



The Gender Intelligence Chronicles™

Changing the Business Landscape

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Where Gender Difference Starts

By Barbara Annis

Sandra had plenty of unique skills that she didn't feel were being put to use, let alone valued. She had a real ability to read people. She listened differently than her male colleagues. She read between the lines and caught things they didn't. She saw a larger picture when they only saw part of it. She was good at building relationships with clients and had a strong ability to sense where people were coming from. Her clients felt she was very tuned in to their needs. And they thought she was thorough, taking her time to cover all the aspects of a problem before she came to conclusions.

Meanwhile, Nathan, as a male minority in a female-dominated skin products company, also had some unique skills that he felt his female colleagues didn't see. Nathan was very task-oriented. He felt his colleagues meandered too much when they had meetings, jumping from one topic to another and taking too long to get to the point. Nathan was good at focusing, following a linear path of thinking and finding solutions to problems. Most of all, he thought he was good at getting things done, at moving from talk to action.

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Nathan and Sandra's stories were no surprise to me. In this age of equal means the same; we systematically assume that differences in the way that people think, work, and communicate are personality differences. But where men and women are concerned, nothing could be further from the truth. Men and women truly are two different kinds of fish. Like Sandra, most women excel in consensus building, relationship building, intuitive thinking, and multi-tasking, to name but a few female skills. And most men share Nathan's linear thinking, and his task and goal oriented approach to work. These differences have nothing to do with individual personalities. Working men and women think, assimilate information, and communicate differently.

The Scientific Evidence

Gender difference has not been a very popular topic of study in the scientific community until quite recently. It's no surprise why. By the early 1970s, women were tired of hearing they were biologically destined to the role of wife and mother. Society had decided men and women were equal, and that women should be able to do the same work as men. Then a strange thing happened. Everyone started equating "equal" with "the same" and talking about gender difference became practically taboo.

By the 1980s, we once again recognized that there were real differences between men and women, but the debate was about how we got that way: nature or nurture? We were more interested in the answer to that question than looking at what the actual differences were. At around that same time, something else happened. Technology and sophisticated research techniques allowed scientists to observe actual differences in the ways men and women's brains work. Scientists observed that men's brains were, on average, up to 10 percent larger than women's. They also saw that certain parts of women's brains contained more nerve cells, and had significantly more neuron firings than men's brains did.

Women's brains therefore, have more connections for neuron firings, which are messages sent between various parts of the brain. In women's brains, for instance, the part of the brain associated with language skills contained up to 11 percent more brain cells than the corresponding part in men's brains. This was just the beginning. Throughout the 1980s and 1990s, scientists came to discover that men and women actually thought and processed information differently.

Over the last two decades, researchers in the fields of medicine, biology, sociology, and psychology have built on these findings, showing us how men and women use their brains differently. For instance, women are stronger in verbal fluency skills, while men are stronger in spatial tasks. Women can remember lists of words or paragraphs better than men can. Men are better than women at mentally rotating images. Men are better at orienting themselves in a closed space and navigating themselves through a route, yet women are better at recalling landmarks from that same route. Now that the taboo on talking about gender difference has lifted, gender difference has come out of the closet.

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It's amazing to hear what different professionals have to say about the differences they observe, and how early these differences begin. Doctors say non-physiological gender differences in babies can be observed within eight seconds of birth. One doctor told me he could even tell the differences if he was blindfolded! Baby girls are more sensitive to touch, to light, and to sounds. They are more easily comforted by soothing words and singing, and even before understanding language, girls are better than boys at identifying the emotional content of speech. Girls show greater interest early in life in communicating and reaching other people. They spend twice as long maintaining eye contact with a silent adult, and girls look longer than boys at an adult who is talking. In a cradle, boys tend to talk to themselves, and are interested in toys and looking at abstract designs, like mobiles. Not only are baby boys less "sensitive"; they also make less eye contact with their mothers. During the first months of their lives, boys have already developed a significantly shorter attention span.

