Valuing Gender Diversity

Great Minds think unalike - which is why we need both men and women in the workplace

Interview Recorded December 2008
With Barbara Annis

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Shelley: Hello, everybody. It’s Shelley Holmes here and welcome to our podcast today.

Today we have with us Barbara Annis, from Barbara Annis and Associates, who are dedicated to bringing the latest research and thinking on gender diversity and inclusiveness into the workplace.

Barbara is recognized as one of the world’s leading gender specialists. The work that her and her team offers is a fascinating and practical guide to how gender differences at work lead to misunderstandings and how to avoid that so that you can positively impact your bottom lines.

So, welcome Barbara. It’s a great honor to have to today.

Barbara: Thank you. My pleasure.

Shelley: Barbara, I read on your website that there are three trends converging:

✓ a new generation of business leaders,

✓ a new value system, and

✓ a new client mindset.

That’s certainly something I’m sure all our listeners today would recognize.
Would you like to speak to that for us?

Barbara: Sure, one of the things that we focus on and have focused on in the last 22 years is, how can you take the lens of those three trends, and really look at building gender intelligence.

And, what we find is that leadership and business minds are shifting. The new generation of leaders are really valuing what we call a more female-centric value system.

What I mean by that is, that is that often corporations and companies were very much focused on, “Let’s just get to the destination no matter what. We’ve got to get the results every quarter, etc. Let’s just get there”.

And I see a value system changing where both men and women in the young generation, value the journey to achieve the destination. Sometimes, even more important than the destination is, “How do I experience working here. How do I feel about working here?”

So that’s some of the emerging shifts that we see.

Of course the client mindset that we see is that clients, actually even globally, but certainly in North America, Europe, and, I believe Australia, are looking for gender balance. They are looking for how to understand, how to be gender intelligent in markets, how we reach our markets.
Also, how do we advance and retain both men and women within our companies?

Shelley: Great. Yeah. It’s wonderful that it’s moving along that way, isn’t it?

Barbara: Yes, I have to say when I first started 22 years ago I thought it would take about five years to get there. [Laughs] But, it’s taken a little longer, but we are definitely getting there.

I even see it in the new upcoming administration here in terms of the president-elect. I see some of that intelligence being put to the test.

Shelley: Yes. It’s fantastic. OK, in your first book, “Same Words, Different Language,” you reveal the top challenges men and women experience with the opposite sex at work, which might be part of the reason for that delay between the five years and the 22 odd years.

Barbara: Yeah. Go ahead.

Shelley: [Laughing] Would you like to share with our High Performance Leaders today your experience in that?

Barbara: You know, it’s interesting, because it was a compilation of 3,000 workshops that we had done. We start with the workshop and we don’t put any thing in men and women’s minds. We just ask them a simple question.
Men in one room, women in another room. And we ask them, what are the challenges you experience working with the other gender?

And these are the themes that come up in every single... It doesn’t matter where we are, we hear these themes. As you will hear them, they are actually rooted in misinterpretation of gender differences.

So, the number one, that men feel and experience, is that they have to be careful. When they work with women in the workplace, they find that they can’t be as straight up, and forward, and provide critical feedback, etc. So they soft-pedal some of those things a bit, in terms of being cautious.

So, that’s one of the top, top challenges the men say all the time, which is sometimes a surprise to women. The other one is men feel confused.

They don’t know what the rules are.

The rules seem to change.

Not only do they change, from day to day, but they seem to even change from woman to woman. So, it gets quite confusing, because men tend to relate in the workplace to just: “Let me find out what the rules are and I’ll abide by them”. You know, just give me the things to do and I’ll do them, right?

Often, that can create the sense of confusion, if that shifts, or if there is lack of clarity around that.
And, the last one that I would like to talk about is, men literally feel blamed for breathing.

And, what I mean by that is that they are blamed for their differences. There’s a sense when we look at gender, when we look at advancing and retaining women, the way we frame it, how we say, “It’s a male dominated paradigm” (or something like that), it lands for men as blame.

So, they don’t feel they can be part of the solution. And, that’s another challenge that we need to overcome.

**Shelley:** And what about the woman? What’s the three things that females experience? The three challenges.

**Barbara:** Well, women say and I should also say, that when the men and women are in separate rooms, men, will have between one to three flip charts, and women will have between 12 to 27 [Laughs] when we ask this question.

