



# The Gender Intelligence Chronicles™

## *Changing the Business Landscape*

Gender Intelligence® Series | Volume 1, Issue 4

## Men's Challenges Working with Women

*By Barbara Annis*

It's amazing how little men and women know about one another. I mean, *really* know about one another. Men and women think they know a lot about the opposite sex, but in fact, what they have are a lot of opinions. Opinions are fine. But they're limited in scope, substance, and usefulness. Why? Because we get opinions from mapping others' behavior on to our own experience.

When we rely on opinions to judge the other sex's behavior, we tend to look for confirmation of what we already believe. We also tend to decide instinctively whether other people are "right" or "wrong" instead of really listening to them. Opinions are good for making more opinions. But they're not very good tools for learning. The time has come to put aside your opinions.

What you're about to receive are insights. Insights are discoveries we make when we become aware of something that we weren't previously conscious of. They are about discovery, about alerting your mind to something entirely new, about grappling with something you never really thought about before, about taking a look at the world through an entirely different pair of eyes. Few of us are paid to have insights, so we don't think about them very much. But insights are exactly what we need to understand the other gender. They are the moments we say, "Ah-hah!"

*When women hear men's challenges,  
they trivialize and dismiss them.*

At the beginning of my gender workshops, I divide the men and women up and send them into separate rooms so both men and women can talk freely about what's really on their minds without worrying about how to put things. Men, you will relate to many of the comments you are about to read. And women, you will get a chance to stand in the men's shoes. This is your first chance to get some "Ah-hahs" about men. But you'll only be able to do that if you put aside your opinions and really listen.

Many women think they understand men through and through. When women hear men's challenges they are tempted to trivialize and dismiss them. It's easy to label men and dismiss them as dinosaurs. Try to resist. Take this information at face value, for what it is. I have heard literally tens of thousands of men talk about the same challenges over and over again. Men truly feel the way they say they do.

Women, try to imagine how you would act if you went to work every day with men's concerns. If learning is what you want, then look for insights. Men are giving you the chance to see how the world

looks from their perspective. Why not take them up on their offer? As I said, it's amazing to see how little men and women know about each other. The proof? When women hear men's challenges, their most common reaction is: "I never realized men felt that way."

### Men's Top Five Challenges Working with Women

It's difficult to get men to talk about what it feels like to work with women. When I ask the men about their challenges, many close up. "There are no problems," they say. One of my male associate facilitators explains men's reaction this way: *Men are very, very careful when they talk about women. Sometimes it takes a good five minutes of silence before anyone speaks up. They're concerned about being accused of not being politically correct. When they do start to talk, they say things like, "Don't write this down... You can't put it that way!" They're very concerned about having this conversation. It's uncomfortable for them.*

*Many men experience that they have to be a little on guard with women.*

For women, this alone should provide you with a huge insight into the male perspective on the gender issue. Most women are convinced men aren't interested in talking about the gender issue. Women think men are resisting. In fact, men are rather intimidated by the question. Not many women would imagine that the all-powerful male in business would feel he needed to be so cautious when talking about women. But he is, and we'll soon see why. These are some of the typical things men say inside the "men's room." If you are a man, feel free to tick off each challenge you can relate to.

- ▶ Men believe they have to be careful.
- ▶ Men are confused about "the rules."
- ▶ Men fear harassment allegations.
- ▶ Men are concerned about reverse discrimination.
- ▶ Men feel blamed.

### Challenge 1 - Men Believe They Have to be Careful

Men Say:

- ▶ "I feel as if I'm walking on eggshells around women."
- ▶ "If I don't know a particular woman, I have to be even more attentive, more cautious. I just don't know how she's going to react!"
- ▶ "I want to be respectful but sometimes it blows up in my face."

Many men experience that they always have to be a little on guard with women. They don't know how women will react in situations in which men's reactions are predictable. As one lawyer told me, "If my colleague Harry does a bad job in court one day, I can just tell him, 'Harry, you did a lousy job in there today,' and we move on. With a female colleague I just never know. I mean I feel that I have to massage in criticism to slowly get her to get the point. Why? Because I know she'll take it personally. Harry will just shrug it off."

Time and again, men report that:

- ▶ Women remember everything, and “things come back to haunt you years after they happened.”
- ▶ Women take things personally and overreact to things that men would just shrug off.
- ▶ They worry about how to deliver criticism to female colleagues without offending them.
- ▶ They just don't know where women are coming from.
- ▶ They fear women will think they are being condescending or discriminating if they “take them under their wing.”
- ▶ They don't know whether to compliment a woman on her appearance or not. On the one hand, it seems like a courteous thing to do. But then she might take it the wrong way.
- ▶ They are afraid of women crying!

