

## Women in Leadership: Changing the Game

Karen Ayas

With a workforce that starts 50--50 why do only 2% of CEO and less than 20% of senior positions on average end up being held by women? In the past few years attention to the topic has increased and the needle has moved some, but way too much energy is spent on the blame game, what's wrong with whom. If instead our efforts can be focused on understanding the gender related differences and learning to trust and work with the natural strengths and talents of men and women, we can truly change the game.

Despite the attention to the topic (also fueled by the book *Lean In* in which Sheryl Sandberg describes her journey to the top) and statistics that prove the economic benefits of women in top teams, progress will be slow unless we contribute and perpetuate the problem due to our natural tendencies.

Men and women are wired differently. These differences are deeply rooted in anthropology, biology, and neurology as scientists have clearly shown. Women need to understand why and how they tend to get in their own way. Men need to make an effort to appreciate how and why women behave the way they do (yes, this is complex and doesn't come naturally) and how they can contribute. The good news: with conscious and deliberate effort to grasp the behavioral preferences, everyone benefits at the end.

### **We are wired differently**

Female and male brains have visible distinctions. The makeup of our brain drives our thinking, our emotions, and behavioral tendencies.

Male brains are larger by about 10% and contain 4% more neurons; however, the frontal and temporal areas of the cortex tend to be bigger in female brains. Also brain substances are distributed differently. Male brains contain 6.5 times more gray matter (generally associated with thinking) whereas female brains tend to have 9.5 times more white matter connecting various parts of the brain. Researchers believe that men tend to think more with gray matter and women with white matter and this may account for some of the differences in how women and men think, feel and behave<sup>1</sup>. For instance, a woman's brain, while smaller in size, may work much faster than a man's. Neither is a predictor of intelligence but points out to different qualities and there is more than one way to arrive at the same result.

The corpus callosum—the bridge of nerve tissue that connects the right and left sides of the brain—is thicker in the female brain. Researchers using imaging technology of the brain can see what parts are activated. Females have language functioning on both sides of the brain, concludes Denckla from Kennedy Krieger Institute.<sup>2</sup> Women's brains neurons are more densely packed on the cortex of the brain which is the command and control center for language and communication. Using imaging studies scientists have clearly shown that men and women access different parts of the brain while performing the same task.

“Women use the cerebral cortex for solving problems that require navigational skills. Men use an entirely different area, mainly the left hippocampus that is not activated in women’s brain. The hippocampus automatically codes where you are in space,” explains Geary.<sup>3</sup> “As a result when a man gives directions, he is more likely to say go west then south. The women will describe it as turning right at Starbucks then continue until the intersection by the gas station. Overall, men are better at getting from point A to B but they are also less likely to realize if they take the wrong turn or they are lost”.

Many studies have shown women to be faster and more accurate at identifying emotions, understanding facial differences and vocal intonations. Women tend to have larger deep limbic system than men which helps them excel at connecting with others and expressing their emotions concludes Shaywitz<sup>4</sup>.

Rubin Gur and his colleagues at U Penn have also discovered that sections of the brain used to control aggression and anger responses are larger in women. This explains why women often have better emotional intelligence. Women have greater activity in hippocampus, the part of the brain that helps store memories. This may explain why women never forget and have trouble letting go. They can hold a grudge forever: “remember what you had said to me 10 years ago...”

Based on a study of 26,000 people by Daniel Amen<sup>5</sup>, on average women’s brains proved more active than men’s. The biggest difference in the level of activity is in the prefrontal cortex, the area that governs planning, organization and learning from mistakes. “Bigger and more active frontal cortex suggests that women are wired for leadership and may actually be better bosses,” says Dr. Amen.

Neuroscience also shows that even if the hard wiring of the brain remains unchanged, the function of the hardware is constantly altered by experience due to the brain’s ability to adapt. Role expectations, culture and upbringing play a huge role explains Parvizi from Stanford’s Clayman Institute<sup>6</sup>.

“We should take gender based differences in brain structure seriously and work with them rather than pretend it doesn’t exist,” argues UCI’s Dr. Cahill.<sup>7</sup>

The best news is that these brain differences are very complementary when it comes to leadership and teamwork. So we need to realize that what we bring to the table is not equal and this is a good thing.

### **We have different preferences**

While no two people are exactly alike, there are generalizable patterns of personality and behavioral tendencies that differentiate groups of people. Many psychologists have proposed models of personality structures (e.g. the Big 5 traits) and looked at gender differences. With recent advances in technology (i.e. brain imaging) much more information is available on biological and physiological foundations of the behavioral constructs.

