
Coaching for Transformation: Diversity, Power and Gender

by Dr Sunny Stout Rostron

“Diversity is about difference: in equality, power, and worldview”

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Diversity and power

Diversity is a universal theme. However, to truly honour diversity requires genuinely diverse thinking with an appreciation for difference. The crucial question is, “who has the power?” Any form of power exacerbates difference and influences how we perceive and react to another’s behaviour. This is true in any area of life, and nowhere more so than in the business context, specifically due to the hierarchical nature of organisational systems.

Power relations not only have deep roots in our cultural matrix – our shared ways of doing things, of making sense of the world – but they can often also inform our personal views, choices, and actions. In a business or institutional environment, the coach needs to become aware of and manage their own responses to questions of diversity, before they can begin to coach a client on similar issues.

I have been involved with companies where diversity-related problems seemed intractable. In one instance, although colleagues from different cultures within the same organisation finally felt that they had the freedom to talk openly, their sense of resentment, even bitterness, came down to the fact that one individual in a team would often talk socially, without thinking, in a language that was not easy for other colleagues – even though they could easily have switched to a language which everyone understood. In another instance, a team coaching session had gone well unblocking many misunderstandings within an organisation, but it nearly blew up into a walk-out at lunch time. The food on offer was common daily fare for one social group, but not familiar to the minority of delegates, who felt they were being slighted.

Often, it isn’t overt attitudes or easily identifiable prejudices that undermine the smooth running of a business. It is the commonplace, everyday, unconscious assumptions – social, linguistic, culinary – that constantly make the minority feel that the majority bulldoze over their personal feelings and collective sensibilities.

Such unconscious attitudes are, mostly, the privilege of power. In many ways diversity is, ultimately, about power and the lack of power. In another instance, I coached a team at a major organisation where all the senior women managers were about to leave. They were of different ethnic backgrounds, languages and ages; the only common factor among them was that they were women. It soon became clear that the male culture in that company – and this included those men

previously disadvantaged under apartheid – tolerated an aggressive and even open disrespect for women. This is just another manifestation of the unthinking exercise of power.

Gender equality

We know that many women and men diverge in interests, abilities and desires. But is this a problem that should be fixed? (Pinker, 2008:255).

Some years ago when I was facilitating a programme in London, I walked into the conference room and heard: “Oh my goodness, look ... it’s a woman”, I heard one of the executives whisper behind my back to a colleague. “Good morning everyone”, I said with a smile, choosing to ignore this rather coarse chauvinism. “And, even worse, she’s a bloody American”, he groaned.

It was not clear whether this man, highly placed in his organisation, intended me to overhear his comments. He probably did. Like many competitive executives who climb the corporate ladder, he was almost certainly flexing his muscles and trying to intimidate me from the outset. Instead, however, he’d given himself away. So, rather than confront such prejudice openly, I now knew who was likely to be somewhat difficult during the seminar. It would be my job to demonstrate that his assumptions were entirely misplaced, and were in all likelihood one of the reasons why his organisation was experiencing personnel difficulties and considerable internal conflict. And so it proved.

In my work, this type of comment frequently reminds me of the assumptions that we all constantly make upon meeting another person. It is this sensitivity to diversity that coaches need to be acutely aware of at all times – and they can do so only by beginning to work on their own unconscious or unquestioned attitudes and personal responses first.

South Africa is regarded as one of the most progressive countries in terms of gender representation. Gender equality is written into the South African Constitution. Nevertheless, “Women are still treated as lesser beings in the name of culture. They are considered minors, possessions of their patriarchal families in many settings, and they can be denied the right to inherit. Pride in the distinctiveness of African customs is cited as a reason for continuing practices that are in conflict with our constitution” (Ramphela, 2008:75).

In addition, South Africa is reputed to have one of the highest incidences of violence against women in the world, including rape. In general, most women do not want to be treated differently. What they want is choice and equal opportunity, equal responsibility and equal pay (Janse van Rensburg, 2009:158).

