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**BRAIN  
MATTERS**

**WOMEN IN LEADERSHIP**

# WOMEN IN LEADERSHIP

## A Damaging Imbalance

### **Are men and women intrinsically different?**

#### **One can only hope so: Vive la difference!**

In many, even most aspects of modern life, we accept that men and women have skills, talents and instincts that are indeed often different, but complementary – as the old song would put it: *'You can't have one without the other.'* And yet, in businesses, both nationally and internationally, the number of women in leadership positions in management and on boards is ridiculously small compared to their male counterparts.

How to account for this, and other historical and, more surprisingly, contemporary inequalities between the sexes is a more serious question. Various studies merely tend to highlight this conundrum rather than explaining it. Are we just talking testosterone, does nurture play a larger part, or do we need to discuss whether our brains are as dissimilar as our bodies?

It is interesting to note that, among the number of relatively few women who have achieved international political leadership, how many have stepped into the shoes of their deceased husbands or fathers. Certainly Sirimavo Bandaranaike, Benazir Bhutto, Aung San Suu Kyi, Corazon Aquino and Indira Gandhi all come into this select band. So perhaps it is possible that the expectations, both from the women who assume these roles, and the men who accept their leadership, play a large part in their achievements. In which case, we should explore this aspect of gender differences in leadership.

Equally, in times of war, women have repeatedly proved themselves capable of doing any job that may previously have been regarded as the sole province of men. However, the minute hostilities cease, Rosie the Riveter and her colleagues revert to 'more feminine tasks.' Please note the quotation marks. That's because there is a need to define not only what is meant by that phrase, but whether it would be defined differently according to your gender.

Indisputably, the main reason that so few women are in leadership roles is that they are still the primary carers of children. So we should examine this first.

*Is this simply because nature has bonded women physically and emotionally to their off-spring, or are there other factors, such as the attitude of employers toward women with children?*

*Do women forsake careers because the call of motherhood is stronger, or are they sidelined professionally because this appears to be 'women's work'?*

*Are prospective employers worried that mothers will not be able to sufficiently prioritise their work commitments?*

The growing number of 'house husbands' in our financially pressured society would certainly suggest that either sex can be the main carer for children but men are still largely seen as the 'hunter gatherers' and women as the 'nurturers'. This is one of the many myths that refuse to go away.

Recent studies have shown that a better balance of genders in management and leadership positions has a positive effect on the economic performance of companies. This is achieved through the recognition that women help to bring a wider range of perspectives to many aspects of the corporate world, i.e. decision making, team building, communication skills, and, very crucially, the ability to listen.

If these attributes are largely ignored then obviously they will not be brought to bear on problems and decision making. To put this in another context, in most peoples' personal lives, when they are presented with a major decision, they will seek advice over the widest possible strata of relations, friends and professionals.



They will search for the best possible help and the question of gender will simply not be a factor. Because everyone knows that the best way of tackling such a situation is to get as many opinions as possible. Diverse approaches will almost always illuminate the problem in diverse ways, greatly enhancing the chances of getting the right resolution. Or, put it another way, they will 'add value'.

But this disparity in earning power and occupational status continues in the corporate world. Nearly half the human race is being excluded from an area which badly needs their input. This is patently absurd. This leads to the inevitable conclusion that those who are in the position to change things are largely not only unenlightened, but totally unaware of how they are 'short changing' their organisations. Is it too much of a flight of fancy to compare attitudes of many employers to an apple grower not realising that very few apple trees are self-fertilising?

Here is an interesting example by **Barbara Annis**, co-author with **Michael Guerin** of '**Leadership in the Sexes**' and an expert on gender differences in the workplace:

*'Imagine you are interviewing candidates for a leadership job. You ask two candidates to share a success story. The first person says, "I saved \$10 million on supplies," and then proceeds to give some background.*

*The second candidate begins obliquely: "One time I was worried that the people on the East Coast didn't feel involved ..." The story goes on, with what might appear to be irrelevant details, before finally working its way to the point: "... and that's how we saved \$10 million."*

*Which candidate is more likely to be hired?*

*All other qualifications being equal, the candidate who got right to the point and did not burden the interviewer with a lot of contextual detail is more likely to be seen as the better leader.'*

According to Ms Annis, this is one reason why companies are so poor at hiring women leaders. She goes on to explain that the candidate who got right to the point was probably a man, and the candidate who gave the whole context was probably a woman. But that what you are seeing is a gender-specific difference in leadership styles, not a difference in capability. It is a prime example of how men and women leaders think differently and behave differently.