They have a lot more to say about this. But, let me give you just the top three.

Number one is, women still feel, today, excluded. They feel excluded from the real meeting, after the meeting, where they can learn and contribute. There still is that sense “I’m not quite a part of it”. Also, in some cross networking and cross mentoring, women don’t quite feel a part of that sometimes.
The second top challenge, that women experience is, they feel dismissed. Now, that sometimes can happen in how we language things, which we probably will cover later on.

In the book, I quote Madeleine Albright, who says, “I’m in these board room meetings with all these men, and I’ll say something that isn’t heard, and three or four chairs down, a man will restate it and it’s brilliant.”

So, that’s a sense of feeling … a sense of dismissed. And so, if you experience that as a woman, feeling that sense of exclusion, and being dismissed, you end up adopting behaviors in order to fit in. We call it “one of the boys” or “one of the guys.”

And, we call that, the “third sex”, those women who take on extreme male behavior, in order to navigate the corporate culture, and that’s called the third sex. Women feel that, that’s a challenge, that they have to operate more like a man.

Shelley: Actually I would have say I would be one of those that was very guilty of that early in my career.

Barbara: I’m a recovered third sex, myself. I understand what you mean.

Shelley: This fascinates me. When you bring the groups back together after doing those flip charts, how do you bridge for them the understanding of those challenges?
Barbara: Well, that’s where we begin to talk about, these are misinterpretations of differences. That the reason that they are pervasive, and that they can experience them so readily, and they keep coming up, is the fact that we don’t understand how these differences actually play out.

And once we understand that, then we go into some of the brain based differences and the communication differences, and then we look back at those challenges. I say, “Now with this new information, let’s look at the challenges you articulated when we first started, and do they still exist?”

They start falling off the list. The literally start falling off the list.

Shelley: All right. Fantastic. You talked about the brain based differences. I was reading a book just recently called “His Brain, Her Brain” by Barb and Walt Larimore. The book just fascinated me. It was about husband and wife relationships and I could see its context into the workplace.

They talked about the actual neuroscience research, about the differences in brain physiology between men and women. I see that you have recently released a book, “Leadership and the Sexes” based on the workplace, which I think is fantastic.

So do you want to share some of your insights that you have in the book?
Barbara: Actually the book, “Leadership and the Sexes” is based on the neuroscience that covers over one million people. So, a lot of people in 30 countries and all continents. We worked with neuroscientists for the last 16 years and they are quoted obviously in the book.

But, some interesting themes around how men and women perceive things, how they problem solve, how we communicate, how we lead and it’s actually brain based behaviors.

There’s many more connections in women’s brains, around emotional centers of the brain, which means women can communicate emotions, and communicate their experience more readily.

It’s harder for men to do that, because they don’t have as many connections, as an example. And, another one is our memory centers as women, we remember everything. We typically retain more complex information and more memory information.

So, I always use the example when he comes home late, we remember all the earlier similar instances when he was late, dating back to the first day that we met him. That’s just something that we can very readily do.

Shelley: Can you talk a little bit more about that? I’m absolutely fascinated by it.
Barbara: Yeah. Some of the hard wiring is quite interesting to me versus what we call the soft science. You know, where we’re kind of socialized to be different. There really is, in the neurobiology of the hard wiring science differences, some interesting things.

One that shows up is what we call “brain at rest.”

And women’s brains at rest, believe it or not, there’s a slide here that demonstrates that. It’s actually as active as men’s are when they are working on problems.

So if you look at the slide here, this is a cut of a resting female brain and a resting male brain. You can see that there’s a lot more going on in the resting female brain than the male.

I have to tell you, I wish I had that male brain.
I speak to a lot of audiences, gender mixed, and I ask the women to give me a show of hands, and say, “When you fall asleep, with things that you are concerned or problems, etc., do you actually wake up with a list of solutions?” And they all put their hand up.

I ask, “How many of the men can do that?” You get two or three hands. But that’s about it. The rest say, oh, I’m pretty well sleeping.

[Laughs]

And, then I’ll ask the women, “How many women have ever asked a man, ‘What are you thinking?’” And they laugh of course, because they will answer it, “Yeah, sure I’ve asked that”.

What does he say? And they’ll say, “Nothing”.

I said, “Actually men can literally think about nothing. The way men de-stress is literally to take that kind of time out, lie on the couch, click the channels, whatever.”