Language and linguistic patterns

As a socio-linguist Tannen (1995) discusses how linguistic style determines our view of people and ideas, and how our assumptions can be mistaken. She explains that there is a visible difference between the way men and women communicate. We assign meaning to linguistic behaviours, such as apologising, questioning, being direct or indirect, and in the process we can easily misjudge others. In the fast-changing business world, success often depends on recognising good ideas and implementing them. However, should an executive miss an idea because it was not voiced confidently enough, it could have serious repercussions for the business.

As coaches, we should be aware of our own linguistic behaviour when coaching executives, and be able to help them to become observant, recognising their own and their team's style and behaviour. Nancy Kline, in her research into the Thinking Environment[®], talks about the messages that are embedded within gender cultures.

Women are socialised to play the role of a *thinking partner*, but not that of an independent *thinker*. The liberating messages in women's culture are that: "it is good to draw out the best in everyone, to share ideas, to re-enforce another's self esteem by championing their excellence; to dignify others by listening; to encourage difference; to ask questions, and to recognise feelings. Women are most often encouraged to develop an *external* thinking environment for others" (Kline, 2005).

The limiting messages in women's culture are that: "women cannot think; women are too emotional; men are more important than women; women should sacrifice their own thinking and support men's thinking; women are nothing without a man". This discourages women from playing the role of *thinker*, and from creating an *internal* thinking environment for themselves (Kline, 2005).

According to Kline's research, men are socialised to play the role of *thinker*, but not of the *thinking partner*. The liberating messages in men's culture are that: "men are important – therefore their thinking matters; men will think about the hard and advanced issues; men should take up space and be listened to; men are inherently more intelligent and logical than women – i.e. men are encouraged to develop an *internal* thinking environment" (Kline, 2005).

According to Kline, the limiting messages in men's culture are that: real men don't do feelings; listening signals weakness and stupidity; asking questions erodes your power base; success is defined as winning; criticism is the only road to real improvement. This discourages men from playing the Thinking Partner role, from creating an *external* thinking environment for others (Kline, 2005).

In the workplace, for diversity to be achieved, men and women need to be encouraged to integrate the best of both gender cultures (Kline, 1999:95).

Communication styles

We also need to consider how men and women differ in their communication styles. Tannen's (1995) research indicates that men talk about "I" and women talk about "we". In US businesses, men's speaking style, as the majority voice, dominates. Women tend to be ignored and interrupted. Women in a business environment say "we" even when they do the work themselves. Pinker (2008) indicates that men tend to blame externally when something goes wrong, yet accept praise internally. Pinker indicates that women do the opposite, and are more inclined to attribute their success to chance and their failure to inability (Janse van Rensburg, 2009:159).

If we consider confidence, women tend to minimise their certainty and men their doubts. This may create the impression that women lack confidence. This can be due to their tone of voice, hesitancy in speech or use of language. Some of this, especially in South Africa, might be due to speaking in a second or third language. Pinker (2008) suggests that as women are more inclined to feel they must know everything before speaking, while men are often happy to know 50 per cent and fake the rest, women tend to ask more questions (Janse van Rensburg, 2009:159). Again, although not necessarily an indication of a lack of confidence, it could create that impression. Studies show that women are more likely to downplay their certainty and men more likely to minimise their doubts. One study provides evidence that, what comes across as lack of confidence on the part of women may actually reflect not one's actual level confidence but the desire not to seem boastful (Tannen, 1995:142). However, in business, and particularly in the USA, the style of interaction that is more common is the assertive style used among men (Janse van Rensburg, 2009:159).

Often men and women in the same position end up being paid unequally. Usually, we attribute this to gender discrimination and injustice, but there may be an alternate reason. Babcock and Laschever (2003) showed in several studies that women do not negotiate for more money. Even women trained in negotiation skills do not negotiate salaries and perks for themselves. Men tend to strongly negotiate on salary, position and authority; women are often more concerned about whether they are qualified enough to do the job (Janse van Rensburg, 2009:159).

