



Gender Differences in the Workplace

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After having facilitated over 2000 Gender Awareness Workshops, I have been able to collect many opinions from men and women who have consistently expressed a gender gap in their experience of the challenges they face in day-to-day business. These seem to be far removed from the typical gender issues of the past.

Today, workshop participants seem more focused on building partnerships and congruence between women and men.

Challenges and Barriers for Women

It doesn't take more than a few seconds for the women attending the workshops to begin the process of listing these challenges on a flip chart. The discussion is hot, rich, intense and enlivening. For women the list gets long and longer, sometimes up to 60 challenges, however women consistently experience these top five challenges:

Dismissed: This doesn't mean that everyone doesn't experience being dismissed, perhaps even quite often. What the women continue to say is that they are dismissed because of their gender and their different, yet authentic, style.

A classic scenario: A woman is raising an issue or making a point at a meeting, and is ignored, a man then restates it and everyone is paying attention and addressing the point. Research continually shows how many more times women are interrupted and/or dismissed in public, in boardrooms and in general gender-mixed discussions.

Tested: Again, we have all experienced being tested, but usually a man going about his daily work, is not tested because he is a man. The typical scenario women mention: "I walk in with my associate (who happens to report to me) and it is immediately assumed that he is my boss, not only that, but even if they quickly figure out that I am the boss, I have to go through this boring process of being tested on whether I know my stuff, how I made it to the top, do I have the 'right' experience?, etc."

Third Sex: If you are dismissed and tested in a 'water torture' way, you may find yourself questioning or even changing your own authentic style and emulating those who don't get dismissed and are rarely tested. For the most part, these are men, or women who act like men. This puts women in a 'no win' situation, because now you are labeled as a 'barracuda', 'dragonlady' or worse. This has serious implications for both men and women: in the mentoring process, in how potential new female recruits view what it takes to move up the ladder, and in how both men and women perceive women in senior positions and their misuse of power.

Excluded, Avoided: The real meeting after the meeting, is the one from which women feel excluded - those famous 'relationship building' meetings, events, golf games, etc. Even as simple as the question after work "Do you want to go for a beer?" Women constantly say they find this limiting in their ability to network and have mentoring opportunities where they could contribute and learn.





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provides workshops and
consultative services that can
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maximize the contributions
and results of all your people.

Tokenism: Employment Equity as a concept is fine, but when it comes to improving men's and women's relationships in the workplace it has, in fact, created a wider gap. Women say they continually hear statements like "she got the job because..." or "we men are losing opportunities because..."

Challenges and Barriers for Men

If you are a woman reading this, we invite you to be rigorous with yourself and your reactions, because there is pure gold in recognizing and understanding where men come from and why they experience things the way they do.

What are men's top challenges? They include:

Confused: A lot of men are confused as to what the ground rules are. They have been brought up a certain way, even taught by women in their personal lives as to what is expected from them. Yet, they find themselves acknowledging that times have changed but lack, clarity as to what has changed behaviourally and attitudinally, and that the 'new' rules seem to vary from individual to individual.

Careful: This is when men have either had a bad experience or heard of one. Whether it was a blatant sexual harassment situation or something more benign, their reaction is to pull back and be very careful with all women. They find this challenge very cumbersome and costly because they can no longer be authentic and take less risks in providing feedback and coaching to women.

Reverse Discrimination: Again, Employment Equity has, in some cases, given rise to the notion that women are getting the better jobs at the expense of men. Often, men say they have worked very hard to achieve their status, and now experience women getting ahead at a faster pace and with less effort.

Difficulty Supporting Women: Men say that as peers or supervisors of women they have great difficulty supporting them, because they see that women do not support other women, and feel they lack the knowledge or tools as to how to resolve this, and will even avoid it at all costs. The other way this challenge plays out for men occurs when a client requests male representation. Often men find it very difficult to push the issue or insist that the woman assigned will do an excellent job.

Communication: Many men recognize that when they say something to a woman it is either heard differently or at least reacted upon differently. This particular challenge they often find even more difficult in their personal lives. Men say they then find themselves thinking carefully about how to approach an issue, or how to speak, and thereby lack spontaneity in their relationships with women.

Insights and Solutions

Accepting that women and men consistently report these different challenges each experience in the workplace, the question becomes: "Where do we go from here?" It is evident that any attempt to ignore the differences, or "make them go away" is doomed to fail, and rightly so. What is called for, and all-too-often lost in the debate is an approach that allows men and women to maximize their respective strengths in the workplace, and to recognize that the true competitive advantage lies in an ability to allow those strengths to coexist in a co-operative, supportive and aware workplace. Those organizations best able to abandon the "battle of the sexes" in favour of a cohesive and focused team approach will inevitably emerge as the leaders in the new, and gender-awareness improved, millennium

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