It’s a way men de-stress, through not talking, taking time out, what we call zoning out. That’s part of their healing process from stress.

For women it’s the exact opposite. We need to de-stress through verbal means. We need to share the situation, vent out. That’s how we get rid of some of that stress.

So another fundamental gender difference.
Shelley: It just brings to mind why I struggle so to meditate. The brain just doesn’t seem to want to quit. It’s amazing.


Shelley: So, these brain differences can lead to men and women communicating differently and problem solving. Do you want to talk to firstly the communicating differently - how that shows up in the workplace?

Barbara: In our workshops we do what we call ‘How men listen, How women listen’. From the “Same Words, Different Language.” And we ask and I’ll give an example. We have literally 220 statements. Not that we use them all.

We see different reactions to the same statement that men and women have. So one, for example, one that stands out in my head right now is the typical one we use all the time at work and at home, “What do you think?”

And when men hear, ‘What do you think?’ What they are actually hearing is that I’m being asked to make a decision. I’m being asked for closure. Make a decision or offer my opinion and I think this, close the conversation.

Shelley: Yeah, we’re done.

Barbara: For men, yeah that’s it. Off the list, right? And for women it’s often the exact opposite. It’s an opening to a conversation of starting a dialog or sharing my thoughts and interactions. So it often can get very misinterpreted.
So, when women say, ‘What do you think’, to a man and he goes, well, I just think you should do this. She thinks, “Well obviously, he doesn’t care. He doesn’t want to discuss it. He just wants to get me out of his office, and just go and do what he thinks I should do, when I already know what I should do. I just wanted to kind of collaborate and discuss it.”

So that’s some of the gender differences. The opposite obviously, is men might think that we don’t have an opinion, when we ask that. When we actually do have an opinion.

**Shelley:** Or, why are you wasting my time wanting to discuss this, if you have decided?

**Barbara:** I know. It really is a different value in terms of how we value conversation.

**Shelley:** I’m sure there are some people sitting listening now saying, yeah, but I’m a female and I think that way. What’s your views on that?

**Barbara:** Well, neuroscientists say that up to 20% of us, and I’m not sure it’s 20%, but we’ll stay with this, up to 20% of us have what is called, my co-author Michael Gurian has coined the term called “bridge brains.”

What that means is that a brain... If I had a bridge brain I would have more of a propensity for male brain versus female brain. I actually thought believe it or not, that I had a bridge brain because
I was in management at Sony and I was the only woman. I took on that third sex behavior. So I literally thought that I had that brain.

But I actually had it tested and I was very wrong. But I had adapted myself in the workplace to behave like that.

Shelley: That’s interesting because I was thinking the same thing. I was thinking I think I’ve got a bridge brain. But now that you have said that [Laughs] maybe I have adapted. Maybe that’s true for many females in the workplace and true for males as well that they are adapting and…

Barbara: That’s right. We adapt. It’s called adaptive behavior. But, the way you can tell, is that if you are different in your personal life than you are in your business life and I was.

Certainly, I was… and of course, I also had a brain scan. So that helps a lot, too.

Shelley: Sure. That would have been an interesting experience.

Barbara: It really was. Yeah. It was fascinating.

Shelley: so in terms of problem solving in the workplace, how might that show up in differences between the genders?

Barbara: Literally, when you see male and female brain scans go through and I actually went through the University of Pennsylvania to observe this. So, you had these male and female subjects who were doing an exercise in problem solving. The way men tended to
tackle the problem, through their brain, was by what we call “focusing in.”

So it was focusing in with solving critically. So they had a very unifocal approach to it.

And women it was the opposite. They tended to focus out. What we call “web like thinking.” They make connections. They interconnected their memory. They reviewed it as a larger context.

For example, if you make a decision, men will weight the pros and cons of the decision. Women tend to weigh the consequential part of the decision. Well, if we make this decision, how will it affect over here, over here, over here.

Imagine if we had that on Wall Street. I’m serious. If we seriously had differences and different perspectives and put interconnected memory and consequential thinking into some of those decisions that were being made, maybe we would have a different outcome, who knows.

Anyway, it’s a common difference in how we problem solve and make decisions.

Shelley: So, when people are in the workplace, how do you teach them to make that bridge so that they are grabbing the best of what the females have to offer and the best of what the males have to offer, in terms of looking at those sorts of solutions?
Barbara: Well, the wonderful thing about the science side of it is that, first of all it takes the blame out of it. And it takes this mindset of sameness out of it.

