Introduction

The purpose of this chapter is to review the contemporary literature relevant to gender as it affects coaching within organizational and institutional environments. While gender already encompasses a wide range of theory and research, as a coaching issue it is relatively new (Stout-Rostron and Wilkins, 2011) and yet executives lead and manage in environments with considerable gender complexities.

I approach this chapter from a variety of perspectives in terms of the contemporary literature available to us. Contemporary research shows us that working with gender in organizations is often about who has power and who doesn’t (Stout-Rostron, 2009, pp. 172–3). Gender, of course, refers to both men and women, and we will examine the current thinking on how men and women are socialized, the impact of organizational culture – and in what ways the dominant male organizational culture has affected the development of women in the workplace (Peltier, 2010, p. 192). Culture is our shared way of making sense of the world, informing our personal views, choices, and actions – and it is at this level of assumption that coaches need to work with their clients in order to understand how to manage gender diversity in the workplace (Marques Sampaio, 2009, p. 198).

This chapter focuses on academic and organizational research, peer reviewed journal articles, and bespoke models to explore gender diversity and gender coaching across five areas: defining gender; challenges which gender presents; wider research on the gender debate; coaching as a solution; and future research.

Defining Gender

The distinction between sex and gender was recognized in the 1960s in feminist and other critical accounts of women’s and men’s positions in society (Broadbridge and Hearn, 2008,
Coaching

Oakley (1972/1985) was one of the first to distinguish biological “sex” differences from “gender” as a set of socio-cultural constructions, identifying how what was often thought of as natural and biological was also social, cultural, historical, and political. However, some of the problems with the approaches in the 1960s and 1970s was with their cultural specificity, and relative lack of attention to power, change, and social structures (Broadbridge and Hearn, 2008, p. S40; Eichler, 1980).

Gatrell and Swan (2008) explore the background to the women’s rights movement and the influence of liberal feminism on the equal opportunities agenda. The history of women’s employment is positioned as a social issue within specific social contexts. Although formal workplace activism started in the 1960s and 1970s, the authors acknowledge that “women have always found ways to fight and resist discriminatory practices, individually and collectively” (Gatrell and Swan, 2008, p. 21). The theories of Marxist feminism, radical feminism, and patriarchy are considered as influences on our understanding of discrimination against women. Greer (1970/2006) and Friedan (1963) gave voice to feminist thinking on gender, work, and inequality. Radical feminism gave “a positive value to womanhood rather than supporting a notion of assimilating women into areas of activity with men” (Beasley, 1999, p. 54). Social and cultural perspectives are examined on how traditional stereotypes of masculinity and femininity have created the gendered division of labor at work, with particular emphasis on the discrimination of women with and without children (Gatrell and Swan, 2008, pp. 36–7).

During the 1970s and 1980s, the two dominant sets of literature on gender and management came from studies of gendered labor markets, “influenced by studies of political economy and by Marxist and socialist feminist work”, and writings on “women and management” (Broadbridge and Hearn, 2008, p. S41). Rosabeth Moss Kanter’s (1977) “extended case study of a large US corporation in Men and Women of the Corporation, significantly opened up the field, although Kanter stopped short of presenting a fully gendered account of power” (Broadbridge and Hearn, 2008, p. S41; Kanter, 1977).

By the late 1970s and 1980s, most relevant work was on gender divisions of labor, authority and hierarchy, and sexuality in management and organizations (Hearn and Parkin, 1983). With the move away from “women in management”, to “gender in management”, in 1986 Women in Management Review was renamed Gender in Management: An International Journal. In 1992, organizational theorist, Joan Acker set out to analyze gendered processes in organizations, describing how they intertwine with organizational culture, sexuality, and violations. A second journal, Gender, Work and Organization, was founded in 1994 due to the expansion of research in this area.

Butler (1990) argued that the sex-gender distinction is a socio-cultural construction. Although “the area of gender, organizations and management is now a recognized legitimate and important area,” and it is recognized that there are “key issues of gender power relations in academic organizations and academic management which need urgent attention,” gender “should not be isolated from other social divisions and oppressions, such as class or race” (Broadbridge and Hearn, 2008, pp. S38–40).

“The idea of ‘gender and gendering’, as opposed to ‘women’ in management as an analytic lens, means that the relationality between men and women, masculinity and femininity – the way they cannot be thought apart from each other – draws attention to the social construction of masculinity and femininity” (Gatrell and Swan, 2008, pp. 4–5). Gender, although a term widely used, finds “no common understanding of its meaning, even amongst feminist scholars” (Acker, 1992, p. 565). For most social theorists, gender is a social construction which means that “as for other social categories such as race, sexuality
and disability – gender is the result of human social processes, actions, language, thought and practices” (Gatrell and Swan, 2008, pp. 4). Gender is seen as a process, rather than as given traits or essences, with “gender actively produced in and through the workplace” (Gatrell and Swan, 2008, p. 4).

Further trends since the 1990s have been the recognition of the specific gendering of men in organizations and management. Collinson and Hearn (1994) sought to contribute to the growing interest in naming men as part of a critical analysis of gendered power relations in organizations, arguing for an approach which addresses the issue of “multiple masculinities”. Deborah Kolb (2009) highlights how the social construction of gender has generally changed the discourse from the concept of difference between men and women, to viewing gender as shifting complexities of identity shaped by the contexts in which “negotiation occurs”. She considers how shifting feminist perspectives on gender can be incorporated into our understanding of gender relations in negotiation theory, practice, and research (Kolb, 2009, p. 515).

