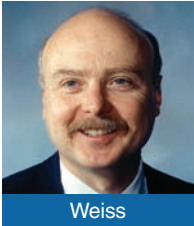


# Managing Gender Diversity: Five Secrets for a Manager's Toolkit

Kurt K. Weiss



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Most managers and supervisors at technical companies struggle to achieve and maintain gender diversity. In particular, engineering, scientific, information technology, and oil and gas companies are faced with the problem of recruiting and retaining female employees. Gender-diversity discussions tend to focus on three main concerns: 1) the relationship between corporate profitability

and gender diversity, 2) the problem of recruiting and retaining women professionals in technical companies where the corporate culture can be inhospitable, and 3) the number of women entering and graduating from science, technology, engineering, and mathematics programs.

## Why is Gender Diversity Important?

First, let's examine how gender diversity positively affects the corporate bottom line in terms of profitability, return on equity (ROE), and total return to shareholders (TRS). Edith G. Orenstein of Financial Executives International reports that, "A study in 2001 by Roy Adler, 'Women in the Executive Suite Correlate to High Profits,' published by the Glass Ceiling Research Center, found that the 25 Fortune 500 firms with the best record of promoting women to high positions are between 18 and 69% more profitable than the median Fortune 500 firms in their industries."

A 2004 study conducted by Catalyst, "The Bottom Line: Connecting Corporate Performance and Gender Diversity," examined 353 Fortune 500 companies from five industries—consumer discretionary, consumer staples, financial, industrial, and information technology/telecommunications services. The study found that, "Companies with the highest representation of women on their top management teams experienced better financial performance than companies with the lowest women's representation. This finding holds for both financial measures analyzed—ROE, which is 35% higher, and TRS, which is 34% higher."

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**Kurt K. Weiss** is a Managing Partner of Executive Management Consulting, a firm providing organizational development through executive retreats, facilitation, and training. He has more than 20 years of experience in executive coaching and development, gender diversity, team building, leadership, and communication to promote effective working relationships. Weiss has extensive experience with companies in the engineering, information technology, and the oil and gas sector. He received his doctorate in individual and organizational development from Vanderbilt University and formerly taught at the University of Tennessee.

"Furthermore, diversity can encourage a more balanced view of problems and an increased richness of decision making through consideration of different viewpoints and perspectives," notes Barbara J. Bowes in her book *The Business Case for Diversity* (2007). "Diversity has also been shown to strengthen the overall corporate culture, enhance corporate reputations, act as a recruitment and retention tool, enhance service levels, reduce turnover, lower absenteeism rates, and improve a company's global management capacity. Diversity creates a sense of worldliness that otherwise would not be possible."

Technology companies invest a great deal of money to attract and train female talent. When 40% of women leave their organization (and often their technical profession), this is a very expensive loss on investment. According to Allan Leighton, Chairman of the Race for Opportunity, a UK benchmarking system, businesses that do not include diversity in their corporate strategy will lose their competitive edge. What is more, diversity strengthens corporate brand recognition.

## Hurdle No. 1: The Low Number of Women in Technical Fields

First, the number of women graduating from engineering and technical programs is lower than in other professional fields. This is a pressing issue because the number of women entering engineering programs is significantly lower than women entering other professions.

According to recent research published in the article, "Why So Few Women, Still?" by Jill S. Tietjen, "In the United States, women constitute about 11% of the engineering workforce and earn about 20% of undergraduate engineering degrees. According to the Washington, D.C.-based Commission on Professionals in Science and Technology, engineering has the lowest percentage of female graduates among all the professions—lower than medicine, law, economics, dentistry, architecture, and pharmacy." As such, it is imperative that technical companies are able to recruit and retain female engineers.

## Hurdle No. 2: Difficulties Retaining Female Talent

In a May 2008 Harvard Business Review (HBR) report titled, "The Athena Factor: Reversing the Brain Drain in Science, Engineering, and Technology," Sylvia Ann Hewlett, Carolyn Buck Luce, and Lisa J. Servon found that an inhospitable corporate culture is driving many woman technical professionals to leave not only their employer, but their field of expertise.