I call it the “culture of sameness” versus the “culture of differences.” I call it the shifting from “great minds think alike” to “great minds think unalike.” So once you have shifted that, you are able to really say, hey you look at it this way. I look at it that way. Right, we have the best solutions when we have that diversity of thinking and approach in enriching how we make decisions and then enriching how we problems solve.

I have coached personally 54 CEOs in Fortune 500. The CEOs who get it, they will actively seek out and they mostly have men, obviously, in Fortune 500, they will actively seek out women’s perspective. They actually say it helps them a lot. To think about they call it “connecting the dots,” “thinking out of the box.”

Those are some of the things. Once you test it and try it I think you will find it incredibly beneficial.

Shelley: That’s great. So, what would be your top three tips to help. Let’s start with the females. Top three tips to help females communicate more effectively and interact more effectively with their male counterparts?

Barbara: I think the first message, there is an assumption that it is the men who don’t get it and the men who have to learn around some of these gender intelligent issues.
I think that it’s first to recognize that we both have to learn. Both genders, there are things to learn and to recognize that it’s not about blame, but really understanding some of these differences.

And when it comes to communication, I would really recommend that you explore some of these common themes in communications, so you can avoid some of those challenges that women often face in the workplace, and frame your conversations in such a way, that you are explicit about what you intend out of the conversation.

So, for example, as we use, ‘What do you think?’ You may want to frame something up front and say, “I’m not here for you to tell me what to do. I’m clear about what decision I need to make. I just would appreciate that we explore it and have a discussion for five minutes” that kind of thing.

That kind of frames the intention before. And the third tip, I would say is, don’t forget the more you know, the more you understand, the more powerful and effective you will be. And really, ask yourself the question, how can I be most effective and powerful in speaking to a male paradigm?

That is what we are dealing with predominantly.

Shelley: Great. OK. And for men, top three tips for men to communicate more effectively with their female counterparts?

Barbara: I would same thing around recognizing the strategies, around really recognizing the standard differences, and you will
begin to see the amazing strength in those differences. That actually by including the different perspective women bring, is actually creating a bigger win.

That would be one.

And the second, and I say this every time I do a keynote or a workshop, is that this is not about cookie cutters. We really don’t come up exactly this way man, and this way, woman. So, be careful about making more assumptions. Be aware of the differences but don’t make assumptions.

Stand in the women’s shoes and no assumptions.

And, the third, which men actually really love, I was doing a session for an investment firm, a half day session in Arizona. They said, ‘We’re just about to walk out here - networking with women and women clients. We have this evening dinner thing what’s the one thing we ought to do to really be gender intelligent?’

And I said, shift the context from being interesting to being interested. And email me and let me know if that worked for you. I didn’t get a hundred email responses, but I got almost 20 saying I’m doing this from now on. I could not believe how effective that was, just that one tip. Try that. The men who are listening, try that on in your personal life and in your professional life.

Shelley: Wow. OK. We were talking briefly before and you mentioned a friend of yours, that was on a date with somebody that was talking more about himself. Talk to that a little bit,
because I think that puts that whole last tip right into context, for men as well.

Barbara: Yeah. I’ll change her name to Sandy, but she’s a very accomplished CEO out of San Francisco. She’s been divorced for many years. She was telling me, that she was dating somebody back from college and she had known him for years and he’s a really wonderful guy, very smart. He’s a lawyer, very accomplished.

She said, “I’m bored stiff when I go out on dates with him”.

And I said, “Well, what’s the one thing that is creating this boredom for you?”

And, she said, “He’s always talking about himself”.

So back to this tip. And I said, “Maybe you ought to just have him click on a webinar or something when I talk about the distinction of being interested versus being interesting. That might shift things for you”.

And she said, “Oh, if he just asked me two questions at dinner time, that would make the world of difference.” That’s one thing that women really love, is for men to capture the attention.

Shelley: Yes. Fantastic. You know, it’s just such commonsense stuff really when you stop and think, but none of us stop and think about it do we?

Barbara: No. I think it is the stop and think and ask and reflect are the key.
Shelley: Now Barbara, I know that you like to sound a warning in your workshops to people that says a little knowledge in this area can be dangerous. Can you let our listeners know what to look out for in terms of that?

