

Gender Myths

By Barbara Annis

Many books written today on women's issues often cite, and accurately so, how women are misunderstood and undervalued in the world of business. These books often point out how men are either blind to these inequities or intentionally instigate them. What many of these works miss though are the misunderstandings that women have of men. From a balanced perspective, to misconstrue is a human condition, not the domain of any one gender.

The myths that men and women have of each other are often based on generalized characteristics or expected behaviours. Such stereotyping tends to be self-perpetuating: Men and women will seek confirmation of their beliefs through any behaviour exhibited by the other side while each gender may not realize that their very conduct may perpetuate the assumptions made about them.

Our practice has revealed the following as the leading gender myths in business today:

Myths about Women

Women Are Not Serious About Business

Women leaving organizations will often cite their reasons as "personal" so as not to burn bridges. Men believe they are hearing the truth, which perpetuates the myth that women's personal issues will usually override their seriousness about business. Women validate this myth by not revealing the truth as to why they are leaving. We recently interviewed 2,400 women who left their positions in various Fortune 500 companies and discovered five key reasons for their departure: "Not being valued" topped the list followed by "feeling excluded," "a male-dominated work environment," and "lack of opportunity." A distant fifth was "work-life issues."

Women Can't Hack it in Business

Men will point to the one or two women in executive positions in their company as proof that even though 50% of their graduating class were women or more than half of their middle management is now comprised of women, only a few are competitive enough to make it to the top. Women again perpetuate this myth by not disclosing their actual reasons for quitting.

In a 2009, Harvard Business School survey entitled "The Exodus of Women," 82% expressed a desire to work with people they respect. 80% wanted freedom to be themselves while 79% sought flexible schedules. 64% wanted recognition for their unique strengths and 15% desired a more powerful executive position. Only 6% said they quit because the work was too demanding.

Women Lack Self-Confidence

When women openly express doubt, men interpret this as a lack of self-confidence or an aversion to making tough decisions. It is human nature to harbour feelings of uncertainty, but men suppress such emotions. Women are, by their very nature, more open and trusting and, as a result, regarded as the weaker gender.

Myths about Men

Men Don't Listen

Women maintain that men do not listen, so they will continue talking with the hope that men will eventually catch on. This, in turn, causes men to “tune out,” which then reinforces the assumption that men do not listen. The reality is that men and women listen differently.

We tested 220 statements of over 100,000 men and women in over 5,000 diagnostic sessions. The simple statement “What do you think?” held a different meaning for each gender:

- Women interpret “What do you think?” as a prelude to a conversation or an exploration of feelings.
- Men interpret “What do you think?” as being asked to give an opinion or make a decision.

Men are Exclusionary

Women will point to men’s club-like behaviour in meetings and at business socials and claim that their intention is to exclude. Men, confronted with this challenge, will recall all the times they were inclusive and respond with, “No, that’s not true. I really did want to include you.” They will discard such accusations because, in their recollection, their intent was never to exclude.

Men’s Behaviours Are Intentional

Women believe that men’s deliberate intention is to maintain an imbalance by not including them in meetings and on teams. The assumption is that if men are behaving a certain way, then it must be their intention. Moreover, if they are not reacting at all, it is their intention as well.

The fact is that men do not give as much thought and consideration to situations at the level of detail that women do. Women are more inclusive and cultivating by nature and the fact that men are not only serves to sustain the belief that men are intentionally non-inclusive and non-cultivating.

Myths such as these are endemic in business because men and women do not fully understand the reasons for the differences between them. Gender Intelligence is the best path to that understanding. GI is the ability to comprehend the distinguishing characteristics of each gender beyond that of physical and cultural to include attitudinal and behavioural distinctiveness. It is an informed and active consciousness that values *difference-thinking* in such areas as strategic thinking, team leadership, and decision-making.

Only when these gender myths are understood and resolved will men and women learn to fully appreciate the unique contributions intrinsic to each other and engage confidently and effectively in workplace settings.