

COACHING WOMEN

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Diversity in Coaching: Working with Gender, Culture, Race and Age J. Passmore (Editor). London: Kogan Page (2009), pages 237-254

Encountering the same challenges as their male counterparts, women executives face another dimension adding complexity to their role: *gender*. For some women, this means that to succeed in business they must become the archetypal male leader: analytical, competitive, direct, and confrontational. For others, this means relying on soft skills and engendering loyalty.

Studies confirm that certain characteristics do come more intuitively to men, such as analytical thinking and competitiveness. Women tend to place more value on relationships, teamwork and consensus-building. Given these differences, coaches must work with women differently than they do with men. Instead of trying to become more like men, women are most successful being themselves and strengthening any under-developed skills necessary to meet their goals.

After years of success coaching women, my “aha” came in 2003 when I discovered research about micro-inequities and gender stereotyping from Catalyst, a leading non-profit research organization in New York. As a minority, women often encounter subtle inequities that may or may not be reinforced by their behaviour but that can alter how they are seen by colleagues. Women must take responsibility for working with these indirect behaviours to become stronger leaders, whether or not the inequities seem accurate or simply the result of a stereotype.

In this chapter, I will highlight the micro-inequities women face in today’s working environment and how they, as well as how other gender difference research findings, shape our approach with women leaders. I’ll provide an overview of gender differences, followed by a focus on three specific differences. The second half of the chapter will include a set of tools coaches can apply to address challenges presented by these differences, along with case study examples from my practice. Accountability tools, auto-pilot styles, thinking trap solutions, and the Alpha Assessment will maximize your results with female coachees.



GENDER DIFFERENCES IN COACHING

Overview

My coaching firm conducts ongoing original research on gender differences in leaders using our Alpha Assessment, a survey that identifies natural strengths and risks in leaders. Over 10,000 people have completed the assessment (found at www.AlphaAssessment.com), which has allowed us to collect substantial data on gender differences in leaders. Our coaching experience, our own research data, and a large body of scientific research all suggest that women in general display their leadership traits somewhat differently than men.¹ The Alpha Assessment identifies a leader’s alpha strengths and risks and how they apply to leadership style. We’ve found that more men than women are high in alpha characteristics – both strengths and risks. Like their male counterparts, female alphas are ambitious and drawn to positions of authority, but as a rule, they are less inclined to dominate. Better attuned to the emotional climate, they are more likely than alpha males to look for ways to collaborate and find win-win solutions to conflicts. They can be just as opinionated and strong-minded, but they’ll search for consensus and buy-in rather than impose their will. Alpha

women want to lead, but they don't necessarily need to rule. Of course, not all men and not all women are alphas. The distinction between being an alpha and being a beta is actually greater for women, because there's an expectation that a leader will have alpha leadership traits. Thus, if these traits don't come to women naturally, they need to develop them. But research shows that people are less tolerant of the dysfunctional alpha traits in women than in men. Therefore, in developing alpha skills it's important for women to acquire only the healthy side of these behaviours.

Our research on alphas as well as our ongoing research on gender differences has given us a foundation to better understand the differences we have observed in working with both men and women in senior leadership positions (summarized in Table 1).

| Table 1 LEADERSHIP APPROACHES OF WOMEN COMPARED TO MEN |
|---|
| <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ More willing to admit they need help and to seek out a resource. Often quicker to see the benefits of coaching and may even consider it fun. ▪ Comfortable with control and being in charge, want to make key decisions, but place less emphasis on dominating. ▪ Like to win but more inclined to collaborate and partner to solve a problem. Compete more easily with people at a distance, for example, with outside companies or competitors; tend to be less competitive with peers than men. ▪ More appreciative in general than men, possibly due to the fact that women are expected to care for and show that they value people's contributions. ▪ Place more value on relationships and pay more attention to how people feel. As a result, often withhold feedback at an early stage rather than risk upsetting someone. ▪ Not as comfortable giving orders. Would prefer to ask for input and make suggestions. Can lull team members into believing all is well when it is not, who then feel blindsided when they find out their performance isn't meeting expectations. ▪ Less likely to express anger overtly. Instead, will drop hints and clues about feeling angry. May also use anger to set boundaries or limits, which may otherwise be a challenge. ▪ Somewhat less likely than men to be strong in reflective, analytical skills, yet stronger in intuitive skills. Able to "feel her way" through problems. |