Binary opposites which define gender

In Western cultures one of the key ways of making sense of the world is through binary oppositions. People construct meaning through the recognition of “opposites”, defining what something is by knowing what it isn’t: “Binary oppositions put the world into clearly defined categories ... between white and black ... masculine and feminine” (Marques Sampaio, 2009, pp. 189, 195–6). However, these “opposites” usually turn out to be based on unexamined assumptions about socially constructed categories, and human reality is much more complex than this kind of expedient simplification (Marques Sampaio, 2009, p. 195). A dualist view of gender (female/male, woman/man, feminine/masculine, femininity/masculinity, girls/boys) presents difficulties (Broadbridge and Hearn, 2008, p. S40; Richardson, 2007). This is because the division of experience into binary oppositions reflects a particular structure of power.

One side of this divide has traditionally been privileged (and often exercised that privilege) over the other: “Men (and masculinity) have traditionally been privileged over women (and femininity); whites over blacks; rich over poor” (Marques Sampaio, 2009, p. 196). In this sense, categories such as “masculine” and “feminine” are socially constructed; they depend on perceptions of gender which are contingent on the social or cultural beliefs of a particular society (see Abizadeh, 2001). In many societies, “characteristics such as assertiveness, initiative and leadership are seen as masculine, whereas obedience and a concern for the domestic sphere are seen as feminine qualities” (Marques Sampaio, 2009, p. 155). Gatrell and Swan (2008) examine the gendered binary of organizing the world, identifying how traditional stereotypes of masculinity and femininity have created the gendered division of labor at work, with particular emphasis on the discrimination of women with and without children (Gatrell and Swan, 2008, pp. 36–7).

To operate within an organizational context, human resources (HR), organizational development (OD) and coach practitioners must first work on themselves – learning from their own experience, developing self-awareness, and understanding the impact of their own limiting assumptions (Marques Sampaio, 2009, p. 198). This means being able to “see” through a multiplicity of lenses; in other words, not just our own individual perspective, but including the worldviews of our clients whose experience, education, background, hopes, and fears may be very different from our own (Stout-Rostron, 2009, p. 180).
Organizational culture and gender

All organizations create their own values, language, rituals, and ways of seeing the world (Peters and Waterman, 1982). Corporate culture can be defined as “a set of understandings or meaning shared by a group of people”, or “the rules for behavior in the organization” (Leimon et al., 2011 p. 53). Part of understanding organizational culture is to clarify the cultural knowledge and social processes that operate within an organization on a daily basis. With organizations operating almost as if they are mini-societies, culture emerges through the social interactions and negotiations of the members of that organization (Czarniawska-Joerges, 1992; Legge, 1987/1995).

There are belief systems in operation about the rights and wrongs of how to do things, and it is through these belief systems that power operates within a company (Janse van Rensburg, 2009, p. 214). These power structures create worldviews about hierarchy, identity, performance, relationships, diversity, gender, and ethnicity. Also, the position that an individual holds within an organization shapes their attitudes, their values, and their behavior (Halford and Leonard, 2001, p. 65).

Organizational culture is articulated through some of the less tangible aspects of organizational life, such as the attitudes, beliefs, and values – as well as the symbols, languages, and practices of an organization. Organizational culture includes a way of “creating meaning” within the organizational system, but also helps to give employees a sense of identity and direction. Research shows that companies who have strong cultures tend to be highly performance-oriented, with hierarchies that create both a structure of power and a way for management to achieve consensus and performance delivery (Leimon et al., 2011).

If women are to progress in their careers, it is essential that they understand corporate culture. Yet, “in many organizations, the culture is still based on a set of values and norms around the ‘white male heritage’ and women do not yet represent a critical mass … at the relevant level of management” (Leimon et al., 2011, p. 53). This is where coaching and well-trained practitioners have a key role to play.

Challenges Which Gender Presents

This section is an overview of the influence of cultural contexts on how gender issues in business are manifested and responded to by men and women, including historical and present challenges, and how these contexts need to be taken into account in coaching. In reviewing the available literature it is apparent that there are very few studies on gender coaching or gender diversity coaching. There are more studies on mentoring with an emphasis on gender.

Most contemporary coaching studies explore how and whether the coaching intervention works (Passmore and Fillery-Travis, 2011). The literature has explored the behaviors used by coaches (Passmore, 2011); what types of individuals make better coaches (Passmore and Fillery-Travis, 2010); issues including experience, gender, and personality (Passmore et al., 2010); the coaching relationship, and the interplay between coach and coachee (see, for example, De Haan, 2008).

The gender diversity literature over the decades has primarily covered the areas of:

- Gender diversity and diversity constructs in organizations
- Gender diversity issues in hiring
Gender Issues in Business Coaching

159

• The dynamics of diversity within business teams
• The effects of gender diversity on business performance
• Gender-based communication styles
• Gender differences in management and leadership styles
• Women shattering the “glass ceiling” to become corporate directors
• Corporate board gender diversity and stock performance
• Women directors and corporate social responsibility
• Gender equity in the upper levels of the sciences, health professions, the judiciary, and government
• Mentoring for gender equality and organizational change

The glass ceiling and gender disparity

The published literature suggests that coaching is one of the key strategies to help women break through the glass ceiling, a term coined in the 1960s to describe the “barrier which is transparent but impassable, so that women can see the top of the management hierarchy, but may not reach it” (Gatrell and Swan, 2008, p. 12). The glass ceiling is also described as the “unseen, yet unbreachable barrier that keeps minorities and women from rising to the upper rungs of the corporate ladder” (Federal Glass Ceiling Commission, 1995). This barrier grows ever stronger with higher positions, higher income, and prestige; and the result is that women are often denied access to— or a voice in most boardrooms (Sparrow, 2008, pp. 18–19). “A major obstacle to establishing managing diversity and glass ceiling initiatives as top priorities for industry and government is the failure to recognize the major implications for the economic performance of organizations” (Cox and Smolinsky, 1994, p. i).