### **Women's Reaction**

Women are always surprised to learn that men spend so much time thinking about these things. And they are amazed at how afraid men are of making women cry! As one woman put it, “I had no idea how concerned men were about how to act with women, how to make good impressions on women, how to avoid offending women. I just assumed men never thought about it.” Of course, it's not all roses. Women get a little depressed when they hear men talk about being careful with them because in a way, it confirms their worst fears. Women hear old clichés at work. “What's this business about being afraid of making us cry?” they ask. “How many times have you seen a woman cry at work?” Women hear men implying that all women are the same and that men can't afford to be direct with any of them.

*Women realize that when men seem to be brushing them off, they are really just being careful. And the reason they are being careful? Men sincerely don't know what the rules are.*

### **The insight for women**

Women aren't happy to hear that men really *do* treat them cautiously. But when men talk about how careful they feel they need to be with women, women see that what they thought was dismissive behavior is, in fact, just hesitant. This is one of the women's first “Ah-hah!” moments. They realize that when men seem to be brushing them off, they are really just being careful. And the reason they are being careful? Men sincerely don't know what the rules are. They don't know how women will react to what they say and do, and they are afraid to offend, or to be misunderstood. So men often act in ways that make it possible to steer clear of problems, conflicts, and friction with women, and just try to find ways of avoiding these things.

Women should understand that men's caution is not intended, but that it really is a big challenge. They should let men know there is no need to be cautious with them, and then should share their insight that they understand the way men feel.

## The insight for men

Men see that when they hesitate with women, and try to avoid problems by skirting around issues, women feel they are being dismissed. And that's the main reason why women react negatively to things. To solve this, men should just try being as direct as possible with women, even to the point of telling them they are afraid of their reaction. Women will welcome this approach. To them, it will resonate as honest and considerate.

## Challenge 2 - Men Feel Confused

Men say:

- ▶ "I wish I knew the ground rules with women; do I call you 'women'? 'Ladies'? 'Girls'? 'Guys'?"
- ▶ "Do I open the door for women or don't I?"
- ▶ "Is it OK to talk to women about their families at work?"

Most men are working in a hierarchical "male" work paradigm, but the rules are changing, and men know it. That leaves most men confused. Lots of men say they were brought up to show respect for women, but when this aspect of their upbringing comes to the surface, they get mixed signals from women. This leaves men wondering what they're supposed to do.

One young engineer told me the story of a scene he witnessed between two colleagues: "I watched this team from our office come out of the elevator after a tough meeting. A senior guy put his hand on one of the women's shoulders and congratulated her for her good work and she snapped back, 'From the elbow down, please!' I mean, I was shocked that she would have that kind of reaction when the guy really meant well."

Over and over again, men report that:

- ▶ They were brought up to be polite and considerate to women, but get mixed signals from them when they behave that way.
- ▶ What they learned from their mother, sister, or spouse doesn't seem to apply with their female colleagues.
- ▶ They want to help women out by, say, offering them a ride home, but are afraid they'll seem like they're coming on to them.
- ▶ They don't know how physical contact will be interpreted.
- ▶ They feel like they have to be on guard when it comes to dealing with women.

*When men are together, there are certain norms and expectations and everyone just follows them.*

## Women's Reaction

Women see that men's trepidation is real. They don't yet understand why men are so confused, but they do see that the confusion is real. It's often a relief for women: they have always sensed men's uncertainty around them and wondered what was behind it. Women don't understand that what men are telling them is that when they deal with other men at work, the rules and procedures are fairly simple: when men are together, there are certain norms and expectations and everyone just follows them.

Lots of men wonder whether these "men's rules" are still appropriate in the workplace, but between men, they work, and they supply men with a comfort zone. Men say they don't spend a lot of time thinking about things like "how to deliver the message" to other men, but women may not be aware of men saying that when they're dealing with women, this communication process becomes much more complicated. They get different reactions from different women in different situations – or even from the same woman at different times. That leaves men confused and desperately searching for a set of rules they can apply whenever they are dealing with women.

## The insight for women

When men are confused about the rules of how to act with women, or how to communicate things to women, they often end up not saying what they mean for fear of being misunderstood. That solves one problem, but creates another: it makes women feel excluded. When men act reluctant, or hesitant, women feel as though they are being left out of the loop or pushed out of inner circles where decisions are being made. Women have to realize that this is not intended. When asking questions for example, women should put them in an open-ended and non-blaming way so that they feel included. And as we'll see later, being included is what women report as one of their main challenges dealing with men!