The authors' research indicates that, "52% of this talent [female professional in technical companies] drops out. We are finding that attrition rates among women spike between ages 35 and 40—what we call the fight-or-flight moment. Women vote with their feet; they get out of these sectors. Not only are they leav-

In this issue's Soft Skills Section, author Kurt Weiss walks readers through several recent studies about the importance of gender diversity in the industry, the struggles involved, and how supervisors can effectively manage gender diversity in the workplace. By understanding the reasons why fewer women are in technical fields, why some women leave the industry, and the basic differences between male and female brains, the author offers five solutions to managing in a gender-diverse environment. These solutions can help managers provide a better corporate culture for both male and female workers.

**Lisa Song and Tim Crumrine**, Editors, Soft Skills

ing technology and science companies, many are leaving the field altogether.”

As Sylvia Ann Hewlett notes, the reasons women leave technology companies center around what the authors call “antigens.” She adds that, “The most important antigen is the machismo that continues to permeate these work environments. We found that 63% of women in science, engineering, and technology have experienced sexual harassment. Hewlett estimates that 1 million women a year in this age group leave technology companies. And, while the mainstream media claims that women are leaving to start a family, the research data does not reflect this belief. One way to define corporate culture is “the way we do things around here.” What kind of culture are these women describing? Hewlett says, “They talk about demeaning and condescending attitudes, lots of off-color jokes, sexual innuendo, arrogance; colleagues, particularly in the tech culture, who genuinely think women don’t have what it takes, who see them as genetically inferior. It’s hard to take as a steady stream. It’s predatory and demeaning. It’s distressing to find this kind of data in 2008.”

Some of the other antigens identified in the HBR report include: (1) the sheer isolation many women cope with daily at work; (2) the career path for many women is mysterious because so few have mentors to look out for them; (3) most male coworkers may not be team players but may be rewarded for risky, lone-wolf behavior patterns such as flying to another country, rescuing the system crash, and returning as a hero with a new promotion and lots of fanfare at the office; and (4) a combination of extremely long hours—in tech fields the average work week is 71 hours—emergencies, and a very family-unfriendly environment. At 35 to 40 years of age—when this research found that many women leave technical fields—many women are having a second child, a time when even the most organized woman finds herself caught short by the demands of her life.

From my own recent consulting experience in an information technology company, female software engineers reported that their male colleagues: (1) did not listen to them, (2) treated them as if they were useless or as housewives at work, (3) did not understand their problems, and (4) were disrespectful to their female colleagues and enjoyed gossiping to destroy the reputation of work colleagues. In a work culture such as this one, it is not surprising that there was a high attrition rate among female software engineers.

### **Hurdle No. 3: Understanding the Differences**

The latest research studies show how women and men work together in corporations is a key concern. Given this, the challenges of how women and men work together become more urgent for managers, especially in technical companies such as the oil and gas industry. Faced with the facts and scenarios listed above, how is a manager to adjust his or her management style in order to thrive in a corporate environment that develops and promotes gender diversity? To explore this question in some depth, I will first present current research on how the female and the male brain function in different ways. Secondly, I will examine techniques that both female and male managers can use to effectively manage in a more gender-diverse corporate culture. Biologically speaking, sexual differences have an impact on the way woman and men encounter and experience work. Below I

will outline five ways women and men see and respond differently in their work environments.

**The female brain and the male brain.** First, based on more than 20 years of clinical experience and recent medical research, Louann Brizendine in her book, *The Female Brain*, identifies how female and male brains differ based on specific kinds and levels of hormones and brain processes. She writes that newborn female and male babies visually scan their environments in different ways. Female babies spend much more time scanning the faces around them, while male babies spend more time scanning the environment.