People are often wary of talking about these differences fearing that it will lead to stereotyping and prejudice. But this reluctance hurts women leaders who have had to suppress their natural leadership style. Such gender differences must be recognised and understood when recruiting leaders.

Some other differences between men and women leaders are noted by Ms Annis are:

*'That men are more comfortable in calling attention to their accomplishments, which may make them look better than equally capable women candidates. They are also more likely to enthusiastically accept a challenge, even if they don't know what it is; whereas women are likely to ask a lot of questions first. This can be mistakenly interpreted to mean that a woman is not sufficiently eager or confident in the task. Also, aggressiveness in men is often seen in a positive light, whereas the same behaviour in a woman is often interpreted negatively.'*

People have long been fascinated by differences between men and women. Not so many years ago, it would have been considered obvious to most people that male brains and male minds were different – and superior – to those of females.

Not much more than a century ago, Gustave Le Bon, one of the founders of social psychology, wrote:

*"In the most intelligent races there are a large number of women whose brains are closer in size to those of gorillas than to the most developed male brains. This inferiority is so obvious that no one can contest it for a moment; only its degree is worth discussion All psychologists who have studied the intelligence of women, as well as poets and novelists, recognize today that they represent the most inferior forms of human evolution and that they are closer to children and savages than to an adult, civilized man. They excel in fickleness, inconstancy, absence of thought and logic, and incapacity to reason. Without doubt there exist some distinguished women, very superior to the average man, but they are as exceptional as the birth of any monstrosity, as, for example, of a gorilla with two heads; consequently, we may neglect them entirely."*

Whilst this may cause you to catch your breath in amazement, is it possible that deep in the collective male psyche there remains an unacknowledged belief of their superior intelligence? If this is the case, then neuroscience can

surely play a significant role in lying to rest this and many of the other fictions that surround gender issues in the workplace.

So, are the brains of men and women the same or different? The answer is both. In large part, the brains of men and women are similar. However, there are some ways in which they differ.

Male and female brains are different from the moment of conception. Despite this, until eight weeks of pregnancy, every foetal brain looks female - female is nature's default setting. A huge testosterone surge beginning in the eight week will turn this female brain into a male brain. If the testosterone surge doesn't happen, the female brain continues to develop unperturbed.

How does this fork in the neurological road affect us? It defines our innate biological destiny, colouring the lens through which each of us perceives the world. There are many variations in the brain that lead to individual behaviour preferences and, skills sets. Our genetic variations and the hormones present in our brain during foetal development are the cornerstone of the brain, but life experiences play upon our particular brain circuits to reinforce individual differences

Do sex differences in cognitive abilities explain the predominance of men in fields like science, engineering and, ultimately, leadership? Although the popular press often stresses the importance of testosterone to the behaviour of men, this claim is also overstated. A study showed that even unnaturally large doses of testosterone did not alter the mood or behaviour of normal men, although it did exaggerate aggression for men who were already aggressive.

Moreover, even if oestrogen and testosterone did shape the brain in different ways, it is an unsubstantiated, logical leap to conclude that such differences cause men to occupy top academic positions in the sciences and engineering or top positions of political or social power, while women are hopelessly ill-equipped for such offices.

For centuries, men and women did different jobs, tasks that required different skills. As natural selection weeded out less able workers, time carved differences in the male and female brain. No two human beings are alike. Countless cultural forces influence how men and women think and act. And each one of us is an elaborate mix of both male and female traits. Neuroscientific research has identified some talents that women express more regularly than men; aptitudes that stem, in part, from women's brain

architecture and brain chemicals, skills that leadership theorists now espouse as essential to leadership effectiveness.