Analyses of numerous other studies show that even when women and men have similar leadership competencies, they emphasize different aspects of their leadership. Catalyst found that senior managers perceive sharp differences in women and men's leadership. In an extensive research study reported in 2005, Catalyst asked senior managers to independently rate women and men on 10 essential leadership behaviours. The gender differences that managers perceived followed a distinct pattern:

- Managers tended to say that more women than men were effective at "take care" behaviours such as supporting and rewarding.
- Managers tended to say that more men than women

were effective at "take charge" behaviours such as delegating and influencing upward.²

Female managers tend to be perceived as more consultative and inclusive, whereas men are more directive and task oriented. There are also indications that men are biologically more dependent on the adrenalin of rapid-fire, high-risk situations, whereas women thrive on the calming influence of endorphin-producing activities, such as conversation and relationship building.³

Systematic and Analytical Thinking

In *The Essential Difference*, Simon Baron-Cohen, a professor of psychology and psychiatry at Cambridge University, found that men tend to excel at systemizing while women excel at empathizing. Systemizing involves discerning the rules that govern how things work, allowing the systemiser to excel in combat, competitive strategizing, and political manoeuvring. Baron-Cohen defines empathy as the ability to put one's self in the shoes of others and respond in a concerned way that resonates with their thoughts and feelings. Because empathizers care about the feelings of others, women prefer to get what they want through collaboration and reciprocity rather than fighting.

Catalyst's findings support the notion that men tend to be stronger analyzers and strategists than women naturally are. Quantitative analysis is systemiser territory; intimate communication is the terrain of empathizers. Catalyst found that men estimated that 80% of male leaders are effective at problem-solving—a critical leadership behaviour—but estimated that only 67% of women leaders are effective problem-solvers.

Our original research on 7,000 clients and readers of the Harvard Business Review also supports these findings. Our research uncovered four alpha leadership styles: commander, visionary, strategist and executor. Men and women are equally likely to be commanders, visionaries and executors, but women are less likely to be strategists, leaders who with lightning speed, can analyze complex situations, discern critical variables, and work out the steps that follow logically from each possible occurrence. Our finding of fewer strategist women is consistent with women having lower systematizing skills. Men tend to be linear, sequential thinkers who easily separate emotion from thought, while women think in a more integrated fashion, perhaps because different thought processes are more dispersed in the female brain and more localized in the male brain.

Women can even the playing field by giving special attention to developing their systemizing skills. Meg Whitman, CEO of eBay and a former client, did just that earlier in her career. Meg is a gifted executive with all the traditional strengths of a female leader, but she's also exceptionally

strong at strategic thinking and rapid analytical processing of information. She was one of the first female partners at Bain, a leading global business consulting firm, where she was trained in a particular model of analytical, strategic thinking. This concentrated training became invaluable to Meg as she grew into the inspirational CEO she is today, one of Fortune's "most powerful women."

While women in general aren't as strong analytically as men, it's important to remember that some women are stronger than some men. On the whole, women may need to work a bit harder and be more committed to develop their talents in this area. Left to "naturally" develop as leaders, they may tend to gravitate to other less analytical areas.

Coaches can assist women by first helping them face the fact of this gender difference and their own potential shortfalls. In my experience, this is one of the areas where women tend to be the most defensive. They often talk like they think, and feel that people should be more open to their particular way of communicating, holding this point of view as a diversity issue. What some female coaches don't realize is that when they speak in a non-linear way, they lose the people in their audience who are not able to process information the same way they do. To maximize their influence, they need not only improve their analytical processing skills, but also to speak succinctly and sequentially.

