

ENLIGHTENED POWER

HOW **WOMEN** ARE
TRANSFORMING THE
PRACTICE OF
LEADERSHIP

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Helen E. Fisher, Ph.D., has written extensively on gender differences in the brain and behavior; the evolution of human sexuality; and the future of men, women, business, sex, and family life in the twenty-first century. The *New York Times Book Review* selected her book, *The First Sex: The Natural Talents of Women and How They Are Changing the World*, as a Notable Book of 1999. She currently serves as research professor at the Center for

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In this chapter, Helen explores how women's "web thinking," intuition, mental flexibility, long-term planning, creativity, imagination and verbal and social skills—as well as their different views of power—create undeniable win-win strategies in business.

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THE NATURAL LEADERSHIP TALENTS OF WOMEN

Helen E. Fisher

“If ever the world sees a time when women shall come together purely and simply for the benefit and good of mankind, it will be a power such as the world has never known.”¹ Nineteenth-century poet Matthew Arnold believed that women can change the world. He was prophetic. At this critical time in history, many are seeking alternatives to the traditional command-and-control models of leadership. This chapter describes some of the biological underpinnings of women’s natural leadership talents. Myriad diverse factors contribute to leadership performance in both women and men, including an individual’s personality traits, thinking and feeling styles, values, motivations, childhood experiences, and cultural milieu. Nevertheless, a great deal of scientific evidence has now demonstrated that in some respects the sexes are, *on average*, not alike.

No wonder. For millions of years, men and women did different jobs, tasks that required different skills. As natural selection weeded out less able workers, time carved differences in the male and female brain. No two human beings are alike. Countless cultural forces influence how men and women think and act. And each one of us is an elaborate mix of both male and female traits. Yet, *on average*, each sex has its own range of abilities; each is a living archive of its distinctive past.

In my research, I have identified some talents that women express more regularly than men; aptitudes that stem, in part, from women’s brain architecture and hormones, skills that leadership

theorists now espouse as essential to leadership effectiveness.² These talents are not exclusive to women, of course, yet women display them more regularly than men.

Web Thinking: Women's Contextual View

One remarkable difference is (HF) the way that men and women tend to think. Psychologists report that when women cogitate, they gather details somewhat differently than men. Women integrate more details faster and arrange these bits of data into more complex patterns. As they make decisions, women tend to weigh more variables, consider more options, and see a wider array of possible solutions to a problem. Women tend to generalize, to synthesize, to take a broader, more holistic, more contextual perspective of any issue. (HF: please put the commas back in. They tend to think in webs of factors, not straight lines, so I coined a term for this broad, contextual, feminine way of reasoning: *web thinking*.)

Men are more likely to focus their attention on one thing at a time. They tend to compartmentalize relevant material, discard what they regard as extraneous data, and analyze information in a more linear, causal path. I call this male pattern of cogitation *step thinking*.

We are beginning to know how these capacities for web thinking and step thinking are created. The female brain has more nerve cables connecting the two brain hemispheres; the male brain is more compartmentalized, so sections operate more independently. Moreover, testosterone tends to focus one's attention. Women's lower levels of this hormone may contribute to their broader, more contextual view. Scientists even know the locations of some of the brain regions for these thinking processes. And some of the genes that construct these regions vary between the sexes. One gene, for example, is active in 50 percent of women and silenced in all men.

Women's proclivity for web thinking probably evolved millions of years ago when ancestral females needed to do many things at once to rear their young, whereas men's step thinking probably emerged as ancestral hunters focused on the pursuit of game. Both

web thinking and step thinking are still valuable, but in the contemporary business community, buzzwords include “depth of vision,” “breadth of vision,” and “systems thinking.” In this highly complex marketplace, a contextual view is a distinct asset. Women are built to employ this perspective. In fact, in one study of Fortune 500 companies, senior executives were asked to describe women’s most outstanding business contribution. Their consensus: women’s more varied, less conventional point of view.

Women’s web thinking provides them with other natural leadership qualities. According to social scientists and business analysts, women are better able to tolerate ambiguity—a trait that most likely stems from their ability to hold several things simultaneously in mind. And if I had to sum up the modern business environment in one word, I would call it . . . ambiguous. Women are well endowed for this indefinite business climate.