Meyerson and Fletcher (1999) believed that the glass ceiling would be shattered in the new millennium, but only through a strategy that uses small wins—incremental changes aimed at biases so entrenched in the system that they’re not noticed until they’re gone. Although seemingly a common-sense argument, it may be too slow in addressing the continuing imbalance of gender diversity on corporate boards (Meyerson and Fletcher, 1999, p. 128). The authors’ research shows that “the small-wins strategy is a powerful way of chipping away the barriers that hold women back without sparking the kind of sound and fury that scares people into resistance” (Meyerson and Fletcher, 1999, p. 128).

Statistics suggest that as women approach the top of the corporate ladder, many jump off, frustrated or disillusioned with the business world (Meyerson and Fletcher, 1999, p. 127). A growth in self-employment among women has also been observed in recent years; this is explained in two arguably interrelated ways. One explanation may be that women have been attracted to self-employment by a desire for autonomy and flexibility; another may be a wish to escape the “glass ceiling” constraints encountered in large organizations (Wirth, 2004, pp. 33–6). Gender discrimination is so deeply embedded in organizational life as to be virtually indiscernible, and although it is generally agreed that women add enormous value, organizational definitions of competence and leadership are still predicated on traits stereotypically associated with men: tough and aggressive (Meyerson and Fletcher, 1999, pp. 129–31).

The International Labor Organization (ILO) conducted research in 63 countries, and despite the fact that women represent over 40 percent of the global labor force, gender segregation in the workplace tends to manifest itself in two main ways: (1) on the concentration of women in traditionally “feminized” jobs such as nursing, teaching, and administration; and (2) on the difficulties in rising to senior positions or higher paid job
categories in comparison with men (Wirth, 2004, pp. 1–3). Despite such segregation, Wirth’s (2004) report provides evidence that women are breaking into fields which have been traditionally male dominated, such as law, science, engineering, and information and communication technology. That progress is, however, balanced by constraints that mean women at the highest levels of corporate life are still rare.

In Britain, claims persist that boardrooms continue to be afflicted by the “pale male” syndrome, with little sign or promise of change (Gatrell and Swan, 2008, p. 11). Women have been segregated into the “velvet ghetto”, and are still segregated vertically in terms of the career ladder, and horizontally into particular jobs that are seen as less valued (Gatrell and Swan, 2008, p. 12). The velvet ghetto refers to positions that are considered to be “gendered”, such as human resources, public relations, and marketing.

In the United States, women comprise 10 percent of senior managers in Fortune 500 companies; less than 4 percent of the uppermost ranks of CEO, president, executive vice president, and COO; and less than 3 percent of top corporate earners (Meyerson and Fletcher, 1999, p. 127). Women of color represent 23 percent of the US women’s workforce, yet only account for 14 percent of women in managerial roles (Meyerson and Fletcher, 1999, p. 136).

Based on an extensive review of the literature, their own wide consulting experience and input from five leading companies on organization change to manage diversity, Cox and Smolinsky (1994) conclude that: (1) managing diversity can improve cost structures of organizations and increase the quality of human resources; and (2) organizations which excel at leveraging diversity, (including the hiring and advancement of women and non-white men into senior management jobs, providing a climate conducive to contributions from people of diverse backgrounds) will experience better financial performance in the long run than organizations which are not effective in managing diversity (Cox and Smolinsky, 1994, pp. 1–2).

Despite these recommendations, the main gender disadvantage for women remains the issue of maternity; maternity impacts on opportunities within the workplace and hinders upward movement with women’s career development. Wirth observes that, as employers start to recognize that family-friendly policies have benefits not only to male and female employees but also in helping to increase overall business productivity, “personal characteristics of integrity, diligence and sincerity, traditionally attributed to women, are increasingly viewed as qualities that can enhance a company’s image in a world riddled with corporate misconduct” (Wirth, 2004, p. 18).

In 2005, the Parliamentary Assembly of the Council of Europe published a paper listing the main reasons for discrimination against women as: lack of access to the labor market, the wage gap, and the “glass ceiling”. The paper describes women as paying a “gender penalty as actual or potential mothers. Many employers wrongly fear the cost and hassle motherhood may entail. But women are not only discriminated against for economic reasons – they are mainly discriminated against because of stereotyping and misguided preconceptions of women’s roles and abilities, commitment and leadership style” (Parliamentary Assembly, Council of Europe, 2005, p. 1).

