

# The Great Gender Divide



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## The Great Gender Divide

Ken: Hello and welcome. My name is Ken Foster and I'm the author of *Ask and You Will Succeed* and your interview host for today. Today we're going to be talking about one of my favorite topics, the great gender divide. I'm going to be interviewing Cindy Petitt, who is an Executive Coach, and former head of human resources with more than 20 years in the field.

Cindy also has studied and consulted on gender issues, such as how gender impacts career advancement and effectiveness of communications.

Cindy, welcome.

Cindy: Thank you Ken.

Ken: What do you mean when you refer to the great gender divide?

Cindy: I like the term "the great gender divide" because it presents the visual image of two major landmasses with a chasm separating them. That chasm represents how much often gets lost in the communications between men and women because of their differences.

In managing this chasm you have three options. You can try to understand and bridge gender differences so that you can communicate more effectively with each other. You can isolate yourself so that you pretty much hang out with your own gender. You can deny the legitimacy of gender differences – consciously or unconsciously – and go through life judging and feeling judged by each other, which leads to a variety of different behaviors.

A lack of understanding or denial of the differences between men and women often results in conflict due to miscommunication.

Now, obviously there are undisputed differences between men and women both physical and behavioral. There have been many theories about how much of the behavioral differences is due to nature and how much is due to nurture. Ken, in our generation, there has been a bias toward the nurture theories. Therefore, many families tried to raise gender-neutral children by not buying toys designed for a specific gender, such as dolls for girls and baseballs for boys. But, gender-based behavior and perception differences still emerged.

Neurological research over the past 10 years has given us a deeper understanding of the differences between men and women that are based on nature. In fact many of these differences are hard wired in the brain.

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Ken: Isn't that the truth. We are definitely hard wired. I'm very interested in hearing about some of the brain differences between us, and how we can start to work together in harmony. So, what does research tell us about the brains of men and women?

Cindy: The brains of men and women are different in more than 100 ways according the gender experts Barbara Annis and Michael Gurian, but the differences fall into three primary categories: Blood flow, structure, and chemistry.

Let's take a few minutes to look at each of the three areas and how differences in those areas affect behaviors.

### Blood Flow

The first category of differences one is blood flow within the brain. The brain is made of many parts, and blood flow stimulates the development of each of those parts. Blood flows differently in the brains of men and women so development patterns within the brain also are different. For example, in men the brain center that is most stimulated is the spatial brain center, which explains why men are more focused on objects and actions.

In women, the brain centers that are most stimulated are those that control verbalization, life experiences, and memory. This explains why women are better with words, emotions, and observations.

How does this play out? A little boy is likely to throw a doll just like he would a ball, and a little girl is more likely to cuddle the doll and hang on to the ball.

In conversations, men tend to focus on the facts and because their verbal centers are less developed than women's, they tend to keep conversations brief. Women with more developed verbal centers, on the other hand, like to expand their conversations – they like to use lots of words.

A perfect example is a conversation between a husband and wife after a day at work.

Wife: "How was your day?"

Husband: "Fine."

Wife: "Was it busy?"

Husband: "Yes."

Wife: "Did you meet any new clients?"

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Husband: “Yes,”

If the conversation was flipped, and husband was asking the questions, the wife would probably give lengthier, more descriptive responses.

It is not just words that escape many men; they often miss non-verbal communication signals as well. Women, who have stronger memory and life experience centers, tend to rerun tapes that tap into what differences in facial expressions and body language mean. Therefore, women are more likely to pick up on subtle signals that indicate when someone is angry or upset. This difference is an important factor in the miscommunication that often occurs between men and women.

Let me explain how. According to linguistic professor Deborah Tannen, people have two primary styles of communication based on what the outcome they are seeking. Women are more likely to communicate to form and build relationships. Men are more likely to communicate for the purpose of clearly conveying information.

When fostering relationships is more important than clarity, the words you use are often ambiguous to avoid offending the other person. Rituals and nuances take on greater importance in communicating intended messages when clarity does not come through words. Men, unfortunately, are much more likely to miss these nuances.

Here is an example. A husband comes home from work three hours later than expected and dinner is now cold. The husband did not call to let his wife know where he was. Of course, she’s not very happy. When he comes in the door, her signal to let him know that she is angry is the “silent treatment.”

Now, in this case, most husbands will be aware that they are probably in the doghouse for being so late without calling. However, if his “mistake” was not as obvious, he might not pick up on the “silent treatment,” or he may not notice if his wife has a sad expression on her face. The wife may interpret his lack of response to her signals as insensitivity, but it could be that the husband has simply not picked up any of the signals because of how his brain is wired.