Women’s web thinking also enables them to exercise more intuition—and intuition plays a productive, if often unrecognized, role in managerial decision making. This mental capacity has been explained by psychologist Herbert Simon. He maintains that as people learn how to analyze the stock market, run a business, or follow a political issue, they begin to recognize the patterns involved and mentally organize these data into blocks of knowledge, a process Simon calls chunking. With time, more and more related patterns are chunked, and clusters of knowledge are stored in long-term memory. Then when a single detail of a complex situation appears, the experienced person can instantly recognize the larger design and predict outcomes that another must deduce with plodding sequential thought. Sherlock Holmes remarked of this, “From long habit, the train of thought ran so swiftly through my mind that I arrived at the conclusion without being consciously aware of the intermediate steps.”³ Women, on average, excel at this form of thought.

Also related to web thinking is long-term planning—the ability to assess multiple, complex scenarios and plot a long-term course. To my knowledge, no scholar has studied gender differences in long-term planning. However, some business analysts believe that women

are apt to think long term more regularly, whereas men are more likely to focus on the here and now. Women definitely use long-term strategies more regularly in their financial affairs. In fact, in a study of six thousand investors, three-quarters of the women had no short-term investment goals; the trading records of thirty-five thousand clients of a large brokerage firm showed that men traded 45 percent more often than women.

There is, most likely, a biological component to women's long-term approach. From studying patients with brain injuries, neuroscientists now know where in the brain long-term planning takes place. Women and men display some differences in the structure of these brain regions. So it is possible that women's brain architecture contributes to their tendency to plan long term. Women may have evolved the propensity to think long term to plan for their children's distant future. Today, however, this faculty predisposes women to see business issues from a longer perspective—an essential element of leadership.

Mental Flexibility

Women's brain architecture for web thinking has endowed them with another natural talent—mental flexibility. Mental flexibility is an essential trait of leadership in our dynamic global economy.

In a recent study of nine hundred managers at top U.S. corporations, researchers reported that “women's effectiveness as managers, leaders and teammates outstrips the abilities of their male counterparts in 28 out of 31 managerial skill areas.”⁴ Among these skills was “generating new ideas.” I suspect that the ability to generate new ideas is the product of women's mental flexibility, as well as yet another aspect of women's web thinking: imagination. What is imagination but the capacity to reach into the depths of one's stored knowledge, assemble chunks of data in new ways, examine these myriad combinations, and “suppose” how various arrangements might play out? All are aspects of web thinking—women's forte. John F. Kennedy once said, “We need men who can dream of things that never were.”⁵ We need the female mind as well.

Verbal Articulation: Words Are Women's Tools

Women have other skills that enable them to lead. An exceptional female talent is the ability to find the right word rapidly—basic articulation. As Mark Twain said, “The difference between the right word and the almost right word is the difference between lightening and the lightning bug.”⁶

Women's verbal skills begin to emerge in early childhood. Infant girls babble more than infant boys. They speak sooner, with longer utterances and more complex grammatical constructions. By age twelve, girls excel at grammar and spelling and at understanding and remembering what they read. Moreover, American women share this verbal fluency with women in Japan, Nepal, England, and every other country where these skills have been tested—most likely because women's verbal aptitudes are associated with gender differences in the brain, as well as the female hormone, estrogen. In fact, a woman's facility with words increases during the middle of the monthly menstrual cycle when estrogen levels peak.

Women are born to talk—a feminine acuity that probably evolved to enable ancestral women to comfort, cajole, and educate their little ones, chastise, even ostracize group members who failed to meet their responsibilities, reward those who did and maintain harmony in the community. Words were women's tools. Words still sway minds and hearts. And as contemporary women leaders have opportunities to express their “voices” in the workplace, their power will increase.

Executive Social Skills

Women have what scientists call “executive social skills.” From millennia of rearing prelinguistic babies, women have evolved a keener ability to pick up the nuances of posture and gesture, read complex emotions in faces, and hear slight changes in tone of voice. Women, on average, have a better sense of taste, touch, smell, and hearing. They see better in the dark, have better peripheral vision, and

remember more objects in the room or landscape. As novelist Sarah Orne Jewett remarked, “Tact is, after all, a kind of mind reading.”⁷ With these skills, women are built to read minds. In fact, several of these “people skills” are associated with the female hormone, estrogen. So it’s not surprising that women already hold over 60 percent of jobs in the booming service sector of the world economy—another way they lead.