The committee report explains that: “Women are routinely passed over when it comes to promotions. The higher the post, the less likely a woman – even one as qualified as her male colleague (or even more qualified) – is to get it.” Women “who manage to break through this so-called ‘glass-ceiling’ into decision-making positions remain the exception to the rule, as even in female-dominated sectors where there are more women managers, a disproportionate number of men rise to the more senior
positions” (Parliamentary Assembly, Council of Europe, 2005, p. 5). Their research shows a significant number of barriers to women’s career development, including: lack of mentoring and role models for women at the highest levels; exclusion from informal networks and channels of communication; stereotyping of women’s roles and abilities; sexual harassment; and unfriendly corporate culture (Parliamentary Assembly, Council of Europe, 2005, p. 5).

Peltier mentions the “glass ceiling” that still prevents women from progressing too high in the organization; and that “glass walls” keep women in the new “pink collar” jobs (Peltier, 2010, p. 193) such as HR, OD, and marketing. Although Peltier acknowledges that women are socialized differently today, his research was carried out prior to the so-called Generation Y, whose members have a very different outlook on work and career from the previous generation of “Baby Boomers”. What Peltier calls “erroneous assumptions” about women in the workplace, for example that most leaders assume a woman’s highest priority is the family, we can identify as “limiting assumptions” which deliberately exclude women from long-term career development. A major challenge facing women is their dislike of promoting themselves, combined with the “stereotyped perception of assertive women as pushy” (Peltier, 2010, p. 202).

Despite changes in UK legislation and policy focusing on equality of opportunity, “discrimination within the workplace remains widespread and persistent” (Gatrell and Swan, 2008, p. 1). The “glass ceiling” and the “glass wall” continue to frustrate black and minority ethnic women, so that “wherever they turn their career progress is limited, they are prevented by organizational practices and processes” from climbing to the “top of the career ladder” (Gatrell and Swan, 2008, p. 12). Similarly, women are often marginalized and excluded from the “family boardroom” (Mulholland, 1996, p. 78). Women play a “fundamental part in the establishment and running of family businesses”, but are often “invisible” and “excluded from social and economic rewards” (Hamilton, 2006, p. 8).

More recently, the explosion of research on gender has been prompted by concerns about the gap in wages and achievement – the glass ceiling effects – in which women plateau before they reach top leadership positions (see Babcock and Laschever, 2003; Bowles et al., 2005). Despite the fact that women make up close to 50 percent of the labor force, graduating from college in greater numbers than men, women are still not anywhere near parity in corporate senior positions (Catalyst, 2007).

Broadening the gender discussion

It is important not to assume that women represent the only gender concerns, but to broaden the discussion to include men. Some research suggests that coaching men is different from coaching women, and Erlandson (2009) has argued that the coach should at least be aware of gender issues. One study suggests that gender issues are not at the forefront of a coach or coachee’s mind, nor do they have any real effect on the coaching relationship or its aims (Bowers and Passmore, in press).

Ludeman and Erlandson, in a paper focusing on alpha males (2004, pp. 58, 62), depicted these individuals as “highly intelligent, confident and successful,” and as “people who aren’t happy unless they’re the top dogs.” Alpha males are described as natural leaders who get stressed only “when tough decisions don’t rest in their capable hands” (Ludeman and Erlandson, 2004, p. 58).

In their research, they claim to have found few successful female leaders with equally strong personalities, or to find women who matched the “complete alpha profile”. When
asked why so many alpha executives need coaches, the authors explained that alpha “quintessential strengths are what make them so challenging, and often frustrating to work with; independent and action-oriented, alphas take extraordinarily high levels of performance for granted, in themselves and in others” (Ludeman and Erlandson, 2004, p. 58). The flip side is that alpha males have “little or no natural curiosity about people or feelings” (Ludeman and Erlandson, 2004, p. 58). Alphas “often make snap judgments about other people, which they hold on to tenaciously. They believe that paying attention to feelings, even their own, detracts from getting the job done; they’re judgmental of colleagues who can’t control emotions yet often fail to notice how they vent their own anger and frustration” (Ludeman and Erlandson, 2004, pp. 59–60).

Ludeman and Erlandson (2004) claim that although alphas make perfect mid-level managers, in the CEO role they don’t necessarily become inspirational people managers. It is in the transition where the role of a competent coach is needed. Alphas aren’t good at asking for help, and can be “typically stubborn and resistant to feedback.” According to the authors, coaches shouldn’t undermine the alpha’s focus on results, but should improve the process for achieving them (Ludeman and Erlandson, 2004, p. 58).

Tannen (1999) picks up on the corporate appetite for conflict, debate, and argument – rather than dialogue. Corporations often operate on an adversarial approach to business, “settling disputes in litigation” (Tannen, 1999, p. 4). Tannen, whose earlier (1995) work explored the differences in communication styles between men and women, has helped practitioners to understand how the “argument culture” impacts the workplace. She draws attention to the military and war metaphors which pervade managerial and boardroom language, affecting behavior and thinking. Tannen’s research has shown how deeply entrenched is the language divide between two polarized ways of thinking and speaking. Her work offers useful input for practitioners who are coaching men and women to resolve their differences.

Corporate conflict is where the role of the “alpha male”, the dominant white male executive, plays a strong part. Peltier calls it the “testosterone culture” because business organizations are typically male-led, dominated by male culture and male assumptions (Peltier, 2010, p. 192). He also mentions that metaphors of sports and war are typical in the standard business environment – almost as if men are continuing to play children’s fighting games, keeping score with “clear winners and losers” (Peltier, 2010, p. 192).

These analyses of “alpha” characteristics are interesting for both men and women executives, but is it crucial for business leaders to have such traits? Further research into coaching alpha executives would be useful to understand the frequency of these characteristics, as well as their importance for successful executive behavior.