Conflict and Competitiveness

Men and women leaders also show a difference in comfort levels with conflict and competitiveness. Men thrive on conflict, while female leaders are less comfortable with it. Studies indicate that men are drawn to situations involving competition and risk taking, while women place higher value on cooperative relationships and working with people they like.⁴

When a male leader doesn't like something, he states it loudly and clearly. A female leader can be less willing to force an issue publicly if she doesn't anticipate quick agreement. Being more interested in collaborating and finding win-win solutions, she'll happily debate an idea until someone's emotions are triggered, at which point she'll back down rather than press toward resolution. This is what one of my clients refers to as a "false opposite," where women will justify not debating an issue or highlighting an apparent difference as an effort to get resolution. By talking about not wanting to be someone who creates churn or who likes to argue for the sake of arguing, the female leader may attempt to stay safe in a soft communication style. This indirect style of communication is often misinterpreted by male peers as being political, leaving female leaders feeling misunderstood and not fully appreciated for what they are trying to accomplish. This style is a defensive posture and one way women can stay stuck in their own patterns.

A study for the National Bureau of Economic Research also found that women are reluctant to compete while men can be overly eager to compete. In a contrived game situation, researchers found that the men were far more confident in their ability to win. What explains the discrepancy? While none of the players actually knew whether they'd won an earlier tournament, 75% of the men thought they had, as compared to only 43% of the women. This bolsters our observation that men are more likely than their female counterparts to see themselves as exceptionally competent—so much so that they relish visible, high-risk competitions in which they expect to stand out. Women, on the other hand, lack confidence and under-estimate their capabilities and thus are more likely to shy away from competition or contrary stands, even when they stand a good chance of prevailing.

Coaches must show female clients the difference between healthy and unhealthy competition. In healthy competition, leaders follow the rules of the game; they're up front about wanting to win while also doing what's right for the company. They know there will be a winner and a loser, and they're okay with that. But women leaders tend to soft-pedal their desire to come out on top, in part for fear of appearing inauthentic and political, as mentioned earlier. This makes it difficult for them to express their desire to win. Contrary to the popular negative connotation of competition, healthy competition can help women move up the career ladder, create credibility for themselves in a male dominated workplace and maximize teambuilding and teamwork.

The Role of Micro-inequities

Coined by MIT Professor Mary Row in the 1970s, micro-inequities explains many of the subtle differences in how men and women are treated in the workplace. These subtle cues can be conscious or unconscious behaviours like someone rolling their eyes, interrupting a speaker, crossing their arms during a conversation, sharing information with one person but not another, or publicly congratulating only one of the two people who just got promoted. Micro-inequities are not as much one-time events as they are cumulative, repeated behaviours which communicate certain people are valued more than others. Because they are members of a minority, women experience micro-inequities more often than men, which heightens their sensitivity to these subtle slights. This sensitivity can inadvertently lead them to question their capability and even believe they are weak leaders because they are not being noticed or heard. Unfortunately, this heightened awareness means that women can over-react to a micro-inequity, reinforcing the view that women are "overly sensitive" and take things personally.

Some psychologists believe that because of these widely shared conscious and unconscious associations about women, men and leadership, women experience a double bind that

prevents them from being seen as compassionate but authoritative leaders. People more readily associate men with leadership traits like assertiveness, whereas women are associated with being caring, soft-spoken, friendly and sympathetic. In other words, the traits necessary for strong, effective leadership are seen as not only male but the antithesis of female, probably because the long history we've had of male domination in leadership positions has made it difficult for people to distinguish between leadership and male associations. The connection is automatic for people, even if inaccurate. Hence, the bind: if women leaders are communal and empathetic, they are criticized for not being assertive and direct (like men); but if women leaders are assertive, direct and ambitious, they are "rough around the edges" and not collaborative or empathetic enough. Women speaking up to defend their turf are vilified as control freaks; men acting this same way are considered passionate.⁵ When women do exercise typically-male characteristics of ambition, assertiveness and control, they are seen as overly aggressive or insensitive.

COACHING WOMEN LEADERS

Given the significant differences in how men and women approach competitiveness, analytical thinking, and micro-inequities, coaches must utilize different tools and techniques when coaching female leaders. What follows is a description of the tools I've found most useful in addressing each of these gender differences.