### Brain Chemistry

A second area where the brains of men and women are very different is in the chemistry of the brains. Women have a higher concentration of serotonin, oxytocin and prolactin. The serotonin has a calming effect. The oxytocin has a bonding effect. The prolactin stimulates tear glands. And, of course, men have testosterone, which brings about aggression and territorial behaviors.

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As a result of their brain chemistry, women are more likely to accept blame and downplay achievements because they want to bond. On the other hand, as a result of their brain chemistry, men tend to be more competitive so they're likely to deflect blame and talk about their achievements. Being comfortable talking about achievements gives men an advantage when it comes to career advancement.

Brain chemistry also affects how men and women respond to stress. Women will feel the stress emotionally and they will seek out support to talk about it. On the other hand, men are much more likely to feel stress physically – like a fight or flight response. Consequently, a man would probably prefer to physically work through the stress.

Let's look at a situation where a co-worker loses his or her job unexpectedly and is understandably upset. If it is a male co-worker, his female colleagues would probably want to support him by talking about his feelings and plans, and what they could do to help him. However, he may not want to talk about it and may get irritated if pushed. In the contrast, if it is a woman who lost her job, some male colleagues may not reach out to her because they assume she needs her privacy or space, or they wouldn't know what to say.

### Gray and White Matter

A second area where the brains of men and women are different is the amount of gray matter versus white matter in their brains. Women have 10 times more white matter than men, and men have 6.5 times more gray matter than women.

Now, what's the importance of this? Gray matter provides the capacity to process information within one center. White matter provides the capacity to process information across centers. Consequently, women are much more likely to be comfortable multitasking and men are much more likely to be direct, to the point, focused on one task at a time.

Ken, you were telling me about a time when you were trying to talk with your wife. She was busy on the computer and doing several other things. As you stood there waiting for her to give you her full attention, she said to you, "I don't need to stop what I'm doing in order to listen to you." According to research on a woman's brain, that is true. She was multitasking. So, she could listen to what you were saying and continue doing whatever else she was focusing on at that time.

At first it bothered you, but over time you developed trust in her ability to listen to you without giving you her full attention. This is a great example of why it is important to understand how the brains of men and women are different.

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Ken: Yes, I remember that well. This is all very interesting.

Cindy: There is a great book that's called *Leadership in the Sexes* by Barbara Annis and Michael Gurian. The book was written to help organizations understand and leverage gender differences. In the book there are two brain scans – a man's brain at rest and a woman's brain at rest. The man's brain at rest is completely dark. The woman's brain at rest is lit up like a Christmas tree. In other words, a woman's brain is never at rest.

Just like it is hard for a man to conceive how a woman can listen while multitasking, it is hard for women to conceive how a man can be zoned out. So, here is what women need to pay attention to. If they take a long time to get to the point in a conversation, a man's brain could easily zone out. Once that happens, they will truly not hear another word.

I don't know if you've ever experienced this yourself, but here is a typical scenario. A woman says to her husband, "Oh, by the way, don't forget my parents are coming this weekend," and the husband might say, "You never told me that."

The woman may say, "I did indeed tell you that. I told you yesterday and I told you the day before," but if that was imbedded in one of these really long conversations, it's quite likely her husband's brain had zoned out and he really didn't hear what she had to say.

Ken: Wow. I'm getting the impression that these differences are hard wired. Does that mean what we do is beyond our control?

Cindy: First of all, men are not all exactly alike, nor are women. Think of what we have been talking about as a continuum. At one end of the continuum might be male tendencies in the extreme and at the other end may be female tendencies in the extreme. Most people will be spread out along the continuums rather than being clustered at the extremes. And, some men and women will be close to the middle and have what is called a "bridge brain" that can navigate both sides of the gender divide.

Second, about 90% of what we do every day is based on routines, which means our brain basically is in a default mode most of the time. There has been a fair amount of research on our capacity to rewire our brains by changing our habits and routines, but to do that you have to stay very conscious. The same is true to some extent of gender differences. You change default behaviors, by consciously making different behavioral choices.

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Ken: How does this all fit together so we can practically apply these things?

Cindy: Well, we've talked a bit about conversations and personal relationships. I'd like to focus a little more on gender differences in an organizational context. There are three major areas where gender differences often cause problems in organizations – communication styles, networking, and how women transition to management positions.

### Communication Styles

As I mentioned earlier, women are more likely to communicate to build relationships and they are more verbal. Men are more likely to communicate to clearly convey information. Men are concise – they get to the point quickly. Women on the other hand often sandwich their main message between a long preamble and a long closing. Too often in meetings, women lose their male colleagues before they get to their main point because of the long preamble.