Of course, anyone with children can see the differences between boys and girls as they grow older – especially when they are all thrown together in school. Sociologists have observed that even at a young age, girls already have an inclination towards building relationships and rapport with others. Girls seek to include newcomers in their groups, while boys are relatively indifferent to newcomers. Boys tend to be individualistic and competitive. They establish a pecking order in groups, and spend their time deciding who's better at what, rather than making sure everyone is included. Girls spend their time chatting in little groups while boys push each other around and make a lot of noise. It's as if girls live according to the slogan: "We are together in this" while boys' motto is: "Life is a contest."

Of course, some of the differences in how girls and boys act may come from the way they are brought up. But they may also be the result of evolution. After all, the human brain has been evolving for millions of years, and differently for men and women.

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In her book *The First Sex*, anthropologist Helen Fisher shows how men's brains evolved to make them able hunters, and women were gatherers. As hunters, men spent their time fighting to be "at the top" while women spent theirs "taking care." Men's brains are adapted to focus on a goal, while women's brains take in a lot of stimuli – women had to look for food, build relationships around them, and watch their children, all at once. These experts confirm my own observations about how men and women think, act, and communicate differently in the workplace. Differences between women and men are in part the result of evolution. But to understand how we differ, the discoveries of modern science excel in the way they enlighten us. Over the past two decades, technological advances in the field of neuroscience have made it possible for scientists to study men's and women's brains at work. And what have they discovered?

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We Have Different Brains

The human brain naturally divides labor between the left and right sides. The left side of the brain controls language, delicate movements of the body, and practical, orderly sequencing. The right side controls visual and spatial abilities, abstract thought, and how we deal with our emotions. By tracking blood flow in the brain, scientists have been able to compare which parts of the brain men and women use for specific tasks. What they have found is that men use each side of the brain for specific tasks. But women use both sides of the brain almost equally, for lots of things. According to Sandra Wittelson, professor of Psychology at McMaster University in Canada, who is currently studying Einstein's brain, "The division of labor is not as distinct in women's brains." For instance, when men use language, the *left* side of their brains is active.

When women use language, both hemispheres are active. When men and women process visual images, the same difference in “labor division” shows up. In women, both sides of the brain are busy “seeing,” while in men, only the *right* side is active. In experiments designed to test spatial ability, men almost exclusively used the right side of their brain, while women used both sides. When men and women are asked to identify the meanings of words, men use the left side of their brain while women, again, use both sides of their brains. Acoustic tests showed the same pattern. When women listen, their brain “spreads the work out” across both sides of the brain, while men concentrate activity in one side at a time.

Looking for the root of why men and women use their brains differently to do the same tasks, researchers in the last few years have been looking at the “corpus callosum” – a bundle of nerve connections between the two hemispheres of the brain. What they discovered was that the corpus callosum is proportionately larger in women’s brains than in men’s. Dr. Roger Gorski, professor of Anatomy and Cell Biology at the University of California in Los Angeles, says this supports the theory that “in women, the two sides of the brain communicate more.” The study suggests that men are “more dependent on one side of the brain than the other.”

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while women are looking at it through a kaleidoscope.*

Researchers at the University of Pennsylvania made another interesting discovery. Tracking blood flow in the brain, they saw distinctly different patterns in men and women’s brains. Dr. Ruben Gur, the neuroscientist who led the study, asked men and women to perform different mental tasks. What he observed was that the men and women used different parts of their brains for similar tasks. Dr. Gur also saw that compared to men’s brains, women’s brains were almost never “off.” There was as much blood-flow activity in a resting woman’s brain as there was in a thinking man’s brain! “The rate of neuron firing in women’s brains is higher,” he explained. Some scientists also believe that women’s own emotional centers are more widely distributed in the brain than men’s, meaning they link emotions up to a lot of other brain processes. It’s easy to see how scientific brain differences come into play in our everyday lives – including at the office.