Wider Research on the Gender Debate

Catalyst was founded in 1962 in the United Kingdom by Felice Schwartz with the aim of introducing women to potential employers and educators. By the mid-1970s, women were being recruited in large numbers, but the workplace wasn’t supportive for women as it was designed by and for men (Mattis, 2001, p. 371). By the mid-1980s, Catalyst began to work with business organizations “to enhance their ability to recruit, retain, develop, and advance women professionals and managers,” and Catalyst is now best known for extensive research in eliminating barriers and leveraging opportunities to train, advance, and retain women professionals and managers (Mattis, 2001, p. 372).
The gendered organization

Halford and Leonard define the “gendered organization” as one of male power in levels which gain “progressively more power” as they near the top (Halford and Leonard, 2001, p. 216). Although women managers have high levels of education and a desire to progress in their careers, few achieve the same status or salary as their male counterparts. Male managers are likely to be better paid; in more secure employment; on higher grades; less stressed; and to not have experienced prejudice and sexual discrimination (Calás and Smircich, 2006; Chênevert and Tremblay, 2002; Davidson and Cooper, 1984; Fielden and Cooper, 2002; Gatrell and Cooper, 2007; Institute of Management, 1995; Institute of Management/Remuneration Economics, 1998).

Simpson and Lewis (2007) offer insight into how gender is linked to organizations and accounts for differences in the experiences of men and women in the world of work. Their study examines where some voices are privileged over others and how masculine voices silence and suppress other discourses such as femininity (Simpson and Lewis, 2007, p. 81). New to most practitioners will be men as the invisible gender(less) subject, with the invisible privileges and resources of masculinity.

Not all men identify with the oppressive, dominating, uncaring, socially and economically privileged representation of themselves. The differentiation between two types of men is based on their orientation to the principle of equality, with some supporting equality and others opposing it, believing instead in traditional roles for women (Simpson and Lewis, 2007, p. 57). However, this binary opposition allows for no middle ground. Simpson and Lewis have developed a practical framework integrating voice and visibility to develop female entrepreneurs, which needs to be researched for applicability in organizations.

The conclusion is that, despite legislation and campaign organizations such as the Equal Opportunities Commission and the lobbying group, Fawcett, there is a continuing debate on gender diversity in management. Not only are there differences between women, we also need to understand the complex ways in which gender operates and the ways that inequality is differentially formed and experienced (Gatrell and Swan, 2008, p. 88).

Lack of academic gender parity

Barriers remain even though women “have risen to leadership positions in professional organizations, academic departments, and funding agencies” (Bell and Kastens, 2004, p. 292). A study by the Commission on the Status of Women at Columbia University, New York from 1990 to 2000 highlights that women are not progressing through the academic pipeline at the same rate as men; specifically, women are under-represented in the applicant pools for faculty positions, and few women are hired into the tenured faculty (Bell and Kastens, 2004, p. 292).

The percentage of women medical students in the United States has grown from 18 percent to 44 percent in the last 25 years (Bickel, 2001, p. 267). Gender stereotyping detracts from women’s opportunities, and although having tripled in number, comparatively few women medical students enter surgery or specialized fields (Bickel, 2001, p. 267). Universities need to monitor gender-related barriers to education, and to create an environment of equal opportunity – “where assumptions and judgments about individuals’ competencies and preferences are not coloured by their sex” (Bickel, 2001, p. 268).
Gender diversity on corporate boards and financial performance

Gender diversity on corporate boards has become a core theme for governance reform efforts worldwide. A large literature documents that the gender composition of the board is positively related to measures of board effectiveness (Adams and Ferreira, 2008, p. 26).

Research in Europe and the United States suggests that “companies with higher numbers of women at senior levels are also companies with better organizational and financial performance” (Desvaux et al., 2008, pp. 1–2). Researchers at the business schools of Columbia and Maryland Universities argue for greater gender diversity among corporate leaders. Using data from 1,500 US companies in 1992–2006, the authors found “evidence that greater female representation in senior-management positions leads to better firm quality and performance” (Desvaux et al., 2008, p. 3).

Adams and Ferreira (2008) from the London School of Economics show that female directors have a significant and meaningful impact on board inputs and firm outcomes. Their sample consists of 86,714 directorships in 8,253 firm-years of data on 1,939 firms. Their results suggest that gender-diverse boards monitor more effectively, CEO turnover is more sensitive to stock performance, and directors receive more equity-based compensation (Adams and Ferreira, 2008, p. 1).

The benefits of having female directors translate into financial success (Bernardi and Threadgill, 2010, p. 16), and a relatively recent study shows that diversity on a board of directors is directly associated with shareholder value (Arfken et al., 2004; Carter et al., 2003; Daily and Dalton, 2003). As companies increase the number of women serving on their boards, they develop a more positive corporate environment with more satisfied customers; an increase in revenue and profit; and companies with diverse boards were significantly more profitable than those with homogeneous boards (Erhardt et al., 2003).

According to Catalyst, companies with the highest percentage of female board members returned 34 percent more to shareholders than companies with the lowest percentage of women (Bernardi and Threadgill, 2010, p. 16; Speedy, 2004, p. 24). Additionally, boards with a higher percentage of women were significantly more likely to appear on Fortune’s list of “Best companies to work for”, and on Ethisphere’s “Most Ethical Companies” list (Bernardi and Threadgill, 2010, pp. 19–20).