Addressing Micro-Inequities

Clearly, micro-inequities present a challenge in coaching women. As a coach, you must both acknowledge them as real and also show women how to have impact in spite of them. The only way to create change, given that micro-inequities exist, is for the female coachee to take ownership of that change. She can do this by embracing the reality that as much as she may want others to change, she has no control over whether that will happen. What she can do is be proactive and take responsibility for overcoming the inequity, regardless of its origin.

First, the coachee must relinquish control over changing others. Table 2 provides some perspective about what a leader can and cannot control in her work. This simple chart makes clear where we can create change – only with ourselves – even if the source of the problem seems external to us.

In coaching women, I sometimes hit the barrier of unfairness, especially with micro-inequities, where coachees don't believe they should take responsibility for someone else's behaviour. But nothing unravels or prevents influence more than when a person feels inside that someone else should fix the problem. By identifying the problem as belonging to someone else, a woman puts herself in a victim position where she feels at the effect of whatever stereotyping or micro-inequities or other challenges exist. If a woman leader, for ex-

Table 2
THE CONTROL FILES

| Things I Can't Control | Things I Can Control |
|--|---|
| Whether I am recognized for my contributions | My commitment to develop strong influence skills, contribute and perform at my best |
| Whether my male colleagues are given "passes," when our female leaders must work harder for the same success | How well I develop and apply the leadership competencies I know are the key to success in my organization |
| Whether someone respects me | How I perform; whether I deliver on my agreements |
| Other people's behaviours that seem unfair or unjust | How I respond to those behaviours, focusing on my own effectiveness and influence |
| Emotions I feel in the moment | How I act (or withhold action) on my emotions |

ample, feels as though she has been unjustly treated, ignored or not included in a key communication, she must acknowledge her experience of the occurrence and be sure not to get stuck in feeling victimized. Most importantly, she must not act out her feelings by being passively resistant toward those who may have been involved in the stereotyping behaviours.

The fine line coaches must walk with coachees in these instances is this: Coaches must acknowledge the coachee's experience as real, knowing that the incident or pattern may in fact be the result of an unconscious bias or behaviour. However, the coachee's experience may also be the result of her own shortcoming, lack of confidence or willingness to play the role of victim, which can provide a temporary false sense of power via righteous indignation. Either way, coachees have a choice in how they interpret and respond to these types of events. Coaches must help women experiencing micro-inequities avoid feeling victimized and at the effect of another's behaviour. Regardless of how unfair the actual experience was, she is the one who must overcome the perception (or the reality) of her shortcoming. And in the business of leadership, perception is reality if a leader wants to grow and become more successful.

Is such behaviour learnable? Absolutely. People can be taught to be accountable by looking inside themselves, wondering about their contribution to a problem and inquiring as to how they could make a situation different. The challenge is learning to explore situations from a learning mindset, where your coachee doesn't look "out there" to explain problems or provide solutions. Instead, she takes 100% responsibility for the problem and for turning it around, no matter what kind of responsibility she may believe others have. She says "Yes" to whatever reality happens to be at that moment, and her slogan becomes "Claim, don't Blame."

Blame is the opposite of accountability and venting about what's wrong and unfair tends to create adrenalin and

drama. It adds an emotional charge to problems like micro-inequities. But blaming never make things right, no matter how hard we try, because it puts the focus on other people who we have no power to change. Further, believing problems come from “out there” guarantees that problems don’t get corrected. So long as women leaders don’t address their part of an issue, the situation or problem will return again and again, as faithful as crabgrass in the spring. Instead, coaches must help them work with the reality at hand and leverage their learning’s, upgrade their skills, ask questions, and pursue their worthy intentions. I encourage my clients to shift from blaming to claiming and step into a higher level of accountability. The most powerful step in taking responsibility is assuming that whatever gets created out there is the direct result of something I have done or failed to do and is not somebody else’s fault. In fact, it’s been set up to teach me an important lesson—and if I don’t get it now, then I can count on an escalation path that’s designed to get my attention.

