes may play a significant role in how we perceive men and women in the workplace.

In considering emotional intelligence as it pertains to leadership, the importance of one emotional intelligence attribute compared to another and the impact it has on leadership effectiveness, or the achievement of a top leadership position, may carry different weight and value at a given corporation. Further, these attributes, or lack thereof, could have a negative effect on a man’s or woman’s advancement into leadership positions within an organization.

### **EMOTIONAL INTELLIGENCE ASSESSMENTS HAVE FOUND WOMEN AND MEN TO BE EQUALLY AS INTELLIGENT EMOTIONALLY, BUT THEY ARE STRONG IN DIFFERENT AREAS**

As a training and development professional, you can help by providing emotional intelligence assessments, education and training to your audience and even your leadership teams so they have an awareness of their specific emotional intelligence attributes.

### **THE LEADERSHIP GAP**

A discussion about gender differences in the workplace would be amiss without a discussion on leadership. In the business world, women leaders are still a minority. During the past three decades, women have achieved parity with men in both number of employees in the workforce and positions in middle management. Despite this fact, female leaders remain the minority, especially in key executive leadership positions. Women now represent 58.6 percent of the labor force in the United States and occupy 51.4 percent of all management, professional and related occupations according to the U.S. Department of Labor. However, women hold only 14.3 percent of executive officer positions of the Fortune 500 companies, and the number of female CEOs at these companies is 3.8 percent.

The significance of these statistics relates to the ability of corporations to leverage the enormous pool of talent inherent in their employees. Given that women account for more than half of college graduates, half of professional degrees such as M.D. and J.D., and half of management and professional occupations, a natural shift to a more gender-balanced senior management should be a reasonable, expected outcome.

If companies tap their female employees, it would have a positive impact on diversity both in middle management and the board of directors. In addition, stakeholders of a corporation expect that the company will appropriately manage and maximize their resources. If companies that have more women in their senior ranks have better return of investment, then companies that do not have women in their senior ranks may be missing an opportunity to enhance their effectiveness. As a trainer, you have a significant role in helping develop talent.

There are two well-documented leadership styles that you may have heard of, one is transactional leadership and the other is transformational leadership. Transactional leadership refers to a relationship between leader and follower that result in an even exchange of transactions between one another. This has been generally associated with male leaders. Transformational leadership refers to a relationship between leader and follower that is built around cooperation, lower levels of control,

collaboration, and collective problem-solving and decision-making. This has been generally associated with female leaders.

In addition to leadership style, the relative effectiveness of male and female leaders has been assessed in a number of studies. Men and women have been shown to be equally effective leaders overall, but there were gender differences such that women and men were more effective in leadership roles that were congruent with their gender. For example, women were less effective than men were in military positions, but were somewhat more effective than men in education, government and social service organizations, and substantially more effective than men in middle management positions, where communal interpersonal skills are highly valued. In summary, the research supports small differences in leadership style and effectiveness between men and women.

#### SO, WHAT NOW?

We have discussed that both men and women are trying to do the right thing, but by two different set of rules. It is clear that there are significant gender differences in the way we communicate and conduct ourselves in the workplace. Now that you have this awareness, what can you do? First, reassess what the opposite gender is really trying to communicate and simply interpret or hear the message differently. In short, reinterpret the intent

behind the actions. Second, flex your style by modifying your behavior to be in sync with the other person. Third, talk about your gender differences and what is happening, and discuss ways to better work together.

As a trainer, you can influence both emotional intelligence and leadership at our organization. You can bring awareness of emotional intelligence to the employees to help close any gender gaps or misperceptions that may exist. Further, you can have a significant role in helping to create training programs that develop leadership talent. Ideally, companies should be a mosaic that represents both their employees and their customer base.

Gender communications and differences in the workplace abound. Just as we cannot expect the same behavior from everyone, we cannot communicate with or lead everyone in the same way. Remember, it is not about right and wrong, it is simply about difference. By having an awareness of these differences in the workplace, it can have a significant impact on your success as a trainer, as well as your organization's ability to manage the talent that lies in their employees. We need to value, talk about, and laugh about our collective gender differences.

*Shawn Andrews leads the Global Medical Affairs training department at Allergan. [Email Shawn.](#)*

## TAKEAWAYS

Both men and women are trying to do the right thing, but by different sets of rules. It is not about right or wrong, good or bad, or Mars versus Venus. It is simply about difference. There are also gender differences in emotional intelligence, leadership and communication styles between men and women, which can have a profound impact on one's career advancement in their organization.

- There are distinct differences between men and women in the way we work within a structure, hold meetings, the way we talk, and the way we lead others.
- Emotional intelligence assessments have found men and women to be equally as intelligent emotionally, but they are strong in different areas or attributes that are gender specific.
- Women account for more than half of college graduates, professional degrees, and management and professional occupations, yet few women hold senior leadership levels and less than 4 percent of Fortune 500 CEOs are women.
- Corporations need to leverage the enormous pool of talent in their employees, and develop leaders who represent both their employees and customers.
- To address gender differences, reinterpret intent, flex your style and talk it over.
- Having awareness of gender differences can have significant impact on your success as a trainer, and on your organization's ability to manage the talent inherent in its employees.