Whether men and women are equal is a political and moral question, but whether they are identical is a scientific one. While there are essentially no disparities in general intelligence between the sexes, a neuroscience study by the University of California has found significant differences in brain areas where males and females manifest their intelligence.

The study shows women having more white matter and men more grey matter related to intellectual skill, revealing that no single neuroanatomical structure determines general intelligence and that different types of brain designs are capable of producing equivalent intellectual performance.

*“These findings suggest that human evolution has created two different types of brains designed for equally intelligent behaviour,”*

said Professor Richard Haier, Professor of Psychology, who led the study with colleagues at UCLA and the University of New Mexico.

If men and women have systematically diverse experiences and expectations from the moment of birth, then it is possible that neuroscience will see differences in the brains of adults of either sex. However, it does not follow that these differences are immutable or innate, merely that we need to re-assess how much they contribute to the situation that many boards and businesses presently find themselves in i.e. underrepresented by women, notwithstanding the fact that female applicants frequently have the highest qualifications for the job.





As well as the looking at mutual expectations, we should take a look at the question of self confidence, in gender terms. It is worth noting then when high performing managers of both sexes were asked to comment on their performance, the women were generally realistic in their self appraisal. However, most of the men had an inflated opinion of their performance, relative to their superior's assessment. But such self confidence meant that the men were more often given promotion than their equally deserving female counterparts. Of course, as those who were making the decisions regarding the promotions were almost certainly male, this can be seen as circular and depressingly self-perpetuating, underlining how much work needs to be done to enable companies to fully realise the potential of a proper gender balance. Advances in neuroscience can help both sexes to better understand, and hopefully begin to deal with, these problems.

So what are the advantages in business terms of gender balance? Well, we have already mentioned the most important one – economic performance. But now let us explore further. Business needs the best brains and qualifications available, especially at the top level that much is self-evident. From an early age, women perform academically better than men, but this tends to even out later, as brain development in girls reaches its peak a year or so before it does in boys. But the key word here is 'even'. Gender makes no difference to the intellectual levels reached. Therefore, if we take the most basic result of the lack of women in leadership positions, it is quite simply that a huge part of the available resources are being lost.

The scarcity of women in business leadership is not new. However, women's representation at senior levels in organizations today is far from where it needs to be. Given the higher number of females getting degrees, representing the majority of graduates in the major countries in the world, they still represent only 6% of executives in the largest companies.

The percent of women in management and leadership positions, compared with men, constitutes a major social indicator of the extent to which women have achieved parity with men in the labour market. As noted by the OECD (2009a) in its report *'Gender and Sustainable Development'*, greater gender equity in management and leadership positions can improve the economic performance of companies and organizations through a number of different processes: women managers can "bring a wider range of perspectives to bear in corporate decision making, contribute team-building and communication skills, and help organisations to adapt to changing circumstances (OECD, 2009a: 31)."



A 2011 report, "Women on Boards", by former British Trade Minister, Lord Davies, concluded:

*"The business case for increasing the number of women on corporate boards is clear. Women are successful at university and in their early careers, but attrition rates increase as they progress through an organisation. When women are so under-represented on corporate boards, companies are missing out, as they are unable to draw from the widest possible range of talent. Evidence suggests that companies with a strong female representation at board and top management level perform better than those without and that gender-diverse boards have a positive impact on performance. It is clear that boards make better decisions where a range of voices, drawing on different life experiences, can be heard. That mix of voices must include women."*

There is a body of research which demonstrates how the appointment of female directors can improve a company's performance. Female directors enhance board independence. Better decision-making is assumed to occur as a result of directors having a range of experiences and backgrounds. Women take their non-executive director roles more seriously, preparing more conscientiously for meetings. Women ask the awkward questions more often, decisions are less likely to be nodded through and so are likely to be better.

Women with the talents, brains and qualifications to enhance organisations are being passed over. If this trend is not reversed soon, it may be too late. Instead of bringing these qualities to large organisations, increasingly women are seizing the opportunities offered up in the 21<sup>st</sup> century and turning to entrepreneurship.

