

Development and Gender Brain Wiring

The adage “Men are from Mars and women are from Venus” has merit — at least where our brains’ wiring is concerned.

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Boticelli's "Venus and Mars" got gender-based neurology right: at rest, neurons in the female brain fire more often and rapidly than those in the male brain. (Courtesy of Wikimedia Commons)

My feminism makes it difficult for me to accept that women are different from men, mostly because “different” often translates to “inferior” in conversations about business. “Women aren’t as good at negotiating.” “Women are more emotional and less analytical.” “Men don’t ask for directions and therefore are more likely to forge their own paths.” And get lost, but that’s neither here nor there — pun intended.

But my interest in neuroscience makes it impossible to ignore scientific evidence that these differences exist. Whether we’re born with an X or Y chromosome not only dictates what reproductive equipment we’ve got but also how our brains are wired.

Nature doesn’t classify one as better than the other, but our social and business structures do, which means that chief learning officers have a responsibility to help level the learning and leadership fields for both genders.

To find out how they can do this, I talked with Barbara Annis, founding partner of the Gender Intelligence Group, which researches how male and female minds differ and applies it to business leadership development.

She said the female prefrontal cortex, the consequential thinking of the brain, develops earlier and more completely than that in the male brain. This leads to more contextualized — also known as divergent— thinking where women instinctively look at how a decision will affect outside, potentially

unconnected, factors. Meanwhile, men's less-developed prefrontal cortex allows them to instinctively gravitate toward convergent thinking; they can focus on one project without straying from it to look at connected topics. Both thought processes can be innovative and analytical but in different ways.

If these variances point to men and women having separate but equal strengths, why does it always seem like female thinking gets a bad rap in the business world?

“In business, we're all about converging,” Annis said. “It's about the results, what are the next three months going to deliver? It's not about diverging, but women can bring some amazing ideas and thoughts.”

Annis has talked to women who say they've worked on projects where divergent thinking would have made them more successful. And she said she's found the biggest successes happen when both types of thinking come together. Men significantly outnumber women in major decision-making positions, which deprives businesses of the divergent perspective.

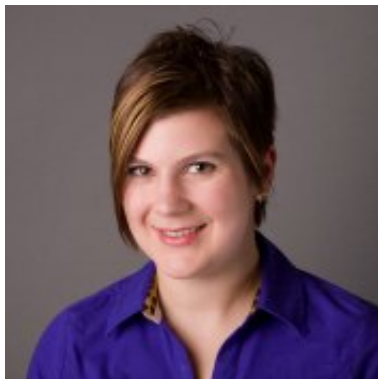
Learning leaders should not only educate executives on gender intelligence's effect on business success — which values having both convergent and divergent input at the decision-making table — but also make sure women receive the development opportunities they need to make it to the top of the organization. Once there, it's easier for them to contribute their divergent skills.

That requires CLOs to be educated in gender intelligence, too, because male and female brain wiring also affects the way they learn. Men tend to learn best in transactional settings, where they can look at facts and statistics and use logic to come to a conclusion. Women learn through relational methods, which include dialogue and anecdotes.

Leadership development has traditionally been suited for transactional learning because for a majority of the 20th century, participants were mostly male. Now that women are a heftier part of the workforce, Annis' group has evaluated five *Fortune* 500 companies' leadership courses for gender intelligence in content and delivery. They found that although they weren't entirely exclusive of relational learning, they were definitely tailored to the male mind.

“How do you create balance?” she said. “The first thing is to learn about gender intelligence and apply it in the courses you deliver. Apply much more of a blended strategy in how you facilitate leadership sessions or learning sessions.”

Men's brains might be Martian while women's are Venusian, but that doesn't mean they can't both lead and learn on Earth.



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