Here are some “wonder questions” to help your coachees sort out the causes and conditions of results they want to own, when they don’t yet see how to make the shift into accountability:

| Table 3 SHIFTING INTO ACCOUNTABILITY | |
|--|--|
| <i>If you find yourself...</i> | <i>Shift by asking:</i> |
| Feeling angry, resentful or fearful | How can I choose ease and confidence instead? How best can I support the results I want? |
| Repeatedly having your buttons pushed, or having a familiar feeling when a problem arises | How do I keep making choices that sustain this pattern? |
| Feeling bottled up, stressed, with flat energy | What emotions haven't I let myself feel? |
| Repeatedly having bad luck or negative results you don't want | Do I have an unconscious intention for things to turn out this way? |
| Wishing someone else would change, do something or stop doing something so that you get the credit you deserve | How can I take responsibility for making this change myself? |

Case Study

I personally experienced an accountability dilemma in 1984 when I became vice president of human resources for KLA-Tencor, a semiconductor inspection equipment manufacturer in Silicon Valley. Today I realize that the situation was a reflection of both some skills I needed to develop and micro-inequities that existed in a company that had never before had a woman executive. In meetings, even when I spoke up with conviction, expertise and passion, I felt ineffective and somewhat invisible. Invariably I would make a point, be ignored, only later to hear one of my male co-workers make the same point and receive accolades for his insight. I was new on a team that had many years working together, and I wanted to be seen as credible. I began

to wonder if I was being ignored because I was a woman. This, however, kept me trapped in what I consider “out there” thinking; in other words, to address this problem, other people would need to change. Instead of placing the blame on circumstances “out there,” I turned my attention to myself and what I could change. Whether or not the issue related to a gender inequity, I needed to make a change, right there, with that team of people in order to have the influence I wanted. My breakthrough started with my willingness to own the problem and look at what I could do differently, instead of wishing things “out there” were different.

As soon as I took this important step, I immediately thought I could benefit from observing an unusually skillful male peer who successfully influenced our CEO and his peers, as well as his own organization. I noticed that he used many non-verbal behaviours to signal that he was about to make a point, such as leaning into the conversation. He also linked his comment to what someone else had just said, building on their ideas, instead of communicating it as a stand-alone idea. It’s not that he was more dominant or assertive, but rather that he used a different method to enter the conversation and get the group to pay attention. My credibility accumulated as I began integrating some of his style into my own.

The most challenging and stimulating explorations of my life – and the ones with the greatest payoffs – have been learning what it means to commit to full accountability in every situation.

Identifying Auto-Pilot Styles

One common derailer for leaders is reverting to a safe and familiar auto-pilot style in times of ambiguity, stress or change. Getting triggered into an auto-pilot style is often what happens when women leaders feel uncomfortable with competition, opposition or conflict. For instance, in the presence of conflict, a leader may become a collaborator or mediator because she wants to be liked and doesn’t want someone angry at her. But in some instances, such a move may not be appropriate and could hinder her leadership. In order to become strong leaders, women with these style patterns must zero in on unseating their limiting styles.

These styles are formed in childhood and early adulthood, based on behaviours learned from our parents, teachers, managers and other role models. Like directors assembling a cast of actors, we audition certain styles and “hire” those that bring us safety, love, recognition, and all the other things people crave. The adopted styles get embedded in the unconscious mind, and we carry them with us into the theatre of adulthood, where they wait in the wings for their cues to come on stage. The more unconscious the style is, the earlier it was probably formed, and the more likely it is that we’ll think, “That’s just the way I am.” By the time we enter the workforce, we

have developed layer upon layer of auto-pilot styles, and slip unconsciously from one role to another, until we recognize the pattern and consciously choose to make a change. Understanding auto-pilot styles has a liberating effect on coachees, because it helps them see their behaviours as a collection of habits that were formed early in their lives rather than as an unchangeable genetic trait or a reflex hardwired into their brains. An effective coach can easily spot these problematic styles by asking a few simple questions. To help you in assisting your clients identify and name their problematic styles, review Table 4, a list of the most common names that our clients have given to their more problematic auto-pilot styles.

