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Creating Gender Synergy in Workplace Culture

BY DONNA S. DENIO

Center for Balance by Design is a research and learning consortium engaged in action research focused on co-creating a more inclusive work culture. We believe that women contribute a humanizing context to the challenges of creativity and teamwork. Women's instinctive abilities to communicate, connect and create community add an empowering context to group performance. Working together, men and women can design a more inclusive work culture. For the purposes of the center's work, we define culture as a system of processes, tools and environments that support teamwork.

The Empowering Instinct

Our hypothesis about gender specific strengths bridged to recent findings in scientific circles in Shelley Taylor's book, "The Tending Instinct, Women, Men and the Biology of our Relationships." Taylor, a social psychologist at University of California Los Angeles, hypothesizes and provides convincing evidence, that females, as the primary caretakers of offspring, have evolved a stress response that provides some protection for their children. This "tend and befriend" response to stress, or quieting offspring, forming social bonds with other women and children and blending into the environment, is an alternative survival strategy to the more widely publicized "fight or flight" response. It appears that there is a hormonal basis for the nurturing behavior that women exhibit when under stress. These gender-specific differences are only beginning to be explored because until 1995, when the federal government acted on the systemic exclusion of women as research subjects, almost all of the studies of stress and most other human conditions, have been conducted on males.

If women react to stress by paying attention to others and trying to calm everyone down, and men exhibit "fight or flight" re-



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sponse, it is reasonable to hypothesize that workplace stress might trigger similar reactions. When the competition is stealing our best clients, or eroding market share, one could imagine men retiring to the "war-room" to plan their attack, while the women might visit offices of colleagues and phone trusted allies to gain support or ask for advice.

One instinctive work strategy for less dominant team members might be to align with one of the powerful team members and build up or reinforce (empower) his self-confidence.

My quest to help women find a common voice to help unify the feminine voice in the design community began with the female architect, Turid Horgen, co-author of the book "Excellence by Design, Transforming Workplace and Work Practice." Turid is a Norwegian who came to the Massachusetts Institute of Technology on a Fulbright fellowship. Turid's work, coined "process architecture," focuses on using design processes, called "design games" to work with groups to help them redesign how they work at the same time they redesign where they work. Working together with a group of other women, we

created a business plan for a design incubator that will be the laboratory to grow and develop our seedling ideas.

Design Game Process Tools

One of the characteristics distinctive of process architecture is using "design games" to help groups surface emotionally charged values and concerns. In "Excellence by Design," Horgen and the other authors state, "concrete design games attempt to surface and test the objectives, agendas and preconceptions of all players to pave the way toward beneficial transformation of the game."

Concrete design games can redirect or refocus interpersonal conflict. Team conflict can be "depersonalized" and redirected toward jointly created constructions. Building a model of the worst-case scenario (or your nightmare client) can help bring clarity to team challenges and goals.

In Horgen's book, design game tools take many forms including Styrofoam shapes, photographs and LEGO® building bricks. In my search to find support for our work, I approached the LEGO Group. LEGO had already developed a "design game," LEGO Serious Play. The structure and rules of LEGO Serious Play is completely consistent with the purpose and intent of "design games" as defined in "Excellence by Design, Transforming Workplace and Work Practice".

Embracing Collaboration

We approached National Science Foundation (NSF) with our hypothesis of men and women having complementary strengths. The NSF program officer focused on gender and diversity referred us to Robert Knecht Ph.D., professor of engineering design at Colorado School of Mines. Bob Knecht has observed and documented behavioral dynamics in same sex and mixed gender teams.

After several e-mail exchanges and a phone call, Bob Knecht and I decided that we

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have enough common ground to begin collaborating on a series of proposals to the NSF. We both share the belief the men and women have complementary differences that I have named “gender synergy.” Within the community of freshman engineering students at Colorado School of Mines, Bob Knecht has observed that the male students are strong in six task-focused skills and the female students are strong in six task skills and six team-process skills. Through a series of “design game” training interventions that take place at intervals throughout the semester, all students are able to build capacity and appreciation in all 12 team skills, the six task and the six process skills.

Within business schools and management training circles, there is a relatively new training focus on developing leadership skills. Most advocates of leadership training agree that management and leadership describe two different skill sets. Management skills usually focus on more concrete aspects like scheduling and budgeting. Leadership skills are softer, often including inspiration and communication. Management skills emphasize the “male” strengths associated with focusing on a goal or task. Leadership skills are the softer, more “feminine” process skills supporting team functioning. One useful summary comparing leadership and management appears in GEI Consultants Project Delivery Manual:

Not Black and White, Dove Gray

Almost everyone agrees that it is undesirable to categorize people in a way that limits their self-confidence and/or aspirations. In my opinion, it is also a waste of time and resources for people to invest time and energy trying to become someone inconsistent with their core skills and values. My intuitive

Leadership	Management
Innovates	Administers
Develops	Maintains
Focus on people	Focus on systems
Inspires trust	Relies on control
Strategic long-term	Tactical – Shorter term
Asks what and why	Asks how and when
Challenges status quo	Works with what is
Does the right things	Does things right
Establishes directions	Works toward goals
Align people	Aligns resources
Motivates and inspires	Maintains motivation
Fosters learning	Develops skills
Models openness and self-awareness ¹	Provides feedback
Builds self-esteem	Reviews and monitors contribution
Generates alternatives	Closes and selects best option

sense about management skills and leadership skills is that all skills are learned and some people have more aptitude for either management or leadership. In my personal assessment, the majority of men appear to have more aptitude, or a preference, for management skills and the majority of women appear to have more aptitude, or preference, for

leadership skills. One way to think about preference is like being left handed or right handed. Preferences are not rigid, and with intentional reinforcement, preferences can be changed. Successful teams and organizations require a balance of management (task focused) and leadership (process focused) skills to optimize team performance.

My hypothesis is that in the world of duality, management is to leadership, the way science is to art, engineer to architect, teacher to student, man to woman. And to grow into an inclusive global culture where all people are empowered and respected, we need to collaborate on the design of systems and structures supporting the successful integration of our individual strengths. Without structural support (processes, tools and environments) the less dominant skills will remain undervalued and, often times, completely invisible.

However you categorize individual strengths, whether by gender, personality type, professional training, or cultural background, people are different. I believe men and women have some obvious differences that when successfully integrated create true synergy.

Design game process tools, such as LEGO Serious Play, level the playing field, provide a structure to integrate management skills and leadership skills and support teams in aligning values and goals. This is the first step in working through and integrating differences to co-create a more inclusive workplace culture. ■

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