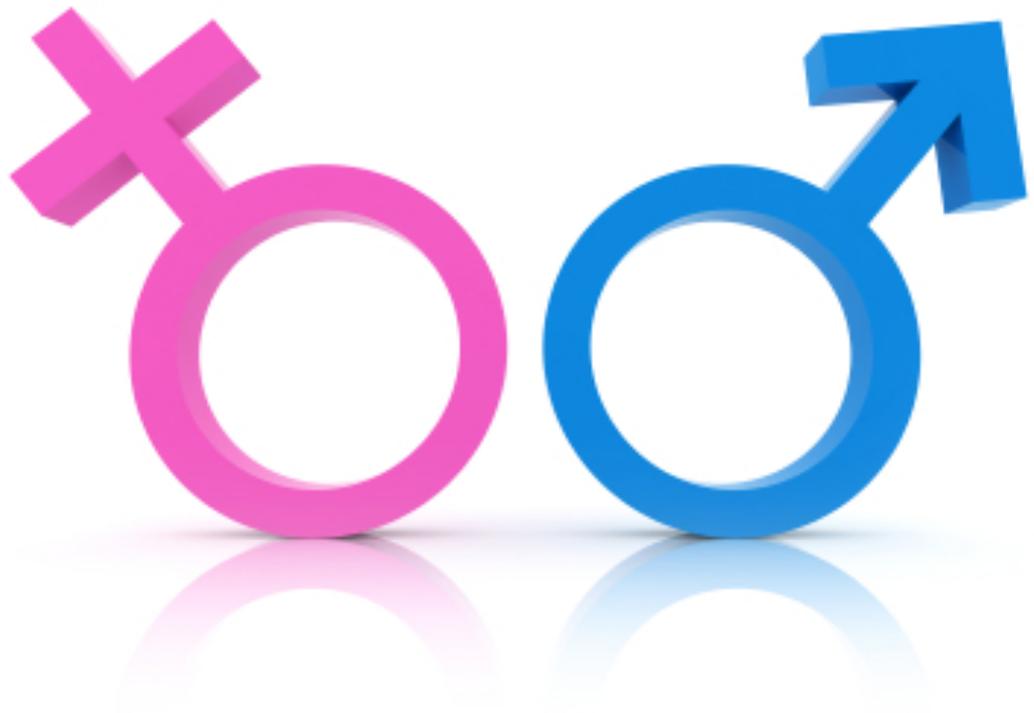


COACHING WITH IMPACT



Does Gender Matter?

Once in a while, individuals requesting coaching state a preference to be coached by a person of their own (or other) gender, but more often than not, a coach and coachee's genders aren't given a second thought when proposing possible matches.

Given that psychologists, anthropologists, neuroscientists, philosophers and biologists have had much to say about the so-called differences between the sexes down the years, perhaps this might be a mistake. In this article, coaches Jackie Keddy and Clive Johnson take a look at what the 'experts' have to say on gender differences and consider the possible implications for coaching.

Gender - and equally, sexuality - may impact on the cognitive framework that we use in communicating with another

person, the worldview that we form and the subconscious assumptions that we make. It may affect the way that we approach a problem and the intensity with which we tune in to others; perhaps more alarmingly, it can impact on our perception of others abilities or status too. Consider some recent research.

Some interesting studies relating to the nature of autism at Cambridge University suggests that a majority of men conform to what is described as "systemizing" patterns of thinking and behaviour - using logic, problem solving and methodical approaches to interpret a situation before preferring what is commonly termed "intuition", whereas a majority of women are more inclined to pick up on the subtle use of non-verbal indication presented by another person and appear to be better able to engage with them in kind (so-called "empathizing") [1].

There are known differences in our hard-wiring and brain structures too, with most women having a larger Corpus Callosum than males, possibly pointing to a better link between the left and right (emotional) hemispheres of the brain.

Then there's Harvard and its partner University's 'Implicit Association Test' [2], an on-line test available to anyone, that examines our subconscious tendency to pass judgements on other people based on their gender, ethnicity and other aspects of perceived "difference". Extensive data collected *does* highlight a strong influence of gender bias.

Were the neurological and psychological arguments concerning the differences between the sexes not enough, the way in which we are socially conditioned can play a significant part too.

Recent research at New York University has highlighted a tendency amongst women who are set on career progression to believe that diligence, ability and dedication as being core to their game plan, but with little attention being given to how they might negotiate their way through a corporate labyrinth [3]. This may result from the way that many children are socialised - with girls often being patted on the head and praised for being "good" when they conform or work hard, whereas a greater tolerance may be shown towards boys when it comes to breaking the rules and playing politics (or war games).

If any of these theories hold water - and we are talking in generalised terms here - then what might the implications for coaching relationships be?

An obvious point might be that implicit bias is often present in a relationship where a male and female come together - whilst they may be at pains to deny it, many males may instinctively relate better to other men, and similarly, perhaps many women will harbour a latent mistrust of most males. Of course such things may quickly be flushed out when a relationship dynamic is established and trust can be built on real dialogue, but nonetheless, such differences can be pertinent when two individuals are first introduced to each

other (and as we all know, first impressions can matter).

Another implication of the theory might be that many male coaches are less able to empathize with their client than are most female coaches. Again, we're talking about a generalisation, but research conducted by Trinity College, Cambridge and others suggests that this would be so. Male coaches, by contrast, might be more adept at helping a client related ideas and then applying logical flow of questions to help them unravel a particular topic.

As for the question of social conditioning - well, the theory here would have us believe that the worldview brought by many female coaches may often constrain realistic career planning. This might be the case especially where a coachee seeks coaching to help explore how they can climb the greasy pole in a corporate environment with a female coach who hasn't herself followed the same path and so who may not appreciate the political contexts that an individual may need to wrestle with as well as many men might appreciate.