Entrepreneurship in the digital age lends itself to childcare, thereby doing away with the complexities of domestic responsibility which we have already discussed. Virtual workplaces and digitally mobile lifestyles give aspiring women entrepreneurs the flexibility to achieve whatever balance is necessary in their lives. Digital tools mean that women can now build a business from home and create unique work schedules. Many women are giving up the unequal struggle and using the skills that we perceive as being traditionally feminine, to create and establish their own companies. The corporate world is already losing many of the assets which would bring them valuable diversity and balance.

Diverse opinions create more dynamics. Let's have a look at the qualities that women can bring to the table that are still being so grossly underestimated.

It can be argued that women's proven strong communication and social skills make them more equipped to thrive in our post-industrial digital age. It seems that women have specific skills, whether the result of biology or social conditioning, that can help them succeed as entrepreneurs. The digital economy requires these skills, and, according to many studies, women enjoy a slight edge over their male counterparts. A Columbia Business School programme teaches sensitive leadership and social intelligence, including a lesson in reading facial expressions and body language.

*"We never explicitly say, 'Develop your feminine side,' but it's clear that's what we're advocating,"*

says Jamie Ladge, a business professor at Northeastern University.

Whether due to biology or cultural conditioning, studies show that women tend to be better listeners and are stronger at drawing people into conversation. This translates to several advantages for the entrepreneur, who can better attune herself to customer needs and build more effective teams of employees, contractors and partners. In fact, many women entrepreneurs often describe building their business as building a team. And that brings us to another 'feminine' facet – women collaborate well. History has many examples of this from communal patchwork quilting to organisations such as the Women's Institute. And who will ever forget the bonding of Cagney and Lacey in the ladies room? Remembered because it struck a chord with almost all women.

But here again we need to look at the advantages of gender balance. Studies increasingly show that women prefer lower risk. Some recent research suggests that groups of men spur each other toward reckless decisions.



Whether testosterone influences decision-making or not, research shows that, as a whole, women prefer lower risk opportunities and are willing to settle for lower returns. Interestingly a 2007 study from the Small Business Administration observes the differences between male and female entrepreneurs in the U.S. The results found that male owners are more likely to start a business to make money, and have higher expectations for their business. Women are more likely to consider whether their business and personal lives will work in harmony. If women are choosing to pursue smaller business ventures in order to balance their business and personal life more easily, so be it. But we have just seen a burgeoning example of how gender imbalance is ultimately restrictive at all levels. Surely it is time that we started to look at the bigger picture. Time that these so-called 'choices' were left in the 1950's, which is surely where they belong. Women should not have to balance changing nappies with the FTSE 100. We do not need to change the world, it has changed already. We just need to challenge entrenched attitudes and prejudices on both sides of the divide.

It is crucial that more women are on boards and in management. To illustrate this let's look at a White Paper from the Cornell Centre for Human Resource Studies last year which stated:

*'There is a strong business case for balanced boards. Inclusive and diverse boards are more likely to be effective boards, better able to understand their customers and stakeholders and to benefit from fresh perspectives, new ideas, vigorous challenge and broad experience. This in turn leads to better decision making.'*

*This business case is backed by a growing body of evidence. Research has shown that strong stock market growth among European companies is most likely to occur where there is a higher proportion of women in senior management teams. Companies with more women on their boards were found to outperform their rivals. And yet women are still under-represented on the company boards of UK plc.*

*The pace of change remains too slow, despite a range of initiatives aimed at training, mentoring and supporting women to be "board ready", and projects undertaken by companies to address organisational issues such as unconscious bias.*

*This is not just a gender numbers game. It is about the richness of the board as a whole, the combined contribution of a group of people with different skills and perspectives to offer, different experiences, backgrounds and life styles and who together are more able to consider issues in a rounded,*

*holistic way and offer an attention to detail not seen on all male boards which often think the same way, and sometimes make poor decisions.*

*Of course a key factor driving boards is profitability and return to shareholders. A range of research illustrates the positive impact that women's contribution to the boardroom can make to the bottom line of the company's finances, and positively associates gender-diverse boards with improved performance. The business case for gender diversity on boards has four key dimensions: improving performance, accessing the widest talent pool, being more responsive to the market and achieving better corporate governance.'*

Research at the University of Southern California found a striking gender difference in brain function when under stress. The distinction appeared in the brain regions that enable people to emulate and understand the emotions of others. According to the research, stress seemed to increase the capacity for empathy in women while reducing it in males.