The conclusions of a McKinsey survey (Desvaux et al., 2008, p. 6) studying over 230 organizations employing a total of 115,000 staff concluded that:

- Companies with three women or more in their top management teams scored systematically higher in nine organizational dimensions (leadership, direction, accountability, coordination and control, innovation, external orientation, capability, motivation and work environment, and values).
- Companies which did score higher in all nine dimensions had a systematically higher financial performance than their peers, an operational profitability that was 68 percent above the group average and a market value 62 percent above the group average.

This issue isn’t without controversy. Farrell and Hersch (2005, p. 104) failed to find convincing evidence that gender diversity in the corporate boardroom is a value enhancing strategy. They found evidence that women serve on better performing firms, but document insignificant financial returns from a woman being added to the board. If gender diversity is not a value enhancing strategy, then why the demand? Organizations may be responding
to outside pressure to create greater diversity, or there may be an internal demand so that corporates reflect the “tastes of society at large” (Farrell and Hersch, 2005, p. 104).

Researchers at the Utrecht School of Economics studied gender diversity and the overall performance of organizations, drawing evidence from Dutch and Danish Boardrooms. “Using empirical data on 186 listed firms observed in 2007 (102 Dutch and 84 Danish), almost 40 percent of these firms had at least one woman in the boardroom. Their findings indicate that there is no effect of board gender diversity on firm performance” (Marinova et al., 2010, pp. 1–2, 16, 18). However, “an equal representation of women in top positions is not only a means to an end, but also a matter of social justice” (Marinova et al., 2010, p. 18).

Coaching as a Solution

How can coaching help women to better manage in the gendered organization? How is coaching helping to redress the gender imbalance on corporate boards worldwide? An evident gap in the literature is how coaching can, or is, being used to promote women into senior management roles, and ultimately to corporate board and chief executive positions. Another gap seems to be how those who are neither alpha male, nor alpha female, can be developed through executive coaching to step into senior executive and corporate board positions. In other words, how important is it for leaders to fulfil “alpha” executive characteristics, or are those characteristics no longer needed in today’s world?

There are a range of studies on women and mentoring, and gender differences in mentoring – but very few studies on gender in coaching, except for one or two studies in athletic coaching (see, for example, Hawkes and Seggar, 2000). A variety of factors that affect mentoring have been investigated, but few have examined the influence of gender identity on the functioning of these relationships (Eddleston et al., 2010, pp. 100–120). Woodd (1997) proposed that different gender cultures can create dilemmas for women in the workplace, and that mentoring can be one means of coping with this.

In the foreword to a seminal compilation of practitioner-researched papers on issues of diversity in psychotherapy (Chin et al., 1993), Sue describes, “how ethnic and racial diversity issues, as well as other diversity issues such as gender and sexual orientation, are embedded in society in general and psychotherapy in particular” (Sue, 1993, p. ix). Brome (1993, p. 1) advocates that diversity and difference need to be respected and valued as assets instead of liabilities. Brome emphasizes the paradigmatic shift needed for practitioners to work effectively with gender diversity complexities in the workplace, advocating the need for cultural self-evaluation on the part of both practitioner and client (Brome, 1993, p. 2). The authors suggest for psychotherapists what is also critical for coach practitioners – that they begin to challenge “their own assumptions about diversity, in all its forms of race, gender, ethnicity, culture and empathy” (De La Cancela et al., 1993, p. 9). The examples cited show how racial, ethnic and economic power differences have affected social esteem and gender role expectations within the groups they studied, and the depth at which historical and cultural experiences color our understanding of ourselves and of self-other relationships (Chin et al., 1993).

Peltier (2010, p. 190) says that: “Women have arrived in all arenas of the workplace and they are not going back home.” Peltier’s view is that coaches need to understand how women function within an organization – the reverse of the standard approach to coaching women, which suggests that they need help in finding a way to fit into organizational
culture (Peltier, 2010, pp. ix–xx). In grappling with the development of managerial leaders, it is critical that business/executive coaches understand the intrapersonal and interpersonal realms. Psychology and psychotherapy have well-established traditions in specialized fields of study such as ethics and supervision, including published research that is highly relevant to our fast-changing, complex organizational and societal systems. Business coaches need a practical grounding or “literacy” in psychological research and theory to understand an executive’s behavior and performance (Stout-Rostron, 2009, p. 20). For our purpose, in terms of coaching women in organizations, practitioners also need an awareness of current studies on gender diversity.

Organizational coaching

Leimon et al. (2011) interviewed 125 successful women leaders, of whom 107 were working in a corporate environment. The study identified the main barriers to women’s advancement in organizations, and the following eight coping strategies thought to be commonly used to overcome these barriers: family and career balance; understanding corporate culture; systematic investment in career and development; confidence; knowledge of own strengths; networking; role models; and career planning (Leimon et al., 2011, pp. 40–1).

A questionnaire survey was carried out to test the effectiveness of these coping strategies among women in corporate roles. It was found that the women were challenged in five of the eight coping strategies:

- Career progression emphasized the need for career planning.
- Confidence examined the major area for coaching, which is women’s lack of self-belief.
- Organizational dynamics means developing a sufficient understanding of organizational culture, and more importantly, finding out the rules of the game.
- Relational support made it clear that women lack an understanding of the critical need for networking to progress their careers.
- Work–life balance is a factor that neither men nor women get right.