So what do our coaches make whole such arguments? Jackie Keddy is perhaps an atypical coach, having achieved a senior role within the London Metropolitan Police Service as a police officer before becoming an evangelist in the world of coaching.

"I think that's it's reasonable to question whether a person's gender may be at all relevant when suggesting a possible match between a coach and a coachee, but suspect that this will often fade in significance against a range of other factors that will underpin the dynamic of a relationship," says Jackie. "Good coaches of either gender will bring the skills needed to best help their clients, and neither gender has a greater call on instinctively being a "coaching natural", in my view," she continues.

Former management consultant turned career coach Clive Johnson agrees. "I think the topic of gender differences can be overplayed," he says, "however, it's not something to be ignorant about either." Clive concurs with Jackie's view that coaches who first and foremost have the skill and experience to practice good coaching and who also follow a strict ethical code should be

less likely to fall into gender-typed thinking that might weaken their coaching, although it must always remain important for them to remain mindful of the possibility that gender can play a part.

Jackie believes that social conditioning usually does shape different attitudes to how we overtly express emotions – and in the way we perceive others who do too. In particular, girls are less likely to be told that they shouldn't cry than boys and may even be consoled when they throw a tantrum – and this can pass on into adulthood. She comments, "I had a coachee bring how she was so disturbed by a man crying to supervision, *but* accepted it was a normal occurrence with a woman. The realisation of how preconditioned her outlook was really opened her eyes as well as mine!"

Of greater relevance may be coachee's perceptions of the people who are introduced to them as potential coaches, but both parties have a responsibility to determine whether they feel that the relationship is suitable (or has the right "chemistry") during their early contracting meetings, and neither need declare or necessarily themselves be aware why they may feel unsure about continuing, if this is the case. Of course, this early discussion is also the critical time when trust can be established, and is when each individual gets to know the others' personality, style and ways of thinking and communicating rather than someone who's *modus operandi* is to be determined solely by reference to their gender and the like.

Jackie makes the point that even if the empathizer and systemizer theory is true, that both males and females would bring positive is to be coaching relationship. Clive similarly observes that if a coach is mindful of their possible tendency to (say) not pick up on subtle forms of non-verbal client communication, then this might become a strong focus for their own self-development. Interventions such as regular coach training, co-coaching between coaches and coach supervision, alongside feedback given by coachees, can only help to increase this awareness.



"Gender differences in a coaching relationship can be positive when this allows both a coach and a coachee to come at a topic with slightly different perspectives."

Clive believes that there may be some substance to the view that a coach's own experience and view of what's needed to progress in a career may have a bearing on the way the coach approaches career coaching. He says that he himself found that his own lack of awareness of what's often involved to thrive in corporate politics meant that his natural line of questioning with clients would sometimes miss the point. However, coaching that causes individuals to recognise for themselves that hard work and talent alone are really enough to help them move on in their careers does often arise from sensitive coaching.

Overall then, do our coaches feel that gender matters when it comes to coaching?

"I think that gender differences can be overplayed and generalised, but shouldn't be ignored," says Jackie. "Gender difference in a coaching relationship can be a positive when this allows both coach and coachee to come at a topic with perhaps slightly different perspectives," she says, "but so too can individuals of the same gender find that they can quickly establish common ground; what matters is that both individuals feel that there is the right dynamic in their relationship and that they can trust each other."

Clive is more ambivalent. "I think that if I'm honest, at a deep level, a whole host of factors can influence the way that we think, speak and

relate to others. Gender and sexuality may be common amongst these, if the striking findings of the Implicit Association test are anything to go by”, he says.

Clive continues, " I wonder whether sex itself is another variable in the mix for some people. Good coaching ethics should guard against any overt sexual intrusion in a coaching relationship, but attraction can be an elusive factor that can come into play some way into a relationship. I'm not consciously aware that I've personally encountered this, although I can honestly say that I have often got to the point of really liking and feeling concerned for my clients, and perhaps that I would like to befriend them on a social basis rather than purely professional one. This is of course the point to realise that a coaching boundary has been reached and that it may be appropriate to step back from the relationship."

Plenty of food for them on a question that deserves attention. However, if the views of our commentators are correct, no one of the genders is likely to produce better coaches than the other - and for that matter neither should a coachee's gender suggest that they are more or less likely to gain from a coaching engagement. There's of course overwhelming evidence that the world offers both good female and male coaches - and countless examples of individuals of both genders whose lives have been transformed through coaching.

Jackie Keddy was instrumental in driving the in-house coaching programme for the Metropolitan Police Service, for whom she served as a senior police officer for nearly 30 years. Following many years' serving as a front-line officer, Jackie carried through an ambitious programme to champion coaching across the Met, a programme that went on to achieve the prestigious EMCC European Quality Award standard - the first UK non-profit public sector organisation to do so. More recently, she was honoured with the Association for Coaching's Award for her 'Outstanding Contribution to Business' and was also named by readers of *Coaching at Work* magazine as 'Person of the Year 2010'.

Jackie now works in private practice, combining her special passion of coaching implementation and development. She was co-founder of the International Conflict Management Forum, the UK's leading network for sharing organisational learning on conflict management, is a prolific speaker and author of numerous articles. Her first book, "Managing Conflict at Work" co-authored with her Clive Johnson, offers a wealth of practical approaches for managing conflict. Jackie and Clive's second book, "Implementing Workplace Coaching", will be published by Kogan Page in early 2011.

Clive Johnson is an Associate of Keddy Consultants.

An adapted version of this article first appeared in 'Coaching at Work' magazine.

"A whole host of factors can impact on how we think, communicate and relate to others."



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