

# Book Leadership and the Sexes

## Using Gender Science to Create Success in Business

Michael Gurian and Barbara Annis  
Jossey-Bass, 2008  
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### Recommendation

This pleasant book is easy to read and easy to apply. What’s enjoyable about the book, beyond the clarity of the writing, is the positive tone Michael Gurian and Barbara Annis strike. As they note, too often gender discussions are fraught with tension, and many workplaces markedly favor one sex over the other. However, the authors not only communicate the benefits of developing “gender intelligence,” they sound completely convinced that businesspeople can improve their gender understanding and relationships almost immediately, and they provide tools for doing so. That said, while the authors are careful to speak in terms of gender tendencies and not absolutes, they sometimes do generalize in ways that might excuse specific actions as biological male or female behavior. That issue aside, *BooksInShort* recommends this book to managers, human resource personnel and anyone interested in understanding gender issues and proclivities.

### Take-Aways

- Men and women think and act differently because their brains are different.
- Male and female brains differ in structure, blood flow and chemistry.
- Men and women tend to lead differently. Women are more participative and process-oriented; men move directly toward their goals.
- When negotiating, men are more aggressive and take more risks, but women are better at reading cues and monitoring interpersonal relationships.
- In meetings, women are better at multitasking and verbal processing, whereas men function better when physically involved and focused on a single task.
- The female brain processes conflict verbally. The male brain responds by engaging the entire body.
- Women bond emotionally to individuals; men bond to entire systems.
- To help female managers, encourage directness, strategic planning and confidence.
- Train male managers to give feedback, communicate with women and seek balance.
- Both men and women benefit from skilled, gender-intelligent mentoring.

### Summary

#### Toward a Scientific Understanding of Gender

No matter where you live or how far you travel, you’ll see that men and women act differently. Sure, some of the contrasts in their behaviors and expectations are cultural, but some are biological, rooted in genetic variances that manifest in different brain structures. PET scans confirm these different structures. Combining that physical evidence with a growing understanding of gender culled from a range of disciplines can provide leaders with new tools. Developing your “gender intelligence” equips you to lead better and to draw on the skills specific to men and women to create a more balanced, adaptable company.

“This book is about the practical application of information on male/female brain differences in every aspect of your corporate life, from workplace comfort to competitive edge to corporate bottom line.”

To begin raising your gender intelligence, recognize two concepts. First, while social context shapes some aspects of gender, it does not affect other aspects. Gender is not as easily changed and molded as feminist theorists once argued. Second, gender differences fall on a spectrum, with male thought tending more toward one end and female thought tending more toward the other. Some individuals of each sex possess “bridge brains” with characteristics typical of both genders. Men and women tend to differ in many areas: memory (women remember more sensory details), language (women use more words), sensation (male and female retinas are different), emotional processing (women make more emotional links and process faster) and purchasing habits (women’s purchases are more linked to the senses). Men and women have a different ratio of gray and white matter in their brains: women have more white and men more gray. Those different neural pathways lead to differing perspectives.

“It can be difficult today to talk completely and honestly about how men and women feel at work. Respectful humor is often helpful.”

Experts study gender differences in the brain in three ways: PET scans, which monitor “neural activity”; MRI scans, which show blood flow; and SPECT scans, which

track brain activity. Using these tools, scientists have identified three main areas of brain differences:

- **Blood Flow** – The more active an area of the brain is, the more blood flows to it. In the male brain, more blood tends to pass through the “spatial-mechanical centers” on the right side; in the female brain, more blood tends to move through the “verbal-emotive centers in both sides.” As a result, men tend to process spatially; women, verbally. In meetings, men might move around, seeming restless, as they process, whereas women tend to talk things out. The male brain’s higher ratio of gray matter means the greater blood flow there focuses men on single tasks and local processing. By contrast, given their additional white matter, women tend to process more globally. In a related difference, women have a more active cingulate gyrus, a midbrain element of the limbic system that allows them to “constantly reassess” the world. As a result, they generally act with a greater awareness of context than men. Finally, women and men differ on their respective “rest states.” Men’s brains rest and deactivate more completely. Thus, a man who seems to be fidgeting in a meeting may be trying to keep his mind engaged.
- **Structures** – The female brain’s larger hippocampus enables women to “remember more physical and situational details.” Thus, a team with both women and men will be better at reviewing situations, leading to greater institutional knowledge. The female amygdala is larger than the male, so the genders respond differently to conflict. In women, the response to conflict is directed upward into the verbal centers of the brain. In men, it is directed down into the body, which leads to physical expression.
- **Chemistry** – Different hormones affect male and female thinking. Men secrete markedly more testosterone and vasopressin, which lead to territoriality and aggressive behavior. Women secrete more serotonin and oxytocin, which support calmness and bonding.

