

How Gender Affects Coaching

By Robert Holmes, Th.D

Kenneth and Barbara are in their mid 40's. They have come to you for coaching. After an initial face to face you have done two more sessions via Skype. You are starting to notice quite large differences in their responsiveness, as Barbara appears to be very engaged and Kenneth is quite reserved. It surprises you when, after the coaching, he says how profound it was. Kenneth's conduct never reflected his internal feelings at the time.

Aside from personality, cultural upbringing and social status the remaining differences in their responses centre on gender and its effects on physiology (the body), biochemistry (the blood) and neurology (the brain). Whilst Kenneth and Barbara's body, blood and brain are about 90% the same, it is the differences that affect the way they experience coaching. Kenneth and Barbara represent the average man and woman. What follows are conclusions from the research that tell us general trends. As with all such generalisations there will be exceptions and outliers, so apply the tips with care and observation.

First, a note about coach gender

Research studies going back to 1989 have looked at how gender affects mentoring and coaching relationships. In his paper *"Choosing An Executive Coach: the influence of gender on the coach-coachee matching process,"* Professor David Gray observed, "The empirical evidence as to the benefits of same-gender versus cross-gender relationships is contradictory and inconclusive."

Actual results produced by coaches of both genders were quite equal, but perceptions about them were different. Women were perceived to have several key advantages: they were often seen to offer more personal support, were easier to talk to, warmer and more approachable and perceived as being better listeners. Some respondents chose female coaches because they were seen as being able to offer broader life based perspectives and displayed more attitudinal flexibility.

So much for the coach, now for our clients. What is driving Kenneth and Barbara to respond differently... and more importantly, what should we do about it?

Physiology: the body

Men and women differ all the way down to cellular level. Barbara has two X chromosomes in every cell and Kenneth has an X and a Y. These differences give rise to at least two coaching related issues:

1. Barbara's skin is ten times as sensitive to touch and her muscles are connected to her centres for emotion. Kenneth's muscles are hardwired for embodied cognition (he thinks about an action and his muscles prepare to act) and are connected to his centres for response.

TIP 1: A female client may respond well to appropriate human touch – tactile responsiveness can change the direction of a coaching session.

TIP 2: Instead of drawing a diagram or explaining it to him, try moving a male client spatially through an exercise. Movement can help him understand more quickly.

2. Barbara has specific areas in her brain dedicated to speech, but they are separate from comprehension. She has a wider field of hearing and greater pitch detection. Kenneth does not have an area in his brain specifically dedicated to speech, has more restricted hearing which blocks out higher tonality and when he is concentrating on a task he is functionally deaf.

TIP 3: You may find women are more attentively engaged, but check they understand the content even when they are nodding affirmation.

TIP 4: Get a male client's attention before communicating, touch his shoulder or point to the notes.

Biochemistry: the blood

Beyond biology, men and women's biochemistry differ remarkably. Barbara's hormones (oestrogen and progesterone) change through her monthly cycle and her last pregnancy deeply affected her mood (she had post natal depression). Oestrogen acts as a neuro-stimulant and anti-depressant. Lack of it during menopause can cause angry outbursts and tearful regret afterward. Kenneth's hormones (testosterone, MIS & DHEA) affect his concentration and heighten anger response in competitive situations.

TIP 5: Are you tuned in and sensitive to your female clients? Do you know what stage of life they are at? Separate genuine response from biochemical overreaction.

TIP 6: Young male clients whose blood is swimming with testosterone will find concentration for 60 minutes very difficult. Break up your session into three or four distinct parts or activities.