Out of this research women seemed to be seriously disadvantaged in “balancing personal life and career”, and attempted to be all things to all people, personally and professionally (Leimon et al., 2011, pp. 47–9).

Some of the other key aspects to emerge are important themes for coaching women in organizations. The interviews demonstrated the need to overcome personal insecurities and inadequacies and learning how to say no to other’s expectations. Most women leaders have a deficit in understanding the culture of the organization in which they work – men consistently network to manage their careers, and women start to network at a later age than men to progress their careers. Due to the shortage of women in senior and executive management positions, women seriously lack female role models and can be excluded from a variety of informal “one-to-one relationship building sessions in male-dominated environments” such as the locker room and the golf course (Leimon et al., 2011, p. 48).

Justifying why women professionals need coaching at various stages in their careers, Leimon et al. (2011) identify the most important factors needed to move out of middle management and to reach a board position. This is one of the few pieces of research looking at the need to differentiate coaching for men and women, developing a model for women’s
leadership development. According to the authors, each of the eight strategies is useful for coaching in organizations. However, to further the evidence base, it will be essential to conduct similar surveys in organizational cultures outside the United Kingdom.

One question is: “How is coaching impacting gender diversity on boards and the development of women for board positions?” Motsoaledi (2009) researched a doctoral study in South Africa on Executive Coaching in Diversity from a Systems Psychodynamic Perspective. In this empirical study, nine major themes and their related sub-themes were identified: gender, race, ethnicity, authority, disability, language, age, de-authorization of diversity work and the coaching process. The study found that “through the coaching, the executives gained insights into their intra-psychic environment and the complex, multi-faceted, and intersecting nature of diversity in their organizations. They were assisted to take up their leadership roles more effectively and to take action on behalf of their organizations” (Motsoaledi, 2009, p. xv).

Role of gender within coaching practice

Although there is a variety of research exploring the different models of coaching practice, there has been a scarcity of research on the coaching relationship and almost no reference to the role of gender within the coach-coachee partnership. Using a Q-sort methodology, Passmore and Fillery-Travis (2011) explore the role of key factors which influence the coaching relationship – specifically the role of gender. According to Bowers and Passmore (in press), given the current imbalance at board level, the issue of gender is worth further exploring to better understand the gender dynamic within the coaching relationship.

There are very few studies in the selection process to match coach and coachee. Gray and Goregaokar’s (2010) study describes the results from a coaching program in which coachees were asked to reflect on and justify their choice of coach. The initial qualitative results suggested that female coachees favored female coaches as a role model of business success; male coachees justified their selection of a female coach as more approachable, and able to discuss more sensitive, personal issues – a minority of male respondents displayed sexist attitudes. In a subsequent quantitative analysis of the data, there was no bias towards the choice of either female or male coach. The results apparently show no statistical significance in a coachee’s gender choice, yet for a minority of coachees, gender is a factor (Gray and Goregaokar, 2010, pp. 525–6).

The results of a study at Villanova University in Pennsylvania, suggest that self-reported leadership styles of female accountants differ somewhat from the leadership styles reported by male accountants. Females are more likely than males to indicate that they use an interactive style of management called transformational leadership. Female accountants reported somewhat higher perceived effectiveness on two of these management skills: coaching and developing, and communicating. The findings also suggest that female accountants receive more developmental opportunities than do their male colleagues (Burke and Collins, 2001, pp. 244–57).

In her doctoral study into executive coaching in South Africa, Motsoaledi studied issues of male insubordination to female authority, finding that in several instances males refused to accept it, projecting inadequacies on to women leaders and using aggression as a tool to dominate them (Motsoaledi, 2009, p. 203). Although the women managers wielded power as individuals, they still had to deal with being a member of a subordinate group expected to comply with traditional patriarchal roles (Motsoaledi, 2009, p. 207). The unique position of the black female leader, who despite her formal authority still had to
submit to male dominance within a patriarchal world, made it difficult for the black female to compete with her white female counterpart (Motsoaledi, 2009, p. 209).

The differences in these studies highlights the importance of research that takes not just gender, but culture into account.

Retaining women to gain the competitive edge

Research shows a correlation between high numbers of female senior executives and stronger financial performance, which means that companies hiring and retaining more women gain a competitive edge – increasing retention rates by “offering flexible hours, maternity and child-care leave, and coaching to ease the return to the workforce” (Desvaux et al., 2008, p. 5). Coaching is one of the key financial investments which may help to retain female talent and embed gender diversity positively. However, gender diversity coaching needs an integrated approach – and no change comes without cost, whether it be financial expenditure or time to implement and manage change.

Suitable policies to recruit and retain female talent will help organizations to create “a larger talent pool and stronger financial performance, which suggest that making gender diversity a significant goal is well worth the investment” (Desvaux et al., 2008, p. 6). Organizations and educational institutions who are keen to promote gender diversity in the workplace need to understand existing government policies and practices that are in place, and to make aggressive efforts to recruit and retain female talent.

A universal finding from Catalyst’s and other organizations’ research on corporate diversity initiatives is that retaining and advancing women in corporate management requires a sustained and coordinated commitment from the top (Mattis, 2001, p. 372). For it to work, senior leaders need to create and link the business case for gender diversity to strategic business plans; all management and employees need to be convinced that eliminating barriers to success and recruiting the best female talent is in their personal best interests (Mattis, 2001, p. 373).