“The human brain is hard-wired (genetically coded with) its gender.”

As a result of these brain differences, men and women use divergent leadership methods. Women tend toward a “participative” style. They connect naturally, enjoy teamwork and foster collegial relationships. They tend to reason inductively. Conversely, men reason deductively and prefer to solve problems alone. They often test people and ideas, and tend toward “transactional” leadership. Women might describe what they’re looking for from employees, whereas men will tell them directly what to do. Women tend to bond through shared explorations over time, favor verbal interaction, encourage people, express emotions directly and empathically, and accent “complex and multitasking activities.” By contrast, male leaders generally emphasize tests, rituals and immediate action. They communicate in short bursts, and de-emphasize emotion as they guide subordinates to take risks, reduce their vulnerability and move promptly.

## Applying Gender Intelligence

You can start benefiting immediately from increased gender intelligence in four areas:

1. **Negotiation** – Men and women negotiate differently and heed different factors, so put both on your negotiating team. Train the team about gender intelligence. Women tend to read emotions and “sensory cues,” including “facial cues” better than men. They are more adept at tracking relationships among groups. Men take more risks, and are more “data-driven” and more skilled at pushing people aggressively. To take maximum advantage of gender intelligence, involve men and women in preparing for negotiations. Select a team leader based on aptitude and compatibility with the other team. A female leader skilled in verbal tactics may want to bring on a male peer to focus on the data. Let gender awareness guide the negotiation, from creating rapport to defining the desired results.
2. **Meetings** – Meetings are stressful, and men and women respond to stress differently. Women produce more oxytocin, as if their hormonal systems were guiding them to resolve stress by building relationships. Stressed men generate more testosterone, a biochemical driver to resolve stress through aggression. Men’s brains may seek the rest mode and they often don’t multitask as well as women’s, so men might get frustrated tracking complex conversations. The male drive for aggression may lead men to seek dominance, perhaps unconsciously. Women are more comfortable linking a range of topics and attending to processes. But women are easier for opponents to silence or intimidate, since they have a reduced tendency toward forceful self-assertion. To make their communication patterns easier for men to follow, women can be more concrete, provide agendas, explicitly link discussions to the meeting’s purpose, and focus on ideas and priorities (rather than feelings). Men should practice active listening and empathy, control their anger, request contributions from quiet participants and praise others when that’s appropriate. All parties should attain balance, involve everyone else and keep outdated behavior patterns from sabotaging discussions. Seek diversity, request both genders’ perspectives and “channel competitiveness” productively.
3. **Communication** – Men and women communicate differently in five major areas. First, women are more verbal than men, who tend to interrupt. Second, women tend to criticize themselves, whereas men criticize others. Third, men communicate about goals, while women focus on the processes of pursuing the goals. Fourth, men are more likely to articulate their own “accomplishments and prowess,” while women are likelier to ask questions and downplay their own achievements. Fifth, women focus on “individual emotional memories,” like those involving family, while men focus on “trivia,” “dominance” and “large social aggression-based groupings,” like sports or war.
4. **Conflict** – After a stressful event, people pass through the same spectrum of responses: They are “irritated,” then “annoyed” and, finally, angry. The progression is similar, but the emotions manifest differently. Angry men are “more physically dominant,” cuss more and “distance themselves” from the situation, often failing to return to resolve the issue. Women are more emotionally engaged in the conflict, and tend to worry about it and take it personally. Women try to verbalize conflict solutions too quickly for the men involved. When upset, both genders need to relax consciously, express their feelings, and review their assumptions about the conflict and those involved. The best step is to seek a good resolution, not to focus on blame. If you take a break and leave the topic – or the room – do come back to work out a solution.