*Men should try to deal with women as they would with a client:  
have your antenna up; be constantly looking for feedback.*

## The insight for men

There is no single set of rules for working with women. As soon as you start to apply a single set of rules, women will sense it and they won't like it. Instead, men should try to deal with women as they would with a client: have your antennae up; be constantly aware and looking for feedback. Engage, be interested, and ask for information. As you read on about women's challenges and better understand their perspective, it will become easier.

## Challenge 3 - Men Fear Being Accused of Harassment

Men say:

- ▶ "I won't even go to lunch with a woman anymore."
- ▶ "Do I ask her out for dinner when we are working late? No way."
- ▶ "I'm even worried when I'm alone in an elevator with a woman."

Men are very concerned about being accused of harassment and terrified of false allegations. As one man put it, "I've seen what one of my colleagues went through when he was accused of harassing a female colleague. I know for a fact he wasn't, but the company crucified him." Because of what they've

seen happening around them, men are determined to do everything they can to avoid any accusations – to the point of not even commenting on a female colleague's new haircut.

Men are afraid that since they don't know what the rules are, they could do something as a friendly gesture that women may misconstrue as harassment. It's hard to overestimate the fear men have of being falsely accused of harassment. Men have seen it or heard about it and are convinced that there's nothing as career limiting as being labeled a harasser. Even the suggestion that someone is *contemplating* bringing an action against them frightens men.

### **Women's Reaction**

Women are always surprised to find out how worried men are about harassment. This may come as a surprise to men, but women don't actually spend a lot of time worrying about the possibility of harassment (unless, of course, they have actually been harassed, in which case it becomes a very real concern). Women say they had no idea that men felt this way, or that the men that they thought they had built a good relationship with still shared this concern. As one woman put it, "To me it's pretty simple to see when it's harassment and when it's not."

### **The insight for women**

When men fear harassment charges it also results in them holding back on relating to women, and women now see that they can easily assume that this is because a man doesn't care, or is disinterested or distant. But in fact, men do care; they just don't know how to show it anymore. Women should understand the degree to which this fear is a concern – it's absolutely impossible to trivialize. There is no easy answer as to what women should do. You have to build relationships, and build the level of trust so men feel safe.

### **The insight for men**

Men are surprised to find out that women don't really spend much time thinking about harassment. My advice to them? Don't hold back in your relationships with women. Do your homework (as you would with a client) and think things through. Women will always welcome a well-framed compliment. But if you hold back too much, the fun and humor at the office will quickly disappear. And when that happens, everyone loses.

## **Challenge 4 - Men Perceive Reverse Discrimination**

Men say:

- ▶ "I see some job ads and just think that white males need not apply.
- ▶ "I think the best candidate should get the job, not the best woman candidate, but that doesn't seem to be the way the world works these days."
- ▶ "I saw a woman become chief executive officer without any operational experience! Are you going to try to tell me it wasn't just because she's a woman?"

*Many men take a look at their future and come to the conclusion that because of equal opportunity policies, men's options are limited.*

Some men believe that the white male is slipping further and further down the corporate ladder. Statistics may not support their feelings that white men are being systematically passed over for the best jobs, but individual and anecdotal experiences are still feeding their pessimism. Many men take a look at their future and come to the conclusion that because of equal opportunities policies, men's options are limited. The men who already have established careers don't feel they're free from reverse discrimination either. As one man told me, "There's all this stuff out there for women – networks and clubs for women only, special interest groups for professional women. If I belonged to a club for men only, people would say it was chauvinism."

On a closely related theme, many men bring up the problem of double standards that favor women, like male-bashing. "Women can joke about men now and it's considered perfectly acceptable," they tell me. There is also a feeling that men (and incidentally, women without children) are still expected to work harder than women with children. "Nobody questions it when a woman has to leave early to take care of her children, but I'm still expected to be there," one man told me.

### **Women's Reaction**

Most women think reverse discrimination is a myth. They know that some men believe that women are being promoted because they're women, that there's more focus on women in the workplace than on men, and that qualified men are being overlooked because of this. But this doesn't cut any ice with women – particularly the women who work in non-traditional fields and constantly feel that they have to struggle to get taken seriously.