Anthropological biologist Helen Fisher’s research<sup>8</sup> on behavioral traits and neural systems is very illuminating. Her study concludes that there are 4 broad temperaments associated with neural systems (i.e. hormonal influences):

- 1) Testosterone – Analytical/Tough minded
- 2) Dopamine/norepinephrine – Curious/Energetic

3) Estrogen/oxytocin – Prosocial/Empathetic

4) Serotonin – Cautious/Social Norm compliant

Preferences have been studied extensively and assessment tools such as MBTI(Myers Briggs) or DISC<sup>9</sup> help us understand ourselves and each other better and increase our effectiveness as leaders and team members. Those familiar with DiSC will probably see the resemblance. While each one of us have a very unique composition, much of the behavioral patterns can be attributed to these broad temperaments and can help explain the derived preferences in male and female behavior.

Helen Fisher identifies in her research talents that women and men express more regularly due to the differences that may come from the distinctions in the brain make up and hormones. These impact the way we think, collect information, make decisions, how we perceive power, connect and influence.

“Women integrate details faster and arrange bits of data into more complex patterns. As they weigh more variables, consider more options, and see a wider array of possible solutions to a problem,” explains Fisher<sup>10</sup> and refers to this as contextual thinking. “Men are likely to focus their attention to one thing at a time. They tend to compartmentalize relevant material, discard what they consider as extraneous data.” Higher presence of testosterone helps focus.

Women’s verbal aptitude and excellence with linguistic skills as well as social skills are associated with estrogen. Women’s ability to read body language and complex emotions, discerning nuances of posture and facial expression, even cross culturally, suggest that they have higher emotional intelligence.

Women tend to see power as a network of connections whereas men tend to see power as status. Fisher claims that these are clearly linked to hormones. “When birds are injected with testosterone they begin to fight for rank; infusions of estrogen tend to produce nurturing and connecting behaviours instead.” Not surprisingly, women are more likely to strive for friends, and men for rank.

Women live in a world of win---win. Women ask for advice even when they don’t need it, women give suggestions rather than orders. And women give the power away; for instance, they do not sit at the head of the table even when they are the leader.

Women tend to underestimate themselves and lack confidence. They consistently give themselves lower scores in self evaluations than men. 66% of men believe they are above average while 33% of women think they are above average.

## **Our leadership styles are different**

There are widely shared conscious and unconscious assumptions and expectations from men and women in leadership. Same actions tend to be interpreted very differently based on gender. Women are helpful, friendly, and sensitive while men are ambitious, dominant, and self-confident. Women tend to have a more participative and collaborative style. Women’s decision making styles are different. Women prefer to talk it through: “I didn’t want to make a decision without hearing everyone’s opinion” is common.

Women's contextual thinking can be a great asset for long term planning. Their ability to hold many things simultaneously in their minds helps them deal with ambiguity. Some of the qualities women naturally bring to the table are perseverance, determination, developing others, engaging people, flexibility, resilience, and intuition. All of these are leadership skills that are increasingly in demand in today's business world.

Needless to say that men have many other skills and natural talents that make them effective leaders. Understanding how complementary these skills are is critical. Women do have a double bind. Their natural tendencies will be to seek approval and being liked. Yet, if they are successful, people tend to like them less. A successful man, on the other hand, is well liked. Sandberg<sup>11</sup> illustrates this brilliantly in her book with the classic Heidi/Howard study and many other examples. Leadership is not a popularity contest and everyone should avoid striving to be liked, but women can fall into the trap much easier.

## **What can we do about it?**

Preferences drive our behavior to a great extent but they are not set in stone. Creating awareness will help us move away from our default preferences, but only if we are convinced that it is worth the effort.

As a top male executive questions you should ask yourself: Do I see the value in having women on my team (reporting to you or your team)? If the value is clear and the intention is there, be aware that it is still not a given.

At some level every single manager knows that men and women's natural talents do tend to differ and that they are complementary in so many ways. The issue is not knowing it but being clueless as to how to put this knowledge into action, especially when natural tendencies in every interaction will go against it.

Consider this: There are two candidates for the job, both equally competent (in their own unique way). The communication with the male candidate will seem much more focused, direct to the point than their female counterpart. If this is your own communication style, you will inevitably and naturally have a preference for it and the male candidate will win over.

