



# The Gender Intelligence Chronicles™

## *Changing the Business Landscape*

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## Women's Challenges Working with Men

*By Barbara Annis*

When women really listen to men talking about their challenges working with women, they are often amazed by what they hear. When men listen to the women's challenges, they tend to hear women's stories as isolated incidents and react by saying, "That only happened that one time. It didn't mean anything." They particularize each point, challenging what women say, rather than trying to understand women's point of view. Well, men, the fact of the matter is, when women talk about their challenges, they are not talking about individual incidents. I often use the expression "water torture" to illustrate how many women feel. When they talk about individual incidents to illustrate what they mean, what they're really saying is how discouraged they are by the build-up of similar incidents.

The drip, drip, drip effect of repeated experiences really gets to women. A woman's boss calls her "sweetie" or "dear." It may not be a big deal on its own, but when she's heard it continually from different male colleagues over the years it starts to wear her down. The press called British Prime Minister Tony Blair's senior female colleagues "Blair Babes." US President George Bush called his senior female colleagues "My Moms." It's easy for men to particularize and challenge these kinds of complaints, but women have heard it all before, and they're sick of it. My advice to men on this issue is the same as my advice to women. Forget about who's right and who's wrong. Resist the temptation to disprove what the opposite sex is saying. Put aside your opinions, the ideas you already have and the judgments you've formed based on past experiences, and look for those "Ah-hah" moments that tell you you're learning something new.

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I've heard women say the same things and raise the same complaints over and over again, from year to year, from profession to profession. There's got to be something in it. And finally men, remember you are getting a rare opportunity to go behind closed doors and listen to what women say when you're not around. You're about to hear how women feel at work. Consider this an opportunity to put yourself in women's shoes.

## Women's Top Five Challenges Working with Men

Interestingly, when I ask women about the challenges they experience working with men, there are always a few women who put up their hands and declare: "There's no difference between women and men." They say, "Problems at work aren't because of gender" or "gender has nothing to do with it; it's individual personalities." Curiously, it's usually the younger women who make those claims. When the older women hear this, they often nod their heads and say, "You just haven't been working with men long enough. You'll see." With the odd exception, though, most women have plenty to say about what it feels like to work with men. It's as if women have been harboring these thoughts for years but have never had the chance to voice them. There is no dead air in the women's room. And that's not the only difference from the men's room.

While the men tend to challenge each other until they decide who's right, women always treat the brainstorming session as a team effort. They instinctively turn the exercise into a collaborative process, sharing experiences with one another and building on them. As the first women start to talk, the other women acknowledge them with "uh-huhs," then reinforce their ideas with their own perspective, effectively building a list. It's not unusual for women to come up with ten or twelve pages of challenges on their flipchart, while men usually come up with only one or two.

One thing that still surprises me about women is how shocked so many of them are to find out that other women share their feelings about working with men. Amazing as it sounds, women may talk a lot together about the men they work with but rarely share their deepest personal feelings about the subject. It's easy to talk about what men are and how men act, but harder to talk about how their behavior makes you feel.

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Women, think back to the many times you've talked to your female colleagues about men, and you'll see this is probably true for you too. Women rarely talk together about how men's behavior affects them—particularly as they rise through the ranks and have to be more cautious about revealing the problems they may be experiencing. Why do many women keep their real feelings to themselves? Strangely, it's because deep down, they suspect it's their own fault. It all boils down to the way many women internalize the problems they experience at work. Internalizing means looking for the answers to a problem in your own behavior, and women do this all the time.

When women have problems working with men, they may tell other women it's a particular man's fault, but instinctively, women wonder whether *they themselves* played a role in creating the problem. They tend to assume it's their own fault. It's very subtle. Most women don't know they're doing it. When women hear other women articulate exactly what they've been thinking for years, their faces light up. Your face will probably light up too!

Many women have lived through decades of gender-based communications problems wondering, "What's wrong with me?" They are just amazed when they find out that other women struggle with the same problems and feel exactly the same way as they do about working with men. As with the men, my workshop is often the first formal opportunity women have had to speak openly about what it's like to work with the other gender. These are the kinds of things they say. If you are a woman, feel free to tick off the challenges you relate to:

1. Women feel dismissed.
2. Women feel excluded.
3. Women feel scrutinized.
4. Women feel they have to act like men.
5. Women are concerned about tokenism.

### Challenge 1 - Women Feel Dismissed

Women say:

- ▶ "Men don't seek my opinion, or if they do, they ignore it."
- ▶ "Men talk a lot but they don't listen."
- ▶ "My boss treats me like his daughter!"