### **The insight for women**

I encourage them to put these feelings aside when they listen to men talk about reverse discrimination. Many men do genuinely feel that reverse discrimination is working against them. And that perception affects men's behavior towards women. Whether, statistically, reverse discrimination exists, or is justified if it does, is not the point. When men feel reverse discrimination, they react with a kind of cynical defeatist attitude. They say things like, "She'll get the job anyway, because she's a woman. So why should I bother." They're only talking about their own feelings, but they inadvertently reinforce one of women's Top Challenges: women's fear of being a "token." This reaction, in turn, feeds women's feeling that they are being tested all the time.

*Traditionally, men have been employed for their potential, while women tend to be employed for their track record and proven skills.*

Again, recognize that men's perceptions are real for them. Women should challenge men to validate their perceptions. Ask for specific statistics that perception is a reality, and soon men will see that it's not a reality, but a myth. Tell men that, even today, it remains a perception and not a reality. But be careful not to blame individual men for their perceptions.

## The insight for men

While employment Equal Opportunities policies are a reality, reverse discrimination is a myth. Men should avoid generalizing using just one scenario, of a woman who moved up a few levels too quickly. What employment Equal Opportunities policies have done is force employers to be more objective in their decisions. They have to justify their choices now. Traditionally, men have been employed for their potential, while women tend to be employed for their track record and proven skills. Equal opportunity means everyone has to be employed according to the same criteria.

## Challenge 5 - Men Feel Blamed

Men say:

- ▶ Men believe they have to be careful.
- ▶ "When I hear the words 'male-dominated workplace,' it just sounds like feminist male-bashing to me."
- ▶ "Why do women blame all men for the historical mistakes of a few?"
- ▶ "I feel like I have to apologize for being a man these days."

Many men feel they have been tarred with the same wide brush courtesy of the feminist movement and that women lump them together as a group. "We're never treated as individuals," men tell me. "Just because your boss mistreated you 15 years ago, doesn't mean it's my fault." Every time they hear the words "male dominated," they feel as if they're being blamed for something they had no control over. "I feel blamed for breathing," some tell me.

## Women's Reaction

Here, the lights really start going on for women. Most women have witnessed, or participated in, or even initiated, some male bashing at work, and they know it. In a world where the power balance has traditionally favored men, women feel justified in such behavior. It seems normal, even acceptable these days, to take a stab at men, all in good humor. Some women, particularly the older ones, even make more jokes when men present this challenge. "But you ARE wrong!" they say.

*Men feel blamed for simply being men  
and women are always surprised to find this out.*

Now women see that comments like these don't appear as harmless to men. They see that even if women consider that sort of behavior harmless and acceptable, men don't. Men feel blamed for simply being men, and women are always surprised to find this out. What women consider a sort of teasing equates to men as "blaming me for breathing." There's a glimmer of light appearing though, as women step out of their shoes and start to look at their own behavior from a man's perspective.

**The insight for women**

When men feel they are being tarred with the same brush, they often react with a kind of dismissive or even cynical behavior towards women. Many men act this way without even realizing it. But women hear the message. It reinforces some of women's top challenges, as you will see in the next chapter: the feeling they are dismissed, excluded, and tested. Nevertheless, women should avoid making sweeping generalizations about men; avoid saying "all men are," and treat men as individuals that are at different Stages of Awareness.

**The insight for men**

Men need to speak up and challenge women when they feel they are being blamed for being men. Women do have a tendency to see patterns and speak globally about men when they feel they are victims of discrimination. Men should take a stand on this one. Men should tell women they feel that they're being unfairly blamed (without blaming women in return!). It might be interesting for both male and female readers to know that the "challenges" men and women present are almost always the same.

Year after year, men always say the same things about working with women and women say the same things about working with men. It doesn't matter if they are lawyers or accountants, secretaries or soldiers, middle managers, chief executive officers, office workers, middle-aged or thirty-something. The same themes come up, over and over again. So is it true? Are the new rules really working against men? The only "truth" I'm really interested in is men's perceptions and how those affect their interactions with women. After listening to thousands of men talk about what it feels like to work with women, I can say with absolute certainty that they really do feel this way.

Men really are confused and they do feel they have to be cautious when they're dealing with women. They really do feel they are being unfairly blamed for the way chauvinists have acted in the past, and they really do feel that they are paying the price by being victims of a policy of reverse discrimination. Women might not like what they hear, but they have to accept that it is an accurate picture of how many men feel. And of course, women should listen to men – because men's challenges shed light on a lot of the behavior that women can misinterpret.

You are listening to the voices of tens of thousands of men who have all said the same things about what it feels like to work with women: what worries them, what confuses them, and what leaves them perplexed. This is not about who's right and who's wrong.

## 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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