We Really Do See Things Differently

It’s as if men are looking at the world through binoculars, while women are looking at it through a kaleidoscope. I’ve often asked men and women what goes on in their minds when they walk into a room to sit down at a chair. Men say, “I spot the chair and I go and sit down.” It’s not that men *can’t* see everything that’s going on in a room. They just don’t notice things automatically. Men tend to be more systematic and ritualized. Men get into a routine and stick to it. Women notice lots of things on the way to the chair. In a matter of seconds, women notice the expressions on the faces of the other people in the room. They can gauge the mood in the room. They read the body language of those present. They notice where everyone is sitting. They can tell who is engaged and who’s not.

Women make connections. It comes naturally to women, so naturally that lots of women aren’t even aware they’re doing it. Until they find out that men aren’t! There are two things going on here. As we have seen, women’s brains never really rest, and the higher rate of communication taking place between the two sides of women’s brains means they’re making a lot of connections a lot of the time.

We Remember Different Things

Women's memory also plays a role in how women assimilate information. Studies on brain differences between men and women have shown that women store memory in more parts of their brains. Women notice many details and make instantaneous connections to things from the past. It all adds up to a kind of natural multi-tasking. Actually, it would make more sense to say that women excel in multi-thinking. Lots of men have told me they think women bring a lot of irrelevant stuff into things. Perhaps men should look at it differently. Instead of lacking the ability to focus, women have the added ability to make a lot of connections between things. Women simply notice a lot of stuff men don't. There are times where the ability to focus quickly on the important features of a given problem is a valuable asset.

As a way of assimilating information, it's neither better nor worse – just different. We need to get over the notion that there is only one way – the “right way,” to do a job. We need to get to a place where we appreciate and respect our different talents. Men tend to see an isolated situation. They want to keep conversations to the point at hand. But because women have an interconnected memory, they have the ability to see patterns. For the men who are listening to them, it sometimes feels like nothing is ever “over.” Women just keep bringing other stuff up.

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We Solve Problems Differently

Women's brains naturally take a lot in. So it should come as no surprise that women go about solving problems differently than men. Men tend to move quickly from problem to solution to action. Men see problems as things to tackle. They attack problems by isolating them, so they “roll up their sleeves” and get down to work. For men, action is the imperative. Their instinctive impulse is to isolate, analyze, and solve the specific situations referred to. By comparison, women tend to “juggle” possible solutions before settling on one.

Again, if it's true – as scientists tell us – that women use many parts of their brain at the same time, it's easy to see why women approach problem solving the way they do. Women apply multi-thinking to problem solving. They tend to explore all the angles first. Of course, if men's brains naturally isolate activities, then it's easy to see why *they* go about problem solving the way they do! What I see in practice is that men see a problem, think of a solution and then act on it. They usually don't want to “waste” time talking about it.

We Listen Differently

Even the way men and women listen is different. Simple laboratory tests have shown that men have difficulty filtering out background noises. When there is a lot of noise in the room, or if there are two or more conversations going on at the same time, men have trouble hearing what's being said to them. Women in the same situation get the message clear as a bell.

Women have the ability to have a phone conversation and stay in tune with what is happening around them; for example, they are able to jot down notes on other things to do, while still being fully attentive on the phone. This is virtually impossible for men. Dr. Ruben Gur says, "Women often think men aren't listening, that they don't care. In reality, men just have more difficulty hearing what's being said to them."

We Make Decisions Differently

The same patterns we saw in problem solving show up in decision-making. The key difference in how men and women approach decision-making is in the perspective each brings. For women, decision-making is first and foremost about visiting the entire context. Women tend to focus on the long-term and wide-range implications of a decision. They make connections between one decision and another and wonder how one will affect the other. Women wonder how a decision will affect the work of other departments, or the relationship they have built with a client. They instinctively connect the dots.

It doesn't usually occur to men to try to connect the dots when they are making decisions. When women do it, men usually appreciate it. But otherwise, men focus on the short-term. The business world is a reactive place. Decisions have to be made and made fast. Men naturally tend to isolate issues in order to get to a decision as quickly as possible. A former client of mine described men and women's decision-making styles as a "tree house." It's as if a woman's preference is to go up in the tree house and look down on the whole scene! he said, "they want to explore the wider picture, how it all connects, while men just want to stay on the ground, or get down so they can do something. What I now find useful is to use both these strengths. Gender differences enhance our ability to make better and more thorough decisions. So now I actively seek that perspective out!"