Women often feel their words somehow don't have the same weight as the words spoken by their male counterparts. Many women tell me about experiences at meetings where they made an important point or came up with a new idea only to have it ignored. But when the same point was later picked up by a male co-worker, everyone listened. "Men only seem to listen to men, no matter what we say," they tell me. When these women try to explore an issue by talking about various aspects of a problem, they feel that men shut them off, and that they are being dismissed and discounted. Many women also feel that old stereotypes about women are preventing men from listening to them. "When I bring up ideas and remind my male colleagues of past discussions they tell me I'm nagging," says one woman.

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Women say:

- ▶ "When we make points at meetings, we get passed over. Then a man takes the point up and says more or less the same thing and everyone gives him three cheers. It's as though we're not there."
- ▶ "When I try to talk through problems at work I just get grunts from men. It's as though men just want to get to the bottom line and get on to something else, as fast as possible."
- ▶ "When I bring up sensitive issues, no one listens to me. Then I keep bringing the points up again and get accused of nagging. It always gets attributed to my gender. Did you ever hear a guy say that another guy was nagging? They say he was relentless!"

The tone changes when they enter a room full of men and that men's behavior changes, their body language shifts, their language alters and the mood changes.

### Men's Reaction

When they hear women say they feel dismissed, men's first reaction is to map women's feelings onto their own experience. They come up with the inevitable conclusion: "Sometimes I feel dismissed too. So what?" They usually pursue this line of reasoning by challenging women, picking apart the examples women give and asking for more proof.

### The insight for men

While the men are arguing over whether women's complaints are legitimate or not, something interesting usually happens. One man has a flash of insight and speaks up. "Listen guys. Look what we're doing. We won't let the women get a word in edgeways because we're so busy talking amongst ourselves and arguing with everything they say. *We're dismissing them!*" The men usually get it. It's their first, "Ah-hah."

Now that you understand this challenge for women, listen actively, even when you feel they may be digressing; understand that what they're saying may be relevant. If you have trouble following their train of thought, try and clarify things in your mind by reflecting back on what you've heard.

### The insight for women

Men aren't the only ones who have an "Ah-hah" here. Many women also realize that the fear of being dismissed changes their behavior too. Because women are on the defensive when they go into meetings, they unknowingly send a message to men to be careful. Then what happens? Men often react to that signal, without even thinking about it, by pulling back and becoming cautious – one of men's top challenges working with women. Women have to realize that men's behavior is not intentional and that men are not deliberately dismissing them.

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### Challenge 2 - Women Feel Excluded

Women say:

- ▶ "I always feel the real meeting takes place after the meeting, when the men go out for a drink."
- ▶ "I just don't seem to be able to get into the real corridors of power, no matter how hard I try."
- ▶ "Men use sports or war talk to describe strategies. I can't use that kind of language, so I feel I can't make my voice heard."

It doesn't matter whether I'm talking to female lawyers, accountants, police officers, or sales people. Most women in business have been in a similar scenario and have been left with more or less the same feeling. A woman comes to a table where men are gathered around, often talking about sports. She tries to fit into the conversation and even cracks a few jokes, but the men just take a look at her and carry

on talking to each other. For a woman, it feels as though men are deliberately ignoring her. Women already feel they have to struggle to be part of the team, but the cold shoulder treatment only confirms to them that no matter what they do, they will always be excluded just because they are women.

The famous “meeting after the meeting” situation also serves to alienate female workers. In this situation, a group of men will go out for a beer after work. They don't invite their female colleague – maybe they assume she won't be interested, or maybe they don't even think of it. How does she feel? As if the real meetings take place after hours and she's shut out of them. So she feels she's deliberately shut out of decision-making. If the woman is invited to attend the gathering, another dynamic sets in. When she arrives, the men are talking about football, or golf. Maybe she's interested, maybe she's not, but it doesn't matter. The men will be having fun, teasing one another, taking jabs at each other and carrying on with what's usually called male banter. Women feel this bonding going on between men. They don't want to be part of the locker-room talk, but they do feel excluded by it.

Women say that:

- ▶ They never know how to “get on the inside.”
- ▶ They never “get invited along with the guys,” or are actually told by their male colleagues, “Believe me, you wouldn't want to come.”
- ▶ Their male colleagues “congregate in a male colleague's office, sit around with other men, the boss included.” To women, it looks as if it just kind of happens naturally, and they aren't included.

### Men's Reaction

Men's first reaction is usually, “Well, I feel excluded too sometimes!” What men don't understand is that women feel they're being excluded because they're *women*. My male associate often takes this opportunity to jump into the discussion and explain women's point of view. He says: “Men, take that feeling you've had of being left out of a decision once or twice and imagine it happening *every day of your working life*. Imagine you even see it coming when you walk into a boardroom meeting. Imagine it as a daily pattern. No matter how good you are, you're never invited to the important meetings! Lots of women feel this way, all the time.”