We have to be "gender bilingual" as Helen Fisher puts it and learn how to flex our behaviors so that we treat others as they want to be treated, not as we want to be treated. Understanding preferences and how we are wired can help us avoid the default behaviors and overcome our natural tendencies that get in the way.

Here is how we as women can help ourselves get out of our own way:

- Champion yourself and what you are capable of. Do not expect to be found out by others.
- Stop expecting to be understood and be disappointed when you are not noticed. Show yourself.
- Take responsibility for your own career development. Continually question where you are heading and what the right assignments are to get you there.
- Do not extend yourself too far and try to be everything to everyone, stay focused.
- Delegate. Ask for and accept help.

## The Ripples Group

- Let go of the desire to be liked and trying to please everyone.
- Accept praise. Take the credit.
- Avoid annoying men: be extremely clear and concise, stop fidgeting.
- Skip the apology. Don't give compliments unless you mean it.
- Make sure you are heard.
- Don't ask for advice when you don't need it.

Here are a few examples of how men can contribute:

- Acknowledge the issue
- Make an effort to listen deeply, be more patient
- Ask for their opinion, create the space
- Admit if you are wrong
- Help women build their self-confidence, hold back the criticism
- Reach out to high potential women, coach them

This requires conscious deliberate effort. Preferences are never an excuse for behavior. We cannot change all our behavioral tendencies, especially given that they are so deeply rooted in our biology and millions of years of evolution. But we can certainly work on specific behaviors that prevent us from being effective leaders.

In a recent study conducted by Bain<sup>12</sup>, including 1500 senior managers, 66% of men believe that there are equal opportunities for climbing the ladder while only 30% of women think so. This is just one of many such studies that demonstrate clear differences in perception. We have a long way to go.

Men who have daughters entering the workforce are much more interested and motivated in addressing the issue. Yet, the lack of female role models is still alarming.

How many women will it take to change the game? Let's assume women will continue to use their natural talents of coping with ambiguity, long term thinking and most importantly, perseverance. Let's also own the responsibility that we as women are making choices and we may choose not to make the sacrifices needed to be at the top. Interestingly enough, the clearer the need for female leadership becomes, the more women will opt to go for the top, to help others and to be of service.

So perhaps it's just a matter of reaching that tipping point. We can get there much faster if we put on different glasses to see what's innately there and what we can create with it. We need to stop asking what's wrong with whom.

## Endnotes

<sup>1</sup>See more on differences at <http://www.webmd.com/balance/features/how-male-female-brains-differ> <http://www.lucinebiotech.com/exploring-brain-differences-male-v-female/>

<sup>2</sup>Dr. Martha Bridge Denckla is a research scientist and director of the [Developmental Cognitive Neurology Clinic](#) at the Kennedy Krieger Institute.

<sup>3</sup>Dr. David C. Geary is a cognitive developmental and evolutionary psychologist with interests in mathematical learning and sex differences in University of Missouri.

<sup>4</sup>Shaywitz, B.A., et.al. "Sex differences in the functional organization of the brain for language" *Nature* vol 373 (6515)

<sup>5</sup>See more at <http://health.yahoo.net/experts/dayinhealth/surprising-differences-between-male-and-female-brain200>

<sup>6</sup>Dr. Josef Parvizi is an Assistant Professor of Neurology and Neurological Sciences at Stanford University Medical Center. See more at <http://gender.stanford.edu/news/2011/is-female-brain-innately-inferior>

<sup>7</sup>Dr. Larry Cahill is a neuroscientist at UC Irvine. See more at <http://www.ocregister.com/articles/differences---382702---women---male.html%E2%80%8E>

<sup>8</sup>See [http://www.helenfisher.com/downloads/articles/Brown\\_et\\_al\\_2013.pdf](http://www.helenfisher.com/downloads/articles/Brown_et_al_2013.pdf)

<sup>9</sup>DISC is a behavior assessment tool based on the DISC theory of psychologist [William Marston](#). Marston's theory centers on four different personality traits: Dominance, Inducement, Submission, and Compliance. See more at <http://www.discprofile.com/whatisdisc.htm>

<sup>10</sup>Fisher, H (2005) *The Natural Leadership Talents of Women. Enlightened Power: How Women Are Transforming the Practice of Leadership*. L Coughlin, E Wingard and K Hollihan (Eds). San Francisco, CA: Jossey Bass

<sup>11</sup>Sandberg, S (2013) *Lean In: Women, Work and the Will to Lead*

<sup>12</sup> Study conducted by Bain's Global Women's Leadership Council in 2012 including 1500 executives from institutions around the world