Networking, Collaboration, and Empathy

Along with women’s executive social skills are their remarkable facilities for networking, collaboration, empathy, inclusion, and sharing power. Men tend to cast themselves within hierarchies and view power as rank and status; women, on the other hand, form cliques and regard power as an egalitarian network of supportive connections. These traits have also been linked with hormones. When birds and mammals are injected with the predominantly male hormone, testosterone, they begin to fight for rank; infusions of estrogen tend to produce nurturing and connecting behaviors instead. These feminine dispositions to work in egalitarian teams, network, and support others were unquestionably vital to ancestral women who needed to support one another and their children. Today these traits are still more impressive contributions to the contemporary business environment.

The Coming Collaborative Society

Web thinking, mental flexibility, the ability to embrace ambiguity, intuition, imagination, a penchant for long-term planning, verbal acuity, executive social skills, the capacity to collaborate, and empathy are all essential leadership traits in the new global economy. But this is not to suggest that women will run the world. Many men display these traits to a considerable degree. Moreover, men have a host of other skills that make them natural leaders as well. Men are, *on average*, superior at all sorts of spacial and engineering skills, gifts

associated with testosterone. Using these capabilities, men have long been building our “high-tech” society, vastly improving human health and welfare.

Men and women are like two feet—they need each other to get ahead. Nevertheless, the world is changing in ways that can profit from women’s skills *as well as those of men*. Today, the business services and health care industries, the media, the law, not-for-profit organizations, and service professions are all burgeoning. All can benefit from women’s natural talents.

Indeed, the business world has begun to feel the impact of women’s leadership skills. As educated women become influential in offices of all kinds around the world, they are spreading their taste for cooperation, flexibility, and egalitarian team playing, as well as providing a broader perspective and new ideas. On television, women have supplied more sensitive depictions of women, more ethnic and age diversity, more visual and performance arts, more programming for children, and a broader, more contextual perspective on many issues. Women’s faculty for language and appetite for complexity are also enriching what we read in newspapers, magazines, and books.

With their “people skills” and imagination, women have begun to provide all sorts of professional services that bring comfort and novelty to our work and leisure hours. Women bring compassion, patience, team playing, and a broader perspective to hands-on healing. They offer creativity in the classroom. And because women tend to have different views on child abuse, sexual harassment, abortion, and criminality in general, women in the law are enlarging our view of justice.

With their influential role in not-for-profit organizations, women are improving the welfare of women, children, minorities, the elderly, and the disabled and disadvantaged, as well as the environment. They are gradually making a difference in government. And with their votes, women are more prominently placing the issues of education, health, child care, poverty, and the environment on the national and international agenda.

Women are also changing family life. Marriage is undergoing a reformation. The traditional patriarchal family headed by the male is metamorphosing into new family forms. Most important, more couples are forming what sociologists call “companionate marriages” or “peer marriages,” marriages between economic and social equals.

Peer marriages are not new. Throughout deep history, women commuted to work to gather fruits and vegetables, contributing 60 to 80 percent of the evening meal. In hunting-gathering societies, the double-income family was the rule. Men and women were economic, social, and sexual equals. When our forebears settled down to farm, women lost much of their economic and social power. But today we are returning to our original ancestral lifestyle. The twenty-first century may be the first in the modern era to see the sexes live as their forebears lived a million years ago: as equals. We are inching toward a collaborative society, a global culture in which the merits of both men and women are becoming understood, valued, and employed.

Albert Einstein once said, “The significant problems we face today cannot be solved by the same level of thinking that created them.”⁸ Women bring a different way of thinking; a cooperative spirit; a gift for “reading” people; patience; empathy; networking abilities; negotiating skills; a drive to nurture children, kin, business connections and the local and world community; an interest in ethnic diversity and education; a keen imagination; a win-win attitude; mental flexibility; an ability to embrace ambiguity; and the predisposition to examine complex social, environmental, and political issues with a broad, contextual, long-term view. As the female mind becomes unleashed on our modern world, societies will benefit—even in lands where it is currently shackled.