### The insight for men

Men usually understand, when another man explains it to them in those terms. Often a man from a visible minority will add, “I can relate to that feeling.” Then men begin to understand that it's not about specific examples, but the recurring pattern: the water-torture drip.

Understand that this is a water-torture experience for women, and make sure that you introduce your female colleagues in a powerful and credible way in meetings with your clients, and make sure you acknowledge their skills and talents. This will eliminate this challenge.

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**The insight for women**

Again, when women hear men's reaction, they often start putting two and two together for themselves. The fear of being excluded, like the fear of being dismissed, often puts women on the defensive. A lot of times, women aren't even aware of it. They get so used to feeling excluded that they forget it's happening! In the workshop, when they are reminded of this feeling, they realize that it changes their behavior. The concern about being excluded makes women act more aggressively, more brashly than they normally would. Men pick up that signal. They don't necessarily understand it; they just react to it. How? By pulling back – being more cautious and more careful. And that reaction, in turn, reinforces women's feeling that they are being excluded.

To solve this situation, women should be more proactive. Look for ways to collaborate. Invite yourself in. And men, remember: women *do* want to be invited in.

**Challenge 3 - Women Feel Tested**

Women say:

- ▶ “With my clients, but even sometimes with my colleagues, it always feels as though there's this assumption that women just don't have what it takes.”
- ▶ “I think women are scrutinized more than men – even by other women!”
- ▶ “I feel I get questioned on my knowledge of technical aspects of my work a lot more than the men I work with do.”
- ▶ “People take it for granted that a man knows what he's talking about, but they wonder about a woman.”

Many women believe that they have to work harder than their male colleagues in order to prove themselves. “I can only prove myself by sheer accomplishment, by being indisputably good,” they tell me. They constantly feel that their male colleagues are testing them, doubting their capabilities. They feel as though there's a different set of standards for women.

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That feeling undermines their self-confidence.*

Women often feel they are assumed to be inferior. That feeling undermines their self-confidence. It's as if everything – even the way they dress or the way they groom themselves – has the potential to lower their credibility. Some executive women say that they would never walk around in casual clothes on casual Fridays. They're afraid it would hurt their credibility. In fields where technical ability is an asset, many women feel that their peers and their clients constantly doubt their competency. The more traditionally male-dominated the fields of work, the more women feel they have to meet higher standards than men do to get the same respect.

Women say that:

- ▶ “Men get promoted for their potential, but women get promoted if they can demonstrate what they have already accomplished.”
- ▶ “It feels as if there’s an ongoing assumption that we have inferior skills or that we don’t have as much technical ability as a man in the same position would.”
- ▶ “There’s an unspoken question: ‘Does she know her stuff?’”
- ▶ “Men get credibility simply by doing their job, but women have to earn it. It’s as if women have a different starting point.”

### Men’s Reaction

When they hear women say this, a lot of men own up. Many men actually admit that they have more confidence dealing with other men, especially when it’s a person they don’t know. This kind of reaction is just salt in the women’s wounds. This issue is particularly sensitive in companies and organizations where women don’t have a strong presence: the police, the armed forces, traditional trades, even among litigation lawyers. Yet for men, the conversation triggers their fear of being blamed. They have a hard time extracting themselves from the issue enough to hear women’s words for what they are: an authentic expression of how it feels to work with men. Fortunately, there are often men present who have gone out on a limb to promote women. “When you push for women, it works,” they say.

*Because women go to work with the feeling that they are being tested, they often feel they have to work harder, perform better, and generally do more than their male colleagues to get the same recognition.*

### The insight for men

Because women tend to go to work with the feeling that they are being tested, they often feel they have to work harder, perform better, and generally do more than their male colleagues to get the same recognition. Men notice this, but they jump to the wrong conclusions. They often tell me the women lack confidence and feel for some reason they have to prove themselves. Well, it’s not that women lack confidence. Women feel they are always being tested. They feel that they really do have something to prove. And there’s more. Women pick up men’s feeling that they lack confidence. This makes them feel even more tested.

### The insight for women

Women can avoid setting off this self-perpetuating cycle of feeling tested by establishing their credibility right at the start. Don’t wait for anyone to doubt you. You don’t need to take on any inauthentic behavior, like bullying or booming your voice. Introducing yourself in a straightforward manner, explaining who you are, what you do, and what your background is will do the trick.

## Challenge 4 - Women Find They Have Taken On Male Behavior

Women say:

- ▶ "If I want to be taken seriously, I have to fit in. I have to be more forceful and more aggressive. I can't really afford to be myself."
- ▶ "I don't really like being so hard, so tough and distant, and directing people the way I do. The problem is, it works!"
- ▶ "Sometimes I think my family would never recognize me if they saw me at work."