We Prioritize Differently

Women's "multi-thinking" really affects the way they go about setting priorities. Women are natural jugglers. A woman once described her office to me as a stove with twelve pots simmering all at once. "They all need stirring at some point or another," she said. The challenge for her was to keep her eye on each in order to see when it had to be stirred. Women tend to look at work and life this way.

The juggling scenario can be tough for men to deal with. Men tend to approach priorities by dealing with things one at a time and crossing them off a list. Men say, "I select the most important pot, finish it, then move on to the next one."

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We Feel Emotions Differently

Brain differences also mean we feel things differently. McMaster University psychologist Sandra Witelson discovered that men and women respond differently to emotional information fed to the right and then the left hemisphere. In men, the emotional functions are concentrated in the right side of the brain, while women's emotional responses are located in both the left and the right sides of the brain. Since the two sides of men's brains are not as well connected as women's, men have more difficulty expressing their emotions. A man keeps his emotions in the right side, while the power to express speech lies over on the left side. So in men, the information just doesn't flow as easily from the emotional right side of the brain to the verbal left side of the brain.

Women do not have this separation because of the way the female brain is organized. The result is that women are less able to separate emotion from reason. When the accounting firm Deloitte & Touche, in collaboration with the Fortune Marketing Research Group, surveyed hundreds of men and women business executives about the skills they thought women needed to acquire to be more effective in business, the executives responded with several suggestions. These included: women should learn to separate their emotions from their business decisions and take things less personally. Now you know why this is hard for women to do. Continuing this observation, anthropologist Dr. Helen Fisher, author of *The First Sex*, says women have a propensity to personalize things because the emotional connectors in the brain are more linked to the verbal. Women express their emotions through verbal means. This is not to say that men don't feel emotions; it's just harder for men to express them through verbal means.

We Read Emotions Differently

It is always helpful to know if a person is happy, sad, interested, or bored. However, tests show that men have more difficulty than women in deciphering facial expressions. In particular, men have more difficulty understanding what a certain facial expression means on a woman's face than on a man's. Tests also show that women's brains simply do not work as hard as men's do when they are identifying facial expressions. In other words, compared to men, women identify people's emotions without even trying.

Dr. Gur, at the University of Pennsylvania, has carried out some well-documented research in this area. He performed a test where he showed pictures of men and women feeling different emotions. When he asked the men to read the faces, most of them could identify the correct emotion on the men's faces but often had trouble reading the women's faces. Women easily read the emotion on both men's and women's faces. Emotions are often the first thing women notice. They read emotions even before they listen to what people say. For men, "I'm doing fine," means "I'm doing fine," even if the person who says it is frowning. For women, it's the frown that counts.

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"thinking" the same way we do, but it's not their fault.
Men's and women's brains work differently.*

We Deal with Stress Differently

Women and men respond differently to stress. To deal with stress, men either fight or withdraw and go into hiding to focus on the problem. Women tend to react to stress by sharing their feelings. They turn to their friends. Two women professors at the University of California in Los Angeles made a groundbreaking study about stress recently. Scientists have long believed that stress releases hormones that prompt the body to either stand and fight or flee as fast as possible. They long assumed the fight-or-flight instinct was the same in men and women. As Dr. Laura Cousino Klein, one of the two women scientists, explained, “We were talking one day in a lab about the joke that when the women who worked in the lab were stressed, they came in, cleaned the lab, had coffee, and bonded. When the men were stressed, they went off somewhere to be on their own.”

Dr. Klein and her colleague decided to test the idea that women reacted differently to stress. They discovered that when women are stressed, they release a hormone called oxytocin, which buffers the fight-or-flight response, probably to ensure that women tend to their children and gather with other women instead of running away from danger. When women engage in this tending or befriending reflex, studies suggest that more oxytocin is released, which further counters stress and produces a calming effect. This calming response does not occur in men, says Dr. Klein, because testosterone, which men produce in high levels when they’re under stress, seems to reduce the effects of oxytocin. According to Dr. Klein, estrogen enhances it. This difference between men and women has huge repercussions in our everyday lives.