| | | |
|--------------------|------------------------|----------------------------|
| ▪ Accommodator | ▪ Drill Down | ▪ Mother Hen |
| ▪ Action Jackson | ▪ Eager Beaver | ▪ Overwhelmed |
| ▪ Biting Critic | ▪ Energizer Bunny | ▪ People Pleaser |
| ▪ Cheerleader | ▪ Hard-Head | ▪ Perfectionist Pied Piper |
| ▪ Complainer | ▪ Harried Harriet | ▪ Pollyanna Good News |
| ▪ Conflict Avoider | ▪ Hunker Down | ▪ Procrastinator |
| ▪ Contrarian | ▪ Juggler | ▪ Rebel |
| ▪ Control Freak | ▪ Know It All | ▪ Wet Blanket |
| ▪ Cynic | ▪ Martyr | ▪ Wheeler Dealer |
| ▪ Debater | ▪ Micro Manager | ▪ Worrier |
| ▪ Do It All | ▪ Missionary Zealot | ▪ Time Keeper |
| ▪ Dreamer | ▪ Misunderstood Genius | ▪ Uninvited Fixer |

These auto-pilot styles are simply nicknames that suggest a particular kind of behaviour, not hard-and-fast categories. Feel free to use them or to have your clients make up names that best capture the masks they use to handle challenging situations. In the example below, I'll show you how coaches can use this construct to help coachees make significant changes in their style.

Case Study

In 2002, I was the keynote speaker for a group of about 80 executives at the Defense Logistics Agency (DLA), a large organization in the Department of Defense, which is about the size of a Fortune 200 company and which provides all supplies for U.S. armed forces. I was coaching the top 20 executives and I was invited to remain for the day to observe their interactions during their quarterly expanded leadership team meeting. At one point I observed Linda Furiga, the chief financial officer (now retired); speak up about a profoundly important trust issue. Unfortunately the conversation continued, and no one apparently heard or responded to her comment. About 15 minutes later, the male general manager for a large distribution centre, made the identical point, and suddenly everyone was listening, including the three-star admiral who was then director of DLA.

I later learned that Linda often felt frustrated that her quiet demeanour and soft voice meant that she wasn't heard and that her ideas didn't produce the impact she wanted. What was even more interesting was learning, as I in-

terviewed people, that sometimes colleagues would recall the substance of what Linda said, but assigned credit to someone who spoke with greater force and volume. Painfully aware of the situation, Linda was not surprised to see the following 360 evaluation comments:

“She needs to assert herself in meetings and to stand up for what she believes is right.”

“She's articulate, but she's not convincing because she's too soft in style. She needs to be far more forceful in her public demeanour.”

“Her tone of voice conveys a sense of timidity when she should be exuding confidence.”

Linda knew her soft-spoken style was a significant risk. As the executive in charge of over \$30 billion in revenue and budget, she had to persuade the Department of Defense and the U.S. Congress to make available the funds DLA needed to carry out its mission. She knew she had to be seen as a strong leader, but she had no idea how to change the situation.

When I coached Linda, I asked her to identify the primary auto-pilot style that was problematic for her in group meetings. She immediately selected Peacemaker, where she was so focused on keeping the peace that she did not stand her ground or deliver needed feedback. This style had originally developed at an earlier time, in childhood, when she acted as a go-between messenger with her two parents, a role with little reward or appreciation. Today she was continuing this role on auto-pilot, with a somewhat similar lack of acknowledgment.

To help her explore this style, I asked her to respond to the following questions, from the perspective of Peacemaker. In other words, I interviewed the Peacemaker aspect of her that had become problematic in her executive role. I did this by addressing her as Peacemaker, using the questions below:

1. *Peacemaker, what are your behaviours and feelings when you're in this style?*
2. *Peacemaker, how does this style create problems with other people?*
3. *Peacemaker, what styles does your problematic style invite in others?*
4. *Peacemaker, what is the positive underlying intention of this style? What are you trying to accomplish when you shift into this style?*

After Linda explored these questions, we worked together to develop a plan to help her shift into a more effective influence style. We videotaped her giving a presentation as Peacemaker so she could recognize when she automatically slipped into this old style. We then created a new, healthier and more impactful style that would support her in fully owning the power that came with her CFO

role. When she gave the presentation this way, the difference was dramatic: Her volume went up, she spoke forcefully throughout, and she maintained a powerful presence.

