
When debates are not gender neutral

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The usual conflict that is often apparent between men and women in the boardroom has a lot to do with the two very different styles of dialogue that come most naturally to men and women.

One division is between the rational, left brain dominant male and the emotive, right brain dominant female. In particular, the tendency of women to personalise some situations is known to exasperate their male colleagues. The man might want to refer to "the financial director", meaning a role, not a person. The woman sees and relates to the person, before the role.

The other division is between male hunting-group instinct and female comforter-carer instinct. This area is more open to debate, with a questioning of the automatic male licence to be aggressive and the female obligation to be more accepting.

The female manager's instinct is to build relationships in contrast to the typical masculine management style, which is to obtain the required results and meet given targets often at the expense of human relationships. The male focus is to achieve the bottom line at any cost, human or otherwise, while the female focus is to get there with everybody still on-board.

Females instinctively try to engage, involve and build rapport while males could gain from adapting their macho style to one that more encourages team-building.

I was once retained as an interviewer by the publishers of one of the UK's big-name fashion magazines. The first editor I had to interview was a popular society hostess, who was completely wrong for the job because she was not adept at executive dialogue. Her meetings with contributors were similar to a cocktail party, with the consequence that many talented people gave up trying to work in such an unprofessional atmosphere.

Her replacement could not have been more different - a woman of enormous talent but abrasive personality, who achieved high standards by rejecting poor submissions in the most aggressive manner. She had obviously adopted a male attitude in her bawling-out of hapless victims. It soon became clear that very few women could work with her, but men were more inclined to accept her idiosyncratic way of working. There was no doubt that her methods achieved results and she became an unusual feature of a successful magazine staffed mostly by male editors.

The above represent two opposite extremes - one woman temperamentally out of place in the boardroom, and another who behaved in an intimidating manner that achieved results but made it impossible for her to work successfully with other women.

All this indicates the need to achieve a balance in the constituent make-up of today's mixed-gender boardroom and the ability to harness the differing natural instincts of men and women.

Key points: Adaptation

- In boardroom dialogue, women have had to adapt to male logic
- In relationship-building, it is male management that need to adapt
- A balance needs to be struck between male and female attitudes

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