In addition, in male dominant work environments, women have a very narrow range of acceptable behaviors. If they are assertive they are considered aggressive, if they are differential they are judged as lacking confidence. This dilemma affects the credibility and advancement potential of women.

### Networking

Women often come into the workforce feeling that if you do a good job that is all that is needed to move up in the organization. In fact, doing a good job is simply your ticket to play. You have to do a lot more than that, including being very strategic about developing networks.

Women rely extensively on networks to manage their family lives; however, many don't recognize the value of networks in the workplace. They think of networking as playing golf, going to a bar after work – things they don't have time for in their busy lives. Based on studies that I've done, the most effective networking doesn't take place outside of the office. Networks are built in the course of doing your work. It's staying in touch with people you meet on various assignments by seeking their opinions when it's relevant, and they will do the same with you. That's what it takes and ultimately, a robust network can make your job much easier.

### Transitioning to Management Positions

As women break through the glass ceiling, and transition into management and executive positions, they often experience the visibility-vulnerability syndrome. The higher they move, the more visible and vulnerability they become. If they begin to stumble in a new management position – which would not be unusual for a man or a

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woman – and haven't cultivated networks, there is no one for them to turn to for support. They become isolated and even more vulnerable to derailment.

In contrast, if a man is put in a new management position and begins to stumble, he is more likely to have a huge network to fall back on that's going to help him recover or put the new manager's actions in context when talking with others. Men see the value of networking and they are much better at it than women.

Ken: That makes a lot of sense. Any other factors that impact gender in our organizations?

Cindy: There are two others worth noting that are inter-related and often impact the career advancement of women. One is role of women in families, carrying primary responsibility for the children and managing the home. Family responsibilities often limit the flexibility of women to travel without notice, and create the perception that women are not able to take on jobs that require long hours.

In addition, most large corporations, particularly in some industries, have male dominant cultures and policies within those organizations are based on the family model of working husbands, stay at home wife. Examples include policies that require mobility – relocating in order to advance – or extended assignments away from families. Much progress has been made in introducing flexible work schedules and arrangements, but the United States is definitely not a leader in this area.

Ken: Cindy, how can we use this information? How can we apply it in our lives to make them better?

Cindy: Awareness is key because once you are aware then you have choices. This information is about understanding gender differences as opposed to passing judgment, it's about learning to leverage those differences, and it's about being conscious and recognizing the choices that you have.

Ken: What changes do you see occurring with respect to the great gender divide in the future?

Cindy: I see three things happening in organizations. The first is that women are beginning to help other women. The first generation of women to break through the glass ceiling did not reach back and help the women below them. In many cases this wasn't because they weren't interested in helping women; it was because they felt the spotlight was on them and they would be viewed as biased if they reached out to help other women. This incidentally is a common reaction to any minority group within an organization that first breaks through its glass ceiling.



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So, while women haven't done a whole lot to give back to other women or to help them within organizations in the past, the new generation of women managers has a very strong commitment to giving back and helping other women.

The second is that organizations are becoming more supportive of the work/life balance that's needed for working mothers, and also for the many men who are taking on more family responsibilities.

The third area is that we're seeing is a huge demographic shift. Right now women are the leaders in schools, in secondary schools and in colleges. Sixty percent of college graduates are women. These women are highly confident and coming into the organization with tremendous ambition and expectations at levels that we have never seen before.

We have a combination of factors coming together. Organizations are becoming more receptive to policies that reflect the dual role of women, and we have a very large and powerful group of women who are now moving into those organizations.

So, you will begin to see a critical mass developing within organizations and the power and influence of women will get stronger.

Ken: Wow. You know what? This has been really great information that everybody can use. I would like to ask you how can people get a hold of you and find out more about your products and programs?

Cindy: They can go to my website, which is [www.CoachForPostiveAction.com](http://www.CoachForPostiveAction.com) and at that website there is an article that I coauthored with some colleagues on how gender impacts career advancement of women. The article is based on research we did in an international financial institution.

Ken: Cindy, any final thoughts?

Cindy: Just to remind both men and women to step back when they feel tension or frustration building with someone of the opposite sex and consider inherent gender differences rather than pass judgment. We all need to seek to understand each other. Understanding creates bridges that bring people together, and judgment isolates people – it pushes them into the chasm.

Ken: That's great advice. We hope you've enjoyed this call today and we hope that you'll continue to connect with Cindy Petitt and all her information so that you can take your business and your life to a completely new level.

Cindy: Thank you Ken.