Before long, she had a crucial test of her new skills. Delivering a presentation to a roomful of high-ranking government and military officials she conveyed a powerful, convincing, and inspiring presence. As the change carried over into everyday interactions, Linda started to receive the recognition she'd always deserved. She was awarded the prestigious Presidential Achievement Award in 2005. Nothing had changed except she had learned to hold her own with dominating leaders, and she took a page from their book by tapping into her own dormant leadership traits. In short order, she spearheaded a successful campaign to obtain the resources the agency needed to meet post-9/11 demands. Based on her briefs with the Office of the Secretary of Defense (OSD), she got DLA an additional \$6 billion in vital funding.

Systematic and Analytical Thinking

As I previously mentioned, women tend to be empathizers rather than systemisers who prefer to get what they want through collaboration and reciprocity rather than fighting. But women who aspire to high levels of executive leadership posts need to be strong in the typically male zone of being analytical.

Many coaches ignore this difference between men and women, partly because a person's approach to problems may appear to be one of the most difficult skills to help change as a coach. My own thinking has been heavily influenced by Perkins who wrote, *Outsmarting IQ*. Perkins' research uncovered four intelligence traps⁶:

- **Hasty thinking.** We react impulsively, mindlessly, without thinking about what we're doing. As a result, we close too quickly and settle for conventional answers, preventing proper analysis.
- **Narrow thinking.** We lock our minds in small, circumscribed boxes based on past conditioning. Beliefs and biases keep us from questioning our own assumptions.
- **Fuzzy thinking.** We become unclear and imprecise, making inaccurate distinctions, such as over-generalizing or focusing on surface similarities instead of underlying differences.
- **Sprawling thinking.** We wander all over the place, running from one connection to the next . . . and the next . . .

Case Study

A couple years ago, I coached an award-winning leader who is the North America COO of a global giant headquartered in the UK. This female executive, who I'll call Carol, demonstrated many of the differences between alpha male and alpha female leaders. She is driven to succeed, likes being in

command, is well-liked, is an excellent coach, and she is both direct and extremely appreciative. All in all, she is similar to most male executives I've worked with. But, unlike the healthiest of alpha males, she had only average systemizing skills. Naturally warm and effusive, Carol is a talented and passionate executive who easily establishes rapport and builds good working relationships. She feels that her "softer edges" are exactly what make her an effective leader. But many men perceive her as "fluffy" and not analytical enough, especially when it comes to crunch-time problem solving. At the time I was working with Carol, the CEO of the company's North America Group, a male, fought hard to place Carol in her current position, and wanted to groom her as his successor. "She's as fine an executive as I've ever worked with," he told us. "But her warm, open approach fuels people's gender biases. She doesn't get the credit she deserves because her more feminine style makes it easy to discount her."

In truth, there was nothing fluffy about Carol. Underneath, she's as tough as nails and smart as a whip. But she has to work harder than men to demonstrate that she's got the left brain they have. "My challenge is to stay tough-minded about results, effectively problem-solve and still keep my affinity for people," she says. She's learning to do things like begin presentations with hard facts rather than a more personal approach, and to confront issues directly while still showing concern for people's feelings.

When Carol decided to focus on her systematizing skills, she identified herself as a sprawling thinker. As such, she'd get one idea, and as she was thinking through it, another one would pop into her mind. She would then go off in this new direction. In spending too much time exploring various options, she would become overwhelmed and thus paralyzed in how to begin addressing the problem. With issues of people leadership, this type of thinking helped her understand the complexity of people, but when solving business problems or articulating her ideas in meetings, this approach made her come across as disorganized and unclear.

Sprawling thinking occurs in part because people lose track of where they are in complex matters through cognitive overload. To begin tightening her focus, Carol started taking one idea at a time and exploring it, instead of skipping from approach to approach.

