▶ Continued from Page 10: Interview with an expert

Gender diversity at work

In an interview, management consultant and trainer Tammy Hughes from the USA shares insights on women in leadership positions and workplace gender differences, and reveals how companies can create a climate in which both genders can contribute their natural strengths at all levels of the organization.

Mrs. Hughes, what prevents women from taking positions of leadership?

First off, not everyone wants to assume a leadership role – and that's OK. Ultimately, it's up to each individual to pursue the career and life goals of his or her choice. However, organizations need to ask themselves why some roles might not appeal to a certain segment of their workforce. Women attempting to enter the upper echelons of a male-dominated company, for instance, are often surprised by the inherently competitive and hierarchical structures they find there. These gender differences can often feel like "culture shock," as typical male behaviors can be foreign to women, who are usually raised in a collaborative environment. The belief that they may have to "act more like a man" to be successful may discourage some women from pursuing management careers. Men, on the other hand, are often raised to seek out competition, which eases the transition to climbing the career ladder.

So, career choices are strongly influenced by upbringing?

That's definitely a factor, but not always the whole picture. Research also shows that young boys prefer toys associated with power, noise or speed, whereas girls tend to prefer toys associated with caring and nurturing. Though every rule has exceptions, it seems that a lot of gender-specific behavior is hard-wired into us. Later in life, this results in each gender having its own norms, customs, and rituals for talking, listening, and problem solving – a phenomenon we refer to as "gender culture." Neglecting to address these gender differences can lead to strained work relationships, misunderstandings, and even a hostile work environment.

How exactly do men and women differ from each other at work?

One example is communication. Men often use language to establish status or authority; women use it to create a close rapport. That's reflected in office e-mails, where men are often terse and to the point, and women tend to be more detailed and concerned with feelings. Generally, men also tend to be more goal oriented, and they favor finding a quick solution to a problem. Women focus on processes; they're more interested in how a goal will be achieved. Ultimately, both genders want to achieve the same results, but they have different internalized structures that determine how they go about it.

What needs to change so that more women will want to climb the career ladder?

Just as Deutsche Telekom employees try to see things from the customer's point of view, it's essential that both genders make a habit of looking at things from the perspective of the other. That way, they'll gain a better understanding of each other and work together more effectively. By doing so, we can also go a long way toward preventing or clarifying potential misunderstandings and creating a work environment where both genders can operate out of their strengths. Some tips to keep in mind when working across gender cultures: when speaking with women, men should avoid monopolizing conversations – and women should cut straight to the chase when conversing with men. By acknowledging, appreciating, and even valuing each other's differences, women, men, and the companies they work for can thrive – and fully leverage the strengths of their gender diversity.

This is Tammy Hughes

Tammy Hughes holds a bachelor's degree in applied arts and sciences and has provided management training on gender-related topics in the US and around the world for more than 18 years. The wife and mother of two young boys also helped develop the interactive "GenderSpeak" workshop series and is currently president of The Heim Group, a consulting firm that provides management and organizational development services. To learn more, visit the Heim Group website: http://www.heimgroup.com