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There's An Elephant in the Room... Recognizing Gender Differences and Expectations

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And no one's talking about it. "What elephant?" you may be asking. It's the gender elephant; the one that's a political hot potato. Thank heavens for generational differences. Recognizing the behavioral differences and expectations between the four generations currently in the work force has cleared the way for a more subtle discussion of diversity, gender being one of them.

But, here's the dirty little secret...everyone talks about gender differences either behind closed doors or with their same-gender friends. The real question is how do these differences play out in the workplace even though it's the elephant we want to ignore despite the fact that it's sitting in our laps.

"The biggest mistake is believing there is one right way to listen, to talk, to have a conversation -- or a relationship."

Deborah Tannen

Before venturing too far down this path, I want to say loudly and clearly I am not a card-carrying feminist but rather a card-carrying equalitarian. Gaining an equal voice for a diverse workforce is tantamount for reflecting the diversity of our society and for innovative solutions. Everyone deserves to be treated with respect regardless of ethnicity, age, culture, weight, sexual preference or transsexuality.

I know this topic is controversial and emotionally charged for fear of stereotyping or being stereotyped. According to sociologists, everyone does stereotype. They contend that categorizing (or stereotyping) is necessary for organizing vast amounts of information. However, if we use stereotyping as an excuse to invalidate the value and uniqueness of a human being, then we have a significant the problem.

Back to gender differences.... There **are** differences in the way men and women perceive the world, think, react and communicate. Louann Brizendine discusses this extensively in her books, *The Female Brain* and *The Male Brain*. She uses neuroscience and hormones to explain differences between the two brains that have extraordinary

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variances. They do influence the way we manage and lead; they influence the way we want to be managed and led. Neither is better ...they are equally powerful.

Numerous other authors have addressed these differences. Some notable thought leaders include: Deborah Tannen, *You Just Don't Understand: Women and Men in Conversation*, Carol Gilligan, *In a Different Voice*, Deborah Kolb and Judith Williams, *The Shadow Negotiation* and Riane Eisler, *The Chalice and the Blade*. It appears that the majority of people calling attention to gender-related differences are women. It's no surprise that heightened sensitivity occurs when you're at the receiving end of imposed limitations.

It is critical to note at this juncture that what I'm about to presents reflects trends...there will always be exceptions. One could say we're back to stereotyping which we are in some form. To be neutral to these differences is as much of an affront as being a blatant sexist in my opinion. They are both denying behavior that directly impacts others and potentially limits their success.

While many books have been written about how these differences manifest themselves in the workplace, this article concentrates on ways to best manage them. So here are blatant generalizations about some of the differences between men and women all of which can be argued:

Men:

Positional/hierarchical
Competitive
Transactional
Considers what's fair and just
Comfortable with negotiating
Unnecessary to like those with whom they work (except their bosses)
Tunnel-visioned
Internal processors
Prefer to be left alone in time of need
Gives answers as an expression of support
Lousy multi-taskers (despite what they think)
Moves on quickly
Action-oriented

Women:

Collaborative
Less competitive
Relational
Considers impact on others
Uncomfortable with negotiating; will take what is offered
Need to like the people they are working with
Notices details
External processors
Seeks out friends in time of need
Prefers to vent first, then find answer later
Listens as an expression of support
Does not forget easily
Good at multitasking

This is by no means a complete list. However, it is a starting point. Again, these are trends and a multitude of other factors come into play such as race, culture and age all which influences behavior. This article focuses on the top two (***positional/hierarchical***

vs. collaborative; transactional vs. relational) since they are key behavioral "buckets" into which many of the other differences fall.

Positional/hierarchical vs. collaborative

Men tend to be positional (or hierarchical) and competitive which relates to position. They feel more secure when they know who the "top dog" is and where they fit in the hierarchy. Women have little or no regard for rank. For us, it's a level playing field.

Women, give men time to define their boundaries. This allows them to establish their comfort zone. I often let men take the lead by either asking a question or letting them report their "findings". And, give them a challenge or competitive goal. This appeals to their desire to assert their power and leadership.

Men, remember to give women a voice, include them in discussions and provide opportunities to work on teams. We typically like to work with others and want to know the functional role we play vs. our role in the pecking order. Ask our opinion rather than telling us the solution. This is where listening skills are valuable. We're a great resource for noticing details that you may miss.

Transactional vs. Relational

Men are all about taking care of business and getting the job done. Women tend to be more focused on building relationships and ensuring everyone on the team is thriving. This may account for women's higher empathy rating on the emotional intelligence scale based on research conducted by leaders in the field such as Goleman, Bar On, Caruso, Mayer and Salovey.

How does this play out? **Women**, know that the men on your team may sound like Sgt. Joe Friday from Dragnet..."The facts ma'am only the facts". Be succinct, task-focused in your conversation (on the job) and demonstrate your competency so they know their "left flank" is cover. It's unnecessary to spend as much time building the relationship with them as you would do with women. But they do have to trust you as their leader. And, they'll ask for help when they need it. Typically, men like to work through problems on their own (remember they don't like to ask for directions!). Give men ample time to think or work through their problems before interceding.

Men, do put time into building the relationship. Have a cup of coffee with her. Periodically ask how she's doing. We have a tendency to engage in what appears to be "small talk". In actuality, it's a form of connecting or reconnecting so begin conversations with something more personal rather than sports or the task at hand.

Give her time to verbalize her thoughts or "think out loud" since we tend to be external processors. Rather than fix the problem, just listen. Offer help and/or support periodically and let her know you're always available if need be.

What I've covered in this article is the tip of the iceberg. Shedding light on the "elephant" is a rich and dynamic topic despite the risk of feeding our predilection to stereotype. However, we now have a platform to start a conversation with the opposite gender to find out how s/he would like to be managed. Both men and women bring a unique perspective to any team. This combination can lead to high performance and innovation both of which contribute to the overall success of an organization.