One of the most valuable actions Carol took was partnering up with a male leader who was a strong analytical thinker. This allowed her to begin mimicking her colleague's logical analysis of challenging situations. She learned some of the mental models he used to tackle problems and sequential questions he explored in the face of large challenges. She also began using communication tools to help her handle her cognitive overload – things like whiteboards, notes on

paper, her laptop. By thinking on “paper,” Carol was able to manage more information than she’s previously been able to.

As Carol did, to effectively address limiting thinking styles, coaches must first identify the kind of thinking they tend to respond to challenges with. Then you can help them to develop the new responses described below in Table 5.

| Table 5 HOW TO BREAK FREE FROM THINKING TRAPS |
|--|
| <p>If you’re hasty:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ Learn to tolerate ambiguity and uncertainty. ▪ Avoid premature closure, especially with important issues. ▪ Actively solicit ideas and opinions from others. ▪ Stay open to new input as long as possible. |
| <p>If you’re narrow:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ Solicit ideas from people who think outside the box. ▪ Expand the range of information you draw upon. ▪ Partner with a sprawling thinker and help each other find balance. |
| <p>If you’re fuzzy:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ Dialogue with a crisp, clear thinker. ▪ Practice explaining your thoughts to people who know nothing about the subject. ▪ Before settling on a conclusion, ask “Is there more to this?” many times. |
| <p>If you’re a sprawler:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ Partner with a systematic, structured thinker. ▪ Simplify and organize your space; cluttered surroundings clutter the mind. ▪ If you can’t organize your thoughts, learn to organize how you communicate them. ▪ Jot down your three main points in numeric order, before speaking. |

Women have strong analytical skills that may just be buried underneath one or two thinking traps. If we as coaches can help leaders avoid a reactive or habitual mental approach, they can usually access their analytical mind. This also helps them communicate more systematically, which makes it easier for people to follow the logic of their thinking.

The Alpha Assessment

Finally, coaches should consider using the Alpha Assessment as an additional tool to identify strengths and risks in coachees. Completion of the Assessment produces a report that includes techniques and approaches for addressing risk areas. www.AlphaAssessment.com

Moving Forward

Coaching female leaders is a challenging yet rewarding experience. In addition to the challenges males face, women encounter micro-inequities and the double bind of needing to exhibit assertive leadership qualities yet often getting docked for doing so. Helping female leaders see that micro-inequities are simply small trails to navigate, rather than steep mountains to climb, makes it possible for them to treat these subtle slights as a surmountable leadership challenge. By becoming accountable, using the auto-pilot style coaching tool, the systematic and analytical thinking exercise and the Alpha Assessment, coaches will learn that with every challenge women face comes a steady determination to excel and improve.

Notes

1. Research findings on sex differences reflect generalities based on statistical averages. Among actual men and women there is huge variation; any individual’s traits might be closer to the average of the opposite sex.
2. Jeanine Prime, “Women ‘Take Care,’ Men ‘Take Charge’” *Catalyst Report*, Oct. 19, 2005.
3. National Institute of Mental Health, “Gender Differences in Behavioural Responses to Stress” Dec. 1, 2003, <http://www.MedicalMoment.org>.
4. Hal R. Varian, “The Difference Between Men and Women” *New York Times*, Economic Section, Mar. 9, 2006.
5. Linda L. Carli and Alice H. Eagly, “Women and the Labyrinth of Leadership,” *Harvard Business Review*, Sept. 2007.
6. David Perkins, “Outsmarting IQ: The Emerging Science of Learnable Intelligence” (New York: The Free Press, 1995), 152-154.



Kate Ludeman, a widely recognized executive coach, speaker and author, founded Worth Ethic Corporation in 1988. Her BS in engineering and PhD in psychology give her a unique approach when working with analytical, data-oriented executives who want to expand their emotional intelligence and create company cultures where people perform at their peak. She has worked with over 1,000 senior executives in a wide range of industries.

She has coached executives globally on every major continent. Previously, she was vice president of human resources for a high-tech Silicon Valley company. Her books include *The Worth Ethic*, *Earn What You’re Worth*, *The Corporate Mystic*, *Alpha Male Syndrome* and *Radical Change, Radical Results* (last two co-authored with Eddie Erlandson).



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