There is also a business case for maternity coaching to support new parents – men and women. Calling it the “new business environment”, Liston-Smith (2010) advocates maternity coaching and HR/OD discussion forums in organizations to enable parents to continue to contribute and to develop leadership potential. Research that the Korea Labor Institute conducted in 2007 indicates that some “family-friendly policies are correlated with higher revenues per employee” (Desvaux et al., 2008, p. 5).

A more even gender mix on the board of directors also helps a company better understand and attract the diverse population that has the potential to become its clients, allowing a company to better penetrate existing markets (Arfken et al., 2004, pp. 177–86). Women are a huge market force, and understanding the female perspective is essential to generating goods and services that meet consumer wants and needs.

Gender coaching strategies

Three years after the release of Workforce 2000, Roosevelt Thomas shifted the paradigm of diversity from compliance to a matter of business survival; he argued that recruitment was not the central problem; rather, the more serious problems began once someone was hired (Thomas, 1990, pp. 108–9). Thomas argued that something besides affirmative action was needed, that is, managing diversity which “consists of enabling people, in this case minorities and women, to perform to their potential” (Anand and Winters, 2008, p. 359; Thomas, 1990, p. 108).
Part of an enabling strategy is gender diversity coaching. Studies confirm that women tend to value relationships, teamwork and consensus-building, where men prefer analytical systems thinking and competitiveness (Ludeman, 2009, p. 238). Instead of trying to become like men, women are more successful being who they are, “strengthening under-developed skills to meet their goals” (Ludeman, 2009, p. 238). Ludeman and Erlandson (2006a, 2006b) assessed gender differences in leaders, identifying that beta characteristics are greater in women – and that women need to develop more alpha characteristics if they wish to be leaders. Ludeman advocates that coaches use different tools and techniques when coaching women leaders, and in particular acknowledging that the coachee’s experience is real (Ludeman, 2009, p. 244).

Similarly, Erlandson advocates coaching for gender difference. Men are drawn to competition and attaining positions of dominance; women work more collaboratively, building relationships and networking (Erlandson, 2009, pp. 216–17). Although some women leaders do possess alpha traits, Erlandson focuses on the alpha male. Strengths become risks for alpha males, and they can fluctuate between healthy and unhealthy behaviors (Erlandson, 2009, p. 220).

Another reason often provided for the absence of women on boards is their lack of connections. Medland (2004) argues that the most important impediment to female directorships is that the informal social network linking directors consists primarily of men. “To win the game, you have to know the rules – the real rules. Women are often not included in the informal network in which information about promotion possibilities and job openings is exchanged; this isn’t just the case in the business world; increasing the transparency of promotion and review procedures is also a challenge to universities and research centres” (Ragins and Sundstrom, 1989).

Internal research at Hewlett Packard showed that women apply for jobs only if they think they meet 100 percent of the criteria; whereas men apply if they feel they meet 60 percent of the requirements (Desvaux et al., 2008, p. 4). Coaching, mentoring, and networking programs have proven quite successful in helping female executives to succeed, encouraging them to seek out new positions more aggressively.

**Future Research**

The importance of gender diversity research cannot be underestimated. There is a huge need for research into the impact of coaching for both women and men on core diversity issues, particularly on how business and executive coaching can be tailored in a more gender-sensitive way to assist women to excel.

Mentoring and sponsorship programs within organizations have been shown to develop equity in the workplace (Ragins and Scandura, 1994). However, there is little research to show what the results would be for equity between men and women, if coaching was available to women on an equal basis to men at senior levels. There is coaching taking place worldwide, but we need evidence-based studies to see what the results are for women breaking through the glass ceiling.

In response to concerns about the imbalance between men and women in senior roles, and the lack of informal mentors and appropriate role models for women – the main body of gender-related research has taken place in the field of mentoring (see, for example, the chapters in this book on mentoring). It has been suggested that coaching could be the key to increase women’s visibility and to challenge stereotypical perceptions, as long as the coach understands how women function within an organization and how organizations
view them (Peltier and Irueste-Montes, 2010; Zeus and Skiffington, 2003). We therefore need to develop new theoretical approaches to gender coaching research, adopting a critical analysis of the gendered organization and the implications for coaching to influence gender equity in senior leadership positions.

In recent decades there has been considerable research into diversity, gender, and culture. However, in the current literature, there is little reference as to how coaching can influence gender balance within organizations, particularly at a senior level. We need more studies in organizations using coaching as a key driver for market differentiation and improved performance, and which are developing gender diversity as a business objective for organizational effectiveness.

**Conclusion**

I have examined current thinking on how men and women are socialized, the impact of organizational culture – and in what ways the dominant male organizational culture has affected the development of women in the workplace. If we are to redress the imbalance of women in senior management and board positions, we need to develop coaching as a driver of business strategy. Coaching conversations can provide a real platform for creative thinking and strategic planning, using the real experiences of clients (Hernez-Broome and Boyce, 2011).

Although contemporary research has looked at whether coaching is different for men and for women (Erlandson, 2009), and whether there is a need for a more gender-specific style of coaching, the way forward is to ensure that coaching is available to help all executives develop self-awareness and an understanding of the “gendered organization”, and how to negotiate the pitfalls of organizational culture, politics, and structure. Each coach practitioner has a responsibility to integrate knowledge and understanding of gender diversity issues into their own education and practice, evaluating themselves to understand their own worldview. It is only in this way that practitioners can increase their competence and empower their clients.

**References**


Coaching