This difference in scanning focus emerges in female-male adult interactions. A woman carefully scans another person’s face to read the micro-expressions that are on display, carefully studying the person’s facial muscles, mouth, and rate and depth of breathing. When a woman scans another person’s face, she has the ability to mimic and feel the feeling that the other person is experiencing. Brizendine defines this process as “mirroring” and that women are innately better at it than men. In effect, women have mirror neurons in their brains. Because of these mirror neurons, women can be acutely aware of how their partner is feeling based on their ability to match their partner’s breathing, posture, and facial expression. In effect, women can be human emotion detectors. Specifically, when communicating with others, a woman is searching for congruence—in the tone of voice, in the eye movements, in the facial expressions, and in the gestures of the other person—assessing emotional nuance to see if the words match these other components of the message.

According to Paul Ekman, in his groundbreaking book based on 40 years of research, *Emotions Revealed, Second Edition: Recognizing Faces and Feelings to Improve Communication and Emotional Life* (2007), to genuinely communicate and understand each other, it is important to read the microexpressions on an individual’s face. Micro-expressions are only revealed on the human face for a split second. Ekman’s research shows that these microexpressions often contain the real message that the person is communicating to us. Microexpressions reveal the following universal human emotions: anger, fear, sadness, disgust, contempt, surprise, and enjoyment.

Brizendine reports that most men are not adept at reading facial expressions and emotional nuance. Brain scans show that women can effectively mirror the feelings of another person better than men.

**Intuition.** Second, Brizendine notes that a woman senses information from the people around her based on her *gut feelings*. She can sense when a colleague is depressed, a boss is feeling overwhelmed, or a stressful and tense environment has developed in a team meeting. Brain scan studies indicate that a woman’s brain (the insula and the anterior cingulate cortex) has larger areas of sensitivity to track gut feelings. Brizendine concludes that, as such, intuitive gut feelings and hunches are grounded in biology, and “...overall, the female brain is gifted at quickly assessing the thoughts, beliefs, and intentions of others based on the smallest hints.” Given the scientific evidence, “women’s intuition” is based on solid research.

**Feelings.** Third, Brizendine indicates that for men, feelings do not trigger gut sensations, but instead increases rational thought. She

says that, “The typical male brain reaction to an emotion is to avoid it all costs.” Scientists have found that it usually takes the male brain longer to decode and process emotions. Finally, researchers speculate that a woman’s tears may evoke a painful response in a man’s brain where he feels powerless to help, which can be difficult for him to tolerate. Consequently, when a woman communicates to a man how she feels, he feels the internal pressure to do something or fix something.

**Communication goals.** Fourth, men and women have different communication goals. Deborah Tannen is a leading researcher on female and male communication. The results of her many years of research are presented in her book, *Talking from 9 to 5 and Women and Men in the Workplace: Language, Sex and Power*. From her research, she identified the differing communication rituals of men and women.

The goal for a man in interpersonal communication is to establish status, hierarchy, and power, Tannen says. This phenomenon especially occurs in conversations that tend to be asymmetrical. One person has more knowledge, more information, or experience. For a man, this gives him the feeling of having more status.

For example, when men discuss sports, there is an exchange of facts and details where one person in the conversation is trying to display more knowledge of the sporting events. On one occasion at work, I observed the following situation on a Monday morning between one woman, Linda, and several male colleagues discussing the football game from the previous Saturday. The men were discussing the facts and details of the football game. Each man in the conversation was trying to outdo the other with his knowledge of the teams and players. When Linda tried to make some comments about the game, the men ignored her and continued talking among themselves. Linda tried again with the same result. Finally, after not being acknowledged by the men, she walked away in frustration and felt excluded from the “good old boys club.” This real-life example illustrates how most women and men have differing communication goals. For most women, the primary communication goal is to create intimacy and connection by establishing rapport where everyone in the conversation is viewed as an equal. Men view conversation as an opportunity to spar with each other creating a hierarchy of one-upsmanship; women view conversation as an opportunity to share with one another to create a web of relationships and connections.