Coaching women

Coaches need to take the differences between coaching men and women into account. Good coaches know that individuals often experience their situations and react to them differently according to their gender. It may be important to help women executives to move beyond stereotypical female behaviours, looking at developing boundary skills, finding life balance, developing their potential leadership skills, expanding their communication skills, learning how to manage conflict, redefining the goals for their career and understanding what opportunities are open for their role at work, as well as exploring entrepreneurial options.

"Women can transform the workplace by expressing, not giving up their personal values" (Peltier, 2001:188). However, women work from a range of limiting assumptions – not due only to their

own limited sense of their capabilities; men and women assume that the family is woman's highest priority; and these assumptions are reinforced by the culture of organisations.

In working with my women clients, these assumptions surface as well as their impact on women's self-belief and self-confidence to do the same job as a man. "It is absurd to put a woman down for having the very qualities that would send a man to the top" (Schwartz, 1989:69). The differences for women which can be explored with an executive coach are: communication style; task vs. relationship; image; taking credit; speaking up; and leadership style. All of these emerge time and again in the coaching conversations with my female clients.

Peltier lists some of the communication characteristics of women in the workplace; men and women use different communication styles. For example, women make requests or suggestions rather than making a direct injunction; some women apologise compulsively and unnecessarily; women say thank you as a way to sustain positive feelings in a relationship; women ask for an opinion as a way to show consideration for another; men and women may use praise and criticism differently; women use "trouble talk" as a form of rapport builder; women (some men do this) communicate indirectly and indirectness is confusing to others (Peltier, 2001:195-197).

On an individual level, many problems are fuelled by our own self-limiting assumptions. We see through the filters of our own worldview, as we are all products of our personal histories, language, culture, experience, education, gender and social conditioning. The business coach needs to see through many lenses: through those of the organisation, the individual executive being coached, and the society and community within which both operate – as well as understanding how their own limiting assumptions may prevent them from understanding other points of view.

My teaching, coaching and research have uncovered similar scenarios of difficulty for female executives. What is most helpful is to assist them with understanding the written and unwritten gender codes within their organisation and to help them decide what to do about the gender difficulties they face, particularly when they are power-oriented. Coaching can help women executives and leaders to:

1. Develop confidence.
2. Learn from their own excellence.
3. Take risks and tackle challenges.
4. Move beyond limiting beliefs.
5. Empower themselves, their teams and the organisation.

In conclusion

Homogeneity, or sameness, is not necessarily beneficial or healthy. The reality within society and at work today is that it is rich with difference – differences of culture, language, gender, education, politics, faith, thinking, and behaviour.

A feature of diversity is that people will only think for themselves when they know that they will be treated with interest and respect even if their ideas diverge from the norm, and that they will not experience reprisal from some sort of authority if they deviate from what is considered normal.

Most people will not think for themselves if their thinking is going to get them into trouble, and more importantly, we may not take the risk of diverging from our group and thinking for ourselves. Thinking environments need to be created so that individuals, teams and groups of any kind can be encouraged to think creatively or differently and to generate new ideas and feel safe if they are suggesting something against the status quo.

Too often, the discussion of diversity can take on a slightly patronising tone: one that subtly suggests we must be nice to people who are in some way different to us, graciously allowing them to sit at our table. Diversity, if it is to mean anything of real significance, must surely mean an absolute assumption and acceptance of equality. We need to operate from a foundation of really believing that people are created equal, with all of us beginning to develop an internal ease in the world of difference that we face everyday.

This article is adapted from the recently published, *Business Coaching Wisdom and Practice: Unlocking the Secrets of Business Coaching* (2009), by Sunny Stout Rostron with contributing author, Marti Janse van Rensburg. *Sunny Stout Rostron is the Founding President of COMENSA (Coaches and Mentors of South Africa); is on the Research Advisory Board for the Institute of Coaching at Harvard; and is a director of Manthano Institute of Learning (Pty) Ltd and Resolve Encounter Consulting (Pty) Ltd.*

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