

THE FEMALE ADVANTAGE

In part two of our series on Emotional and Social Competence, **Ken Nowack** and **Andrew Munro** explore ESC differences in men and women, and ask whether women have a leadership advantage over their male counterparts

Does 'playing well with others' (ie demonstrating empathy, caring and civility) really impact bottom line performance for organisations? In general, do female leaders differ in their ability to lead relative to their male counterparts based on their ability to demonstrate specific social skills that facilitate interpersonal trust and team performance?

Recent global surveys suggest that high employee engagement, performance and retention of talent today hinges on a psychological safe and trusting organisational culture. Toxic peers and leaders undoubtedly



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are a liability to organisations, affecting such outcomes such as absenteeism, stress disability claims, hostile workplace lawsuits and health. In fact, socially related stressors are particularly physiologically activating, causing the stress hormone cortisol to be elevated 50% longer than stressors that are largely task or performance oriented.

Indeed, one of the key concepts surrounding all current models of emotional and social competence (ESC) is the ability to demonstrate →



INTERPERSONAL SKILLS

empathy and diverse interpersonal skills to manage effective relationships with others. Treating people with respect and with care has important organisational business outcomes.

For example, research by Georgetown University's Prof Christine Porath¹ suggests that 98% of employees have experienced rudeness from others on the job. A culture that lacks empathy and compassion results in 30% less creativity, a decrease in team spirit and performance that reduces work quality by 38% and results in significantly higher levels of customer dissatisfaction.

Leaders who demonstrate a lack of ESC, particularly empathy and interpersonal skills, achieve lower team performance and an increase in absenteeism and negative health outcomes. In one study² published by Mika Kivimaki from the University College London, 6,442 male British civil servants were asked to rate how they were supervised (for example, perceived justice at work). This group was then tracked over a 10-year period for cardiovascular events. Employees who felt they had been treated fairly had 30% lower rates of heart disease.

Additionally, Development Dimensions International (DDI), in its 2014 High-Resolution Leadership Report,³ assessed 15,000

leaders and found that empathy was one of the most important drivers of overall performance. The same research also found, however, that only 40% of the frontline leaders assessed were sufficiently proficient or strong in empathy. Empathy matters in business, but there seems to be a significant gap between its importance and leadership capability.

To some extent, ESC might be hard-wired. Anne Chong and colleagues at the National University of Singapore explored the social skills of 1,300 healthy young Chinese adults.⁴ They found that participants, particularly males, with higher expression of the genes that govern the release of the prosocial peptide oxytocin had more close friends and better social functioning. Those with lower expression were found to engage in fewer social interactions, were less socially adept (eg reported engaging in less small talk with others) and had fewer close friends.

Gender differences in ESC

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regulating emotions. Our own research⁵ using a validated behaviourally based emotional intelligence measure (EIV360; Emotional Intelligence View 360) compared self-ratings to those of others on 17 competencies organised into three domains: self-management, relationship management and communication skills. In a comparison



of 671 men and 674 women randomly selected from diverse companies and industries, self-ratings of women were higher on an overall measure of ESC, communication skills and relationship management competencies.

In addition, compared to their male counterparts, women were rated significantly higher on both areas as well as an overall score of ESC by their manager, direct reports and peers. Prior research on our measure suggests a strong overlap with transformational leadership assessments, indicating that women tend to draw more on involvement-oriented and participative leadership styles relative to males.

These findings are consistent with other research using other validated ESC measures. For example, a 2016 DDI and Conference Board report⁶ found that women scored higher on interpersonal sensitivity compared to men (13% more) and men scored higher on impulsiveness (11%) and inquisitiveness (16%).

Recently, Leonardo Christov-Moore and his colleagues at the University of California have provided evidence⁷ from functional magnetic imagery (fMRI) scans of the brain to suggest that women demonstrate higher levels of empathy for pain compared to their male counterparts.

The neurobiology of empathy, trust and social skills

Why might women be better than men at judging emotions of others, being more sensitive to distress and pain in other people and to have significantly more neural activation to perceived unfairness? What might give women a leadership advantage in demonstrating greater empathy, sensitivity and interpersonal competence with their colleagues and direct reports?

Over 20 years ago, social psychologist Shelly Taylor (University of California) hypothesised that women under stress exhibit a release of oxytocin, a hormone that plays a key role in female reproduction and also supports what Taylor calls 'tend and befriend' behaviours.⁸ We are constantly seeking the right balance between interacting with others while being wary of those who pose a possible threat. Oxytocin signals to us when it is safe to be around others by reducing our brain vigilance.

Over the last 20 years, research⁹ by Paul Zak at Claremont University in the US and his colleagues has established that oxytocin is indeed the biological basis for psychological safety, empathy and interpersonal trust. Their studies suggest that oxytocin, testosterone and stress-related neurotransmitters compete for the same receptor sites in the brain and heart to enhance emotional awareness in others and collaborative behaviour.

Under stress, men produce about five to 10 times more testosterone than women, a factor that may explain their higher levels of competitiveness and aggression. Indeed, many of the gender differences found in ESC (eg empathy, involvement oriented leadership styles) might be largely attributed to the prosocial hormone oxytocin which selectively provides women with a slight evolutionary advantage over men.

Mind the gender pay gap

That being said, a potential leadership advantage for women still doesn't translate to equality in pay or senior leadership roles. Almost 50 years after the introduction of the Equal Pay Act, and a century after the first women were granted the right to vote, the UK's gender pay gap remains quite pronounced. Despite a potential ESC leadership advantage afforded to women, progression into senior leadership roles remains well behind their male counterparts.

Given a general sense of mistrust in senior leaders and organisations by employees at all levels, companies can gain a significant advantage by moving to a new generation of policies, rewards and benefits; practices better placed to realise fully the talents, skills and ambitions of their female leaders. Some suggestions might include:

- ▶ Provide more formal networking experiences and mentoring for women identified as high performing and high potential (those who receive mentoring report more job satisfaction, higher pay and have more interpersonal competence compared to those who do not).
- ▶ Create more structured high potential women leadership programmes internally to help identify and deploy their signature strengths and increase diversity within the organisation.

- ▶ Encourage structured, challenging job assignments; provide executive coaching opportunities, and increase accessibility for women to senior leadership positions.
- ▶ Encourage women to clarify both personal and professional definitions of success and reinforce opportunities for women to psychologically detach from work once they leave the office or where they are working remotely. This may be the case for male leaders.

In summary

A business case for ESC in organisations can be made when the need to restore, build and maintain trust is critical to future success.

One important facet of ESC includes social awareness and interpersonal skills including empathy, trust and civility.

It appears that neurobiological differences might provide women with a distinctive leadership advantage compared to men, despite disparity in both pay and progression into executive positions. Findings by Sigal Barsade and colleagues at the University of Pennsylvania¹⁰ show that, across all industries, when employees and leaders felt and expressed compassion, respect and caring towards each other, it resulted in significantly higher performance, engagement and retention of talent.

Indeed, the ESC components of 'playing well with others' does appear to contribute mightily to the success of most organisations. **TJ**

An interview with Paul Zak is available at www.trainingjournal.com

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