**Processing anger.** Finally, men and women experience the same amount of anger, but men express a greater amount of anger and aggression than women. This connects directly to differences in the female and male brain. According to well-documented research, Brizendine notes that, “The amygdala is the brain center for fear, anger, and aggression, and it’s physically larger in men than in women, whereas the anger, fear, and aggression control center—the prefrontal cortex—is relatively larger in women.” While men express anger immediately in a hair-trigger fashion, the female brain is hard-wired to reflect on anger before expressing it out of fear and anticipation of retaliation. What is more, the female brain has a strong aversion to conflict due to the fear of making the other person angry and, potentially, losing the relationship. Typically, the net effect of this biological difference is

that a woman will not express her anger in situations where there is a chance of male retaliation.

## Five Secrets to Managing in a Gender-Diverse Environment

It is important to recognize that the research studies I have cited here are scientifically recognizable patterns of behavior in women and men. Since there are always exceptions to the patterns identified (some women try to problem solve rather than listen; some men are good active listeners), these exceptions do not invalidate the results of these research studies.

**1. Woman-to-woman mentoring.** One successful approach is to create a woman-to-woman networking program. In such a program, a more senior woman in the organization provides mentoring guidance to more junior female employees. The role of the mentor is to provide advice on career paths, to help navigate organizational politics, to be a sounding board about office politics, to prevent isolation at work, and to help create a culture that better supports gender diversity. Intel is one example of a company that has implemented a successful mentoring program for women employees.

The following techniques are based on the work of Kathleen J. DeBoer, in *Gender and Competition: How Men and Women Approach Work and Play Differently* (2004).

**2. Empathy vs. advice.** Often when a female colleague discusses a problem with a male colleague, she is seeking empathy (someone to listen to her) rather than looking for a solution to her problem. For men, remember that the primary goal for women in communication is to make a connection. Women feel connected to others when they feel their feelings are acknowledged and genuinely understood. For women, remember that male colleagues are looking for bottom-line results. Men want solutions to problems, not empathy from you.

**3. Anger management.** As my colleague, Kate Driesen advises men, “When you lose control with anger and rage, you lose, period.” Anger is one of the primary male reactions to stress. However, when male managers blow up at work, it makes them look unprofessional to their supervisors and damages their relationships with female colleagues.

For women, when male colleagues express their anger, it is important to realize that, yes, male anger does scare you. This is part of the hardwiring of the female brain at work. After the angry incident, get out of the situation as soon as you can and go to a quiet place, take a few deep breaths, and reassure yourself that the display you witnessed is your male colleague’s inappropriate reaction to stress.

**4. Working through problems.** When men hear women talk about their problems, men often hear “whining” and “complaining.” Men see this as counterproductive, because they want to solve problems and get results. When faced with difficult emotional problems at work, it is better for a woman to discuss her feelings with a trusted female colleague.

For men, recognize that withdrawing and not addressing conflict is perceived by work colleagues as a sign of emotional immaturity

*Continued on page 17*

and a lack of social awareness. It is important to communicate openly with male and female colleagues at work.

**5. Creating a healthy meadow.** In the mid-1990s, Don Coyhis of the Mohican Nation was asked by his tribal elders to describe his work with corporate cultures. He was asked what would happen if you planted a healthy tree in a sick forest.

Coyhis replied that if you plant a healthy tree in a sick forest, the new tree will become sick as well because it is fed by the same nutrients from the soil, the same water, and the same air as the unhealthy trees. He counseled that in order for the newly planted healthy tree to survive and thrive, a healthy meadow would need to be created, where the good nutrients and clean water and air can feed all the trees in the healthy meadow.

## **Conclusion**

Brizendine observes, “...there’s no getting around the fact that women have different emotional perceptions, realities, responses, and memories than do men, and these differences—based on brain circuitry and function—are at the heart of many interesting misunderstandings.”

If managers recognize that misunderstandings between women and men at work are often based on female and male brain differences with resulting displays of gender-specific behaviors, then they have the chance to practice a new set of behaviors. These new behaviors provide them with a more flexible repertoire of responses to stressful work situations. As managers, they can create a corporate culture where women and men thrive by using the five techniques described above.

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