When you've been in the workforce for, say, a decade, during which time you have felt ignored, dismissed and excluded, your behavior does start to change. Many women say, "You become more assertive and forceful." But there's a price to pay for this behavior. You may get respect, but neither women nor men will be comfortable working with you. You may also be labeled as the "Dragon Lady" or worse. Before you know it, you will have turned into a member of the Third Sex – a woman who acts like a man.

Most women who tell me about this phenomenon didn't know what was happening until it was too late. "All I was trying to do was get respect," they say. But because every aspect of their femininity seems like a drain on their credibility, many women slowly take on a new professional persona. It's a shock when they find out what happened. "I worked so hard on just being a straight, no-nonsense worker, and now I get called a barracuda," one very senior woman told me.

*When a woman takes on Third Sex behavior, men will often stay as far away from her as possible.*

### Men's Reaction

When a woman takes on Third Sex behavior, men will often stay as far away from her as possible. In order to understand why women do this, men usually need to hear it from another man. Here's how my male co-facilitator explains it to them: "Imagine wearing a suit of armor to work every day. Imagine having to act as though you're someone else every working day, just to have the feeling that you're being taken seriously."

Some of the women in the room admit that they've changed their behavior so much and for so long that they're not sure they could give it up any more. Some of them don't think they would want to give it up. Why not? Because it works. When they hear this, the light goes on for many men who can recall an incident when they heard their wife using a strange tone of voice on the phone with a colleague or client. It was her "work" personality coming through!

### The insight for men

Men have to understand that most women don't 'choose' to become the Third Sex. They feel they have no alternative. Women who end up turning into Dragon Ladies often do so because they feel they have to in order to succeed.

**The insight for women**

The consequences of this choice are bad and women have to understand this. Maybe it seems to work, but in reality, Third Sex behavior just leaves men more confused. They feel blamed, and act more carefully than ever. And of course, when men pull back and act carefully, that ends up making women feel as though they have to be Dragon Ladies in order to get respect! Women have to see the cost associated with this kind of behavior – to themselves and everyone else. Trying to influence, rather than dominate people, is a much better way to earn respect.

**Challenge 5 - Women Feel Like Tokens**

Women say:

- ▶ “Men always think I got this job because I’m a woman. It’s so insulting and so humiliating to have to justify myself.”
- ▶ “I didn’t want affirmative-action policies. I just wanted the job I got!”
- ▶ “I feel as if there is a price for getting this promotion. I’m under the microscope all the time!”

Many women tend to look at the workplace and see a no-win situation. When they do get employed, they feel that men are suspicious about how they got the job. Programs to promote women add to this problem, as the perception is that a quota rather than qualifications is the determining factor in employing women.

Women say: “If I get the job or promotion, there is the sense out there that it’s because I’m a woman, not necessarily because I deserve it.” The women who do succeed feel they are under a magnifying glass. They feel that if they make mistakes, those errors will be attributed to their gender. They feel they are carrying the weight of the world on their shoulders.

*Many women tend to look at the workplace and see a no-win situation. When they do get employed, they feel that men are suspicious about how they got the job.*

**Men’s Reaction**

When women talk about how it feels to be viewed as tokens, men usually react by saying, “Yes, but we’re victims of reverse discrimination so it all evens out.” Yet there’s another, important aspect to this particular women’s challenge. If men don’t see it themselves, I encourage them in that direction and help them make the connection to one of their own challenges. Men’s reaction to the ‘tokenism’ issue creates an even wider gap between men and women and makes it difficult for them to work together effectively.

**The insight for men**

Although men react defensively at first, they eventually come to see that workplace policies to promote women do not mean life is a walk in the park for women everywhere. Those very policies add to women's feeling that they are being tested. And how do women respond? They feel that they have to work harder. They try to prove men wrong before they're ever accused of anything.

Men often say the women they work with over-compensate or work too hard or are too perfectionist. Now they get a clue as to why women act that way. It's not because women are insecure. It's because women feel tested. Men definitely have an "Ah-hah" moment here.

**The insight for women**

It's tough for women to feel good about their work when they fear they got their job because of equal opportunity. It's not an empowering feeling to carry around. And it ends up reinforcing their feeling of being tested and having to prove themselves. We've already seen what this does to women. The feeling of being a token makes women act defensively. It makes women feel they have to over-compensate. Sometimes it makes women more aggressive than they would normally be. They react to feeling like a token by working harder. But unfortunately, men often think this is a sign that women lack confidence.

My advice to women? Don't let yourselves fall into the trap of feeling tested. Develop a network of support around you. Don't try to bear the burden of proving women can do the job all alone.

Now you've had the golden opportunity to stand in the other gender's shoes for once. You've heard what they have to say about working with you and you've seen how your own behavior feeds those challenges. Now you're ready to learn to do something to improve this situation. You'll learn that men and women speak different languages, hear different stories and see different worlds. And you'll learn what you can do to bridge the gap between those worlds.

## 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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