We Work Differently in Teams

Women are natural collaborators, whereas men naturally compete and want to win. A group of researchers based at Emory University in Atlanta, Georgia, watched men’s and women’s brains while they played games. The researchers tested women on a board game, while scanning their brains with an MRI scanner (watching the blood flow). The blood activity in the reward centers of women’s brains showed that these centers were activated when the women collaborated; the more they collaborated, the more the reward centers were activated. The researchers discovered that when women are involved in a situation where they are cooperating with someone else, they experienced activation in brain areas that are also activated by “rewards” such as food, money, and drugs. This indicates that women’s bodies may have been somehow programmed to label “cooperation” as “rewarding.” Other researchers have found that women’s brains register collaborating as a reward, even when collaboration isn’t in a particular woman’s own self-interest. Men feel reward by beating the competition and winning the game. In teams, they feel reward by being the star of the team, or the team leader.

It’s No One’s Fault. We’re Just Different

When I present what scientists say about gender difference to my workshop participants, it comes as a big relief to everyone, men and women alike. Why? Gender difference is no one’s fault. No one should feel guilty or deficient because of the way he or she thinks or processes emotions. Men and women’s brains work differently and you can’t change that. All these years we have been blaming the other sex for not “thinking” the same way we do, but it’s not their fault. Men and women don’t think the same way. They don’t see the same reality the same way. They really are very different from each other.

In three decades of work in the corporate gender field, the patterns I've noticed are absolutely consistent with what scientists say about gender difference, from women's more "highly connected" brains to men's more "focused" approach to problem solving. It's no accident that men and women approach the same situations or tasks so differently. Men and women *are* different. Their processes for assimilating information, for thought, and for communication are all different. This creates all sorts of misunderstandings. Why? Men and women assume that the other sex thinks exactly like they do. So when a member of the other sex doesn't react in the way you would, you jump to conclusions about what they mean.

Seeing how men and women's brains differ physiologically is just the start. We begin to see how gender differences create misunderstandings, which feed more misunderstandings and leave both men and women frustrated. Here is a summary of the different ways in which men and women think and engage with the world:

Women

- Justify
- Look for areas of agreement
- Bond in conversations
- Are validated in relationships
- Are multi-thinkers—switch topics in conversations
- Have multi-dimensional insights
- Are concerned with feeling connected
- Usually explore every detail before concluding
- Share problems when they want to talk about them
- First see a problem as "their" problem
- Have personal breakthroughs through validation

Men

- Carry out regardless
- Look for gaps
- Bond in games and tasks
- Are validated in accomplishments
- Are linear thinkers—dealing with one problem at a time
- Have linear insights
- Are concerned with independence
- Usually want to get straight to the point
- Share problems only when they want them to be fixed
- First see a problem as "someone else's"
- Have personal breakthroughs through struggle and debate

About the Author

Barbara Annis, Founder and CEO of Barbara Annis & Associates, Inc. is a recognized global expert in Inclusive Leadership and Gender Initiatives. Her research and consultancy practice is dedicated to removing organizational and leadership barriers by bringing the latest research and thinking on Leadership, Gender Diversity, and Inclusiveness into the workplace, helping organizations turn gender diversity into a powerful technology of success. Her insights and achievements have pioneered a transformational shift in cultural attitudes on the importance of gender unity to organizational success.

Since its founding in 1980, Barbara Annis & Associates has interviewed tens of thousands of men and women, facilitated over 8,000 corporate workshops, and delivered keynotes and executive coaching sessions on Gender Intelligent Leadership across the globe. Barbara Annis first coined the term Gender Intelligence in the early 1990s and developed the concept in her first book *Same Words, Different Language* (2002) and second work, *Leadership and the Sexes*, co-authored with Michael Gurian (2006).

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