

MORE THAN EVER THE TIME IS NOW FOR FEMALE LEADERSHIP IN LAW FIRMS

by

*Stephen Mabey
Applied Strategies*

FEATURED ARTICLE

POWERED BY

TheRemsenGroup
Smart Strategies for the Forward Thinking Law Firm

TheRemsenGroup.com

Definitely Mabey

More than Ever the Time is Now for Female Leadership in Law Firms



Stephen Mabey, CPA, CA
Principal & Managing Director

Our understanding of the science of the brain in general and the differences in the attributes of male and female brains specifically continues to grow and evolve. And well there is nothing to indicate a general difference in intellectual performance, there clearly are differences including:

1. **How and what we remember:** Women tend to take in more through their five senses than men do, and to store more of this material in the brain for later use. Thus they tend to remember more details during a conversation.¹
2. **How we process words** (including how many and what kinds of words we use): Women use many more words than men while speaking, reading, and writing.²
3. **How we experience the world:** Female retinas have more P ganglion cells – which see colour and fine detail – while male retinas have more M ganglion cells, which more easily see physical motion of objects around them.³
4. **What we buy and why we buy it:** Women's buying is linked to immediate complex sensory experience, so they enjoy walking through a store and touching objects; men link more of their buying to performance competition, so they tend to buy memorabilia from sports teams with which they identify.⁴
5. **The way our midbrain (limbic system) and emotional processing works:** A woman can process a major emotion-laden experience immediately, whereas it may take a man hours to do so. This often creates a lot of tension between men and women.⁵
6. **The amounts of white and gray matter in the brain:** Women have more white matter, which connects brain centers in the neural network, while men have more gray matter, which localizes brain activity into a single brain center. This is one reason the genders bring different perspectives to the same problem or design. Women are able to make connections between widely different elements that men don't make, while men tend to focus on one element or pattern without distraction better than women do."⁶

Impact on Leadership Styles

While the above list of six differences is not intended to be an exhaustive one, it should serve to clarify the basis for the notable difference in leadership style in some key areas.

In reviewing the following table, we are speaking in generalities, and there will always be exceptions!

Area	Male	Female
Problem Solving	Deductive	Inductive
Collaboration	Hierarchy	Participative teams
Interaction	Transactional in interactions (empirical)	Relationship in interactions (emotions)
Communication Style	Prescriptive	Descriptive
Conflict Management	Tend to seek out conflict, deal with it and move on (exception when involves women they tend to become more conflict avoidant)	Tend to work through a problem with a more passive approach – tend to remember conflicts longer but be more forgiving
Cohesiveness	Bond with coworkers in short bursts of connection (goal achievement)	Sustained bond with coworkers (relationship focused – continued dialogue)
Process Orientation	The solution	The process itself and the impact on others
Task Orientation	Single task focus	Emphasize complex and multitasking activities, actions, and team development by expanding leadership into various tasks rather than from dominance by one task
Autonomy	Promote independence in an employee (historical access)	Continually work toward helping others express emotions verbally (strength in networks)
Disciplinary	Enforce adherence to rules	Review rules as to fairness and equity before dealing with issue (historically disadvantaged)
EQ	Tune out emotional vulnerability – solve problem quickly	Tune in emotional vulnerability – focus on situational emotions before dealing with problem

Individualism

Guide coworkers to sacrifice their thinking and feeling in exchange for authority thinking until colleagues have demonstrated that they are sufficiently capable of being authoritative

Promote skill and talent development through an emphasis on verbal encouragement and praise

Common Challenges Facing Legal Departments and Law Firms

There is a growing recognition that in many ways legal departments and law firms have more in common than differences as demonstrated by Northwind Professional Institute's broadening of its old Law Firm Leaders Forum in recent years to Law Leaders Forum and include leaders of legal departments on its invitation list.

While many law firms deal with legal departments in a passive adversarial manner, the more enlightened ones have come to see that closer collaboration apparently results in more win-win scenarios. And given the commonality of issues faced, the concept of meaningful collaboration is not rocket science.

These common problems include (not in order of importance nor exhaustive):

- **Fiscal pressures:** expectation to do more with less
- **Talent management:** attraction, retention, and mix
- **Risk management:** problem prevention versus solving
- **Technology:** artificial intelligence in particular
- **Compensation:** valuing contribution
- **Development:** professional, skills and leadership
- **Engagement:** quality of assignments, life balance, esprit de corps

What is it going to take?

At the risk of a penetrating glimpse into the obvious – if legal departments and law firms always do what they always did, they will always get what they always got – no permanent solutions!

The core solution to all of the problems identified is leadership. While leadership in both legal departments and law firms has been present in the past, the leadership style that is required to solve these mutual problems in the future needs to be different.

... if law firms always do what they always did, they will always get what they always got...

The tendencies that this different leadership style must embrace include:

- Inductive problem solving
- Instinctive use of participative teams
- Descriptive communication style
- Recognizing other's needs – EQ
- Integrated multi-tasking
- Promotion of individualism in thoughts and emotion rather than conformity and consensus

- Passive conflict management

No doubt you have connected the dots and recognize that the tendencies identified above are more inherent in females than males.

Conclusion

I am not promoting an immediate palace revolt, but what I am suggesting is that those legal departments and law firms who actively promote women into leadership roles to address the problems facing them are more likely to achieve long term solutions than not. A side benefit from doing so is that these organizations also create developmental opportunities for leadership skills and avoid succession “holes”.

¹ [Leadership and the Sexes: Using Gender Science to Create Success in Business \(n.d.\).](#)

² Ibid

³ Ibid

⁴ Ibid

⁵ Ibid

⁶ Ibid

Comments or Questions?

Copyright © Applied Strategies Inc.



Print PDF Version