The neurology: the brain

In the womb a foetus is bathed in chemicals that deeply alter the brain's structures. Louann Brizendine has published the results of her lifetime of research in "The Female Brain" and "The Male Brain" respectively. There is a spectrum from female gender, female brain (F-brain) through to male gender, male brain (M-brain). In between these two poles are women who have an M-brain and men who have an F-brain:

Brain gender	Female with F-brain		Female with M-Brain			Male with F-brain		Male with M-brain	
Gender presentation	super feminine	feminine	tomboy	masculine	none – both	feminine	sensitive	masculine	super masculine
% population	1.0	36	10	2.9	0.2	2.9	10	36	1.0

SIDENOTE: [Whilst coaching work is certainly done among Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual and Transgender populations – who almost certainly fall within the 6% in the middle of this table – very little research has been done on the brain differences of these groups.]

Barbara has an F-brain. She is very relationship oriented, group aware, emotionally intelligent, thinks of many things at once, looks for connections between things and does empathy well. Kenneth has an M-brain. He is very logical, goal directed, more single minded, defaults to taking action quickly, looks for outcomes and doesn't do empathy well. There are at least five distinctions that affect our coaching with them:

1. Words

Barbara's F-brain stores a dictionary of approximately 50,000 words and she employs an average of 7,500 words each day. She loves to process things verbally. Without a specific area for linguistics Kenneth's M-

brain is less inclined to keep an extensive vocabulary. He keeps a dictionary of about 35,000 words and uses just 3,000 words a day. Once they are used, he loses motivation to keep communicating.

TIP 7: Mirror an F-Brain clients' words and language to build rapport. Watch out for them using up precious coaching time with divergent stories.

TIP 8: Consider booking M-brain clients in the morning when they are more likely to share.

2. Watching faces

Oxytocin primes Barbara's F-brain to perceive apparent boredom as listening, care or passiveness. She will believe that you are interested, even when you are not. By contrast, vasopressin primes Kenneth's M-brain to perceive apparent boredom as anger, hostility or offishness and he will respond accordingly.

TIP 9: Summarise what you hear your F-brain client say and what you believe it means. Allow for clarification.

TIP 10: Stay focussed, present, attentive and engaged with your M-brain client and if you see unwarranted hostility, explore it.

3. Emotion and problem solving

When Barbara's F-Brain is faced with a problem her mirror neurons switch on and keep emoting, empathising and staying connected. Oestrogen and oxytocin switch on her facial response system, magnifying and mirroring what she observes. When Kenneth's M-brain is faced with a problem his mirror neurons activate to acquire and recognise a "target". Then his temporal parietal junction (TPJ) activates to fix the problem. Testosterone and vasopressin switch off his facial response.

TIP 11: F-brain clients respond well to coaching presence and empathy. Don't try to solve or fix problems, let them work it out.

TIP 12: If you pose your M-brain client with a problem they may appear to switch off – but they are probably coming up with a solution to the question you asked. Leave space.

4. Social symmetry

Barbara's F-brain is not consciously aware of hierarchy or status. She tracks her social connection and group belonging. Kenneth's M-brain is primed to find the lead or "alpha" position, calculate his own position and then fight against, submit to, or flee from the dominant one.

TIP 13: Your F-brain client will subconsciously measure belonging in the coaching relationship. Rapport building is imperative in the early sessions. Be wary of co-dependence and set clear boundaries.

TIP 14: Take a position of equal social status to your M-brain client and not in a sub-ordinate position. Dress for authority and position the chairs as equals. Calibrate your rapport and test whether you can lead them.

5. Fear

Barbara's F-brain registers fear as general anxiety, allowing her to exercise pre-frontal self-control and decision making under stress. The price she pays is a heightened emotional reaction. Kenneth's M-brain registers fear more strongly in the brain stem and amygdala. Under stress or threat these take over the decision making process and will respond with freeze, flight or fight response.

TIP 15: Avoid overwhelming your F-Brain client with a bombardment of questions. Use emotionally charged questions sparingly.

TIP 16: Remove any overt threats in the environment and use confrontation (and why questions) carefully with your M-brain clients.

Summary

Men and women have different physiology, biochemistry and a spectrum of neurology from F-Brain to M-brain, each with its own nuances. Coaches should understand these in order to work with the individual more effectively.

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