Generally speaking, female leaders tend to be more interactive, wanting to keep an encounter going until the emotional content has been played out. Conversely, men's discomfort dealing with emotion (and their brain's innate response to it) leads them to immediately search for solutions, rather than understanding that sometimes people - including colleagues and employees - just need to be heard.

At Harvard University, Robert Rosenthal developed a test called the Profile of Nonverbal Sensitivity to analyze gender differences in decoding body language signals. With the exception of men who held jobs involving nurturing, artistic or expressive work, women (from fifth grade to adulthood) had superior scores in accurately judging messages communicated by facial expressions, body movement and voice quality.

And not only are women more adept at identifying nonverbal cues, they are better at expressing them - employing more animation, gesture, vocal variety and emotion in their communication behaviour. They are more likely to focus on those who are speaking by orienting head and torso toward participants. They lean forward, smile, synchronize their movements with others, nod and tilt their heads (the universal signal of listening, literally giving someone your ear). To a woman, good listening skills also include making eye contact and reacting visually to the speaker. This use of warmer body language signals in turn builds trust and encourages collaboration.

Male leaders, on the other hand, have been found to send more nonverbal status signals. Men expand into available space: They stand tall or they sprawl, sitting with their legs spread or widely crossed, their materials spread out on a conference table, and their arms stretched out on the back of a chair. In a business meeting, they smile less than women, but employ more facial expressions that come across as intimidating, overpowering or disinterested.

Such status and power cues make male executives look like leaders. Or at least they did in a hierarchical, command-and-control setting. But when it comes to leading collaborative teams, status cues can undermine the organization's efforts. If you behave like the boss who has all the answers, why would anyone else need or dare to contribute?

The most successful leaders of the future will take the time and effort necessary to make people feel safe and valued. They'll emphasize team cohesiveness while encouraging candid and constructive conflict, they'll set clear expectations while recognizing what each team member contributes, they'll share the credit and the rewards. And, most of all, they'll foster true networked collaboration through a leadership style that projects openness, inclusiveness and respect.

Dianne Abbott, MP, on being asked why she thought she was the only female contender for leadership of the labour party, said:

*"Women tend to think of the reasons why they shouldn't do something, whereas men are not hindered by that level of introspection."*



Our mental image of leadership has been shaped by the fact that most leaders have been men. Women who follow their natural leadership strengths will not match that mental image, which leads interviewers to feel they lack the right qualifications.

Organizations must be aware of gender-specific behavioural differences. Interviewers who are trained to correctly interpret women's behaviour will find great leaders that other companies have missed. It's time for companies to look at the science of brain differences and apply what they learn in the hunt for the best leaders.

So we have come full circle. Nature or nurture? Or both?

Whatever the reasons for so much corporate short sightedness, the conclusions are clear. The world of business, which, let's face it, is the engine which drives modern life, will never achieve its full potential until it can celebrate a right and proper balance of the sexes. We need to change attitudes. It really is as simple as that. Women's attitudes. Men's attitudes.

And to achieve this end, it is essential that we use all the tools available to us in this 21<sup>st</sup> century. One UK-based organization, *PRISM* Brain Mapping ([www.prismbrainmapping.com](http://www.prismbrainmapping.com)), now provides workshops for organizations highlighting the role that neuroscience can play in the wellbeing and development of women in leadership roles. The workshops cover a wide range of brain-related topics, including stress, decision-making, diet, lifestyle, The company has also developed a neuroscience-based recruitment tool which is designed to highlight the suitability of candidates, as a means of ensuring that hiring decisions are not only better quality, but also free of gender bias.