Barbara: Well, I certainly think that back to what I said is we could go in and make stereotypical assumptions, for some of these differences. So, I think it would be safe to say there is a continuum between men and women. Not all men fit in this category and not all women fit in that category.

And there are of course men who have more feminine kind of approaches and values and vice versa. So, I think the key is to understand that there are some hard wired differences. They are very useful to be aware of. But update your stereotypes and just say, he speaks, I’ve got to speak this way. There’s she speak I have to speak that way.

I think if you try it on, I think you will find a tremendous value.

Shelley: I guess bottom line is here is the individual standing in front of me, what does this individual want from me?

Barbara: Exactly.

Shelley: How do I flex my style slightly to communicate more effectively, taking responsibility for yourself, I like to say.

Barbara: And, I think the last thing that I want to say is also we were brought up in a very egalitarian way. If I do this for you, I must do this for him, etc., kind of thing. And egalitarian sometimes
means sameness, or means equality, which means treating people the same. And I think if you could walk away with saying, there’s some differences here.

So treating people as I would like to be treated might be a wrong premise. Maybe I need to shift my context to treating people as they would like to be treated.

**Shelley:** ... to be treated, yeah. I think that’s great. One of the themes that runs through my entire website is the only person you can change is you.

**Barbara:** Absolutely.

**Shelley:** And that’s the whole thing is you don’t expect the other person to change for you to communicate more effectively with you. Look at their world and their way, and say to yourself “OK, how do I flex a little bit so that we get a better result together here”.

**Barbara:** Absolutely. And I don’t know about you, but I have asked women over the last 22 years, ‘how many women have ever tried to change a man? And how many women were successful?’ I have yet to see a ...

**Shelley:** ... hand go up. [Laughs]

**Barbara:** So it’s very consistent with your message.

**Shelley:** Yeah, absolutely. Well, Barbara time is just flown. I’m sure there’s much more we could talk about. In fact, I know you do work around... you’ve got a model around five states of integrity, and I’d
love to do an interview with you about that in the future. It seems the model is fascinating.

**Barbara:** I would be absolutely delighted to do that.

**Shelley:** So if anyone listening in today wants to get onto either of your books: “Leadership and the Sexes” or “Same Words, Different Language,” or onto your website and find out about the type of innovative solutions you can offer to people, because I know that you do things in the US, but you have also got other ways of getting the information out to people in other countries around gender diversity and inclusiveness.

How can they find you?

**Barbara:** Well they can either Google me which will link into the website or they can go to our website which is the [www.genderintelligence.com](http://www.genderintelligence.com)

**Shelley:** Right. And I’ll have all those links on the website along with a slide where Barbara has spoke to the physiology so you can actually see the differences in the brain. So come across to [leadership-and-motivation-training.com](http://leadership-and-motivation-training.com) and you’ll be able to pick up those, plus some links straight through to Barbara’s website.

Well, we’ve just added another tool to your high performance leadership toolbox. Ensuring that you are tapping into, and making the best use of the rich diversity of people in your business, sets you and them, on the path to success.
So this is Shelley saying goodbye for now until we come together again, to Make a Dent in the universe you were meant to.
About Shelley Holmes

Using tools, tips, ideas and strategies that help them to be really clear about what is ‘success critical’ and how to get there fast, Shelley guides leaders to flourish as they live, love and lead at a remarkable level .... making the dent in the universe they are destined to.

For several years, Shelley was a key leader in a High-performance Organization (that had national and international recognition). It is this real-world experience that underpins and brings to life the theory and insights gained, from her deep study of high-performance leadership.

Around the globe, she has worked with organizations (with total revenues in excess of $116 billion) and supports thousands of individual leaders through, coaching, consulting, workshops, webinars, audio programs and the Make A Dent Leadership website (which has over 5,000 visitors per day).

Shelley’s Philosophy...

Whether you like it or not, the way that you show up at work defines you as a human being.

On grand and small scales, the way you interact with others, the products and services you are a part of delivering, all roll together to become a part of the legacy that you leave behind. The way you deal with others, the things you teach them, that cause them to grow, and become a better version of themselves .... as individuals, work colleagues, leaders, and parents ... now that defines who you are!
There are hundreds of resources like this article at Make A Dent Leadership where you can join our community of leaders who are focusing on being inspired and inspiring and making their dent in the universe.

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