## Developing “Gender-Balanced Leadership”

Gender-intelligent leaders help the women in their firms succeed, not just because it is a good thing to do (though it is), but also because failure is expensive. Women understand female consumers best and they make the majority of purchases. Through their families, women control even more buys than they make directly. What’s more, unless you deliberately support your female hires, you may find yourself in a position like that of Deloitte & Touche, which did great at recruiting talented women, but could not retain them. When its leaders recognized that men and women solve problems differently and that both male and female approaches contributed to the firm, they radically reduced the firm’s turnover rate. IBM also dramatically reduced its turnover rate (and generated good PR) by giving conscious attention to diversity. Led by CEO Lou Gerstner, IBM set out to widen its appeal and improve productivity through understanding “gender and racial differences.” It asked its leaders to be mentors who demonstrate and teach appropriate behavior, and it asked employees to cultivate more “gender balance.”

“Males and females are hard-wired, not just acculturated, to lead one another differently.”

Women need their leaders to provide respect, understanding, acknowledgement, “work-life flexibility,” and mentoring. They need their employers to realize what they contribute and to train men to communicate with them. In turn, women should be assertive about planning and pursuing their own careers, and they should mentor other women. When you try to support women on gender issues, you may find that people dismiss or deny these problems. Relate scientific data about gender differences to economic arguments about the bottom line. Train people to capitalize on their gender-specific strengths.

“Increasing gender intelligence and moving toward balanced leadership begins in understanding who each other really is.”

Most gender training focuses on women’s needs, often to the extent of dismissing men’s strengths. Many men have had female colleagues or supervisors who indulge in “male bashing,” an attitude of rejecting and even mocking their contributions, so the first thing they need is to be treated better by women. Like women, men appreciate being accepted and valued for who they are and what they can do. They have many strengths, but several important male attributes deserve particular attention. First, men are good at “competitive systems thinking.” They often focus their empathy on the larger systems they belong to, and support and protect these systems. Just as a woman’s concern in a legal battle might be for the individuals and families involved, a man is just as apt to be emotionally involved with the system at stake, such as law or justice. Second, men are more gifted at taking risks, not just for themselves but for their systems. This might extend even to risking their own health or lives for their larger systems. Men know how to treat difficult times, even defeats, as opportunities to test themselves and build confidence.

“Human nature is and always has been the prime mover of our instincts, and our workplaces are instinctual places filled with ambition, power, and need.”

Men need help creating work-life balance. Men’s brains shift biochemically when they become fathers; they generate more oxytocin, causing men to bond more readily. Their impulses change as they set out to provide for their families. They need time off for family life, and support for taking that time. Men need help working well with female co-workers. When men are angry, leaders can help by focusing on solutions to problems. When reviewing a man’s work, focus on the goals, rather than the process.

“Our female and male brains are equally smart, but can be smart in different ways.”

Both men and women need gender-intelligent leadership and mentoring. How well you lead and train your workers shapes all the major factors that ensure employee retention: fair treatment, opportunity, appreciation and excitement. Mentoring women gives them a needed sense of interpersonal connection, and mentoring men can help them learn to read verbal and social cues more skillfully. When you are mentoring, offer career, psychosocial and gender-intelligence support. Guide women by encouraging them to communicate directly, especially about their achievements. When a woman is under stress, work through the issue verbally, and link any criticism to a discussion of successes. Support men by helping them advance in their careers and educating them on giving women feedback. With either gender, use the “Declare-Frame-Check” communication method: Declare what you’re trying to do, frame the discussion and check to make sure the recipient understands.

## About the Authors

**Michael Gurian** is co-founder of the Gurian Institute and the author of more than 20 books, including *Leading Partners*. **Barbara Annis** is CEO of Barbara Annis & Associates and the author of *Same Words, Different Language*.

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