

Coaching and Gender Diversity

by Mary Ovenstone

Any consideration of diversity, either in society or in business, is lacking if the most fundamental human element of gender distinctions is not dealt with first. All too often in South Africa, because of our historical emphasis on making racial and cultural distinctions, we ignore the implications of the primary biological and psychological differences between men and women. Men originally designed most of the institutions of our society according to male values. While they meant well, too many assumptions were made about how women think, feel, make decisions and relate—many of which no longer fit.

For centuries most men worked out of doors, farming and building, and were sometimes away for months on end, hunting or fighting in wars and therefore developing brains with excellent spatial/motor responses. Women ran the homestead, often participating in farming activities, and raised and educated the children—developing the mental capacity to manage people and processes. Men began to work indoors in numbers after the industrial revolution, which only really caught on in South Africa after the 1860-80s to accommodate the needs associated with diamond and gold mining. Certainly the corporate business world, as we know it, is a very recent development in human history, gaining momentum after the World Wars of the first half of the 20th century.

During the 20th century, corporate processes and management styles were further developed by European and North American men to accommodate their thinking and working styles. Their business practices were exported to South Africa and utilized by white men, with a few cultural accommodations. While women joined the business world in the USA during WWII, gaining management status in numbers by the 1960s, women have only been invited into South African corporations more recently, and given management roles since the 1980s. As long as women have been able to think and act like men, they have been tolerated in the corporate world. When it was realized they could accomplish volumes of detailed work, they were utilized for that purpose.

Even though we are now all working together 'indoors', the business world still features the expedient decision-making style of the hunter, the competitive edge of the warrior and the architectural thinking and systems of the builder. Given the mess the world is in now, is that style really still adequate? Wouldn't we profit from the female brain with its understanding of human nature, the ethics of the educationalist, and the complex decision-making style of the multi-tasking manager of people and processes?

Why is it important to consider this history? Not to grind any axes, but to understand the context within which to view diversity.

For thousands of years we have experienced gender separation, dividing our functions and roles. Accordingly, our brains have developed differently. It will take generations of natural selection to change our basic brain/body structures, even though we might learn new ways to utilize our brains. Now, more often than not, we choose to spend many hours of the day living and working together. In order to get the most from our interactions at work and at home, both genders need to learn to understand the other better and to value our differences, rather than expect the other to change.

As coaches, we certainly need to understand the neurological distinctions and learn from them to coach women somewhat differently from men. The one-size-fits-all approach, within which both psychology and coaching have been grounded, is being blown out of the water by the last 10 years of neuro-scientific research in which brain differences are scanned in real-time with

the use of fMRIs and SPECT imaging. While 92% of our brains are the same, the 8% difference is significant, with neuroscientists isolating over 100 differences so far.

To name a few that I think most influence our work as coaches, I'll begin with the most basic structural difference. Testosterone present in the male fetus causes a decrease in the activities of the right hemisphere of the brain. Conversely the female brain, due partly to a larger corpus callosum, receives abundant information from both hemispheres simultaneously. The challenge for most women is to separate out our feelings from our thoughts. One of the most useful functions of a coach is to help women do this and to develop habits for doing so.

While the human brain has 6 centers that can be utilized in the production of language, the average man utilizes one in the left hemisphere, while the average woman uses all 6—three in each hemisphere. As neuro-researcher Dr. Michael Gurian says, this difference explains why men have a harder time finding words to describe their feelings. Women on the other hand, use words not just to describe but also to process their feelings. Coaches need to listen carefully to women as they process their feelings using words, yet find non-verbal ways to encourage men to process their emotions.

The generation of serotonin and oxytocin, which are produced in abundance in the female brain, make it easy for women to listen to each other talk about their feelings. The average man has a 10-minute attention span while listening to females talking about feelings. In a team coaching session, you will see that men will begin to fidget and tap their pencils in order to refocus their brain when the 'soft talk' goes on for too long.

The utilization of vasopressin and testosterone in the male brain creates the competitiveness, territoriality and drive that we see in the corporate world. It must be appreciated in coaching men, while another range of motives should be offered into their awareness. And the effects of the gradual loss of testosterone in middle age needs to be accommodated when coaching older men.

While the female brain has a capacity to channel large amounts of testosterone through it—many women love the feeling of it—it needs to reset its balance at the end of the day with the regeneration of oxytocin and serotonin through talk and affection.

I am aware that I have generalized, that many men and women are different, and that many coaches like me have found ways to coach men and women differently. In this short article I hope that I have at least stimulated your thinking to develop more ways to diversify your coaching.

In the 21st century we have an opportunity as coaches to support new ways in which men and women can blend their talents to sort out the complex problems of the world in which we live.

Mary Ovenstone is an Executive and Leadership Coach and Mentor, a Canadian-trained Counsellor for individuals and couples, designer and presenter of corporate interventions, international workshop presenter and public speaker, author and frequent guest in the media.

Mary has spent the last three years studying the latest research on the differences between male and female brains, and experimenting with ways to coach men and women differently in her business coaching practice. She also works with couples to help them understand their differences and how to resolve them.

For further information, telephone (021) 761 8312, email mary@maryovenstone.com or visit Mary's website at www.maryovenstone.com.