

Women and men influence sensitivity in workplace teams

December 5 2014, by Mary Catt

Remember the coworker who seemed really tuned in to your ideas about the project?

Chances are it wasn't just that person's gender, disposition or the workplace social structure that produced what social scientists call "interpersonally sensitive behavior."

A new study led by ILR School Assistant Professor Michele Williams shows that context is huge in producing this behavior by both men and women.

"Our findings inform gender dynamics in organizations by finding that increased interpersonal sensitivity is not necessarily the result of females' increased willingness to act with interpersonally sensitive behaviors relative to males."

"Rather, it is the result of the increased willingness of individuals – both male and female– to act with these behaviors when interacting with female colleagues."

"Our findings challenge the assumption that in teams with higher proportions of women, it is the behavior of the female team members, not the male members, that causes the team to behave more sensitively or use fewer overly aggressive decision-making strategies," she said in an interview.

"Is it Me or Her? How Gender Composition Evokes Interpersonally Sensitive Behavior on Collaborative Cross-Boundary Projects," written by Williams and Evan Polman, ILR M.S. '08/Ph.D. '10, will be published in *Organization Science*. Polman is an assistant professor at the the Wisconsin School of Business.

Surveying more than 200 management consultants, they also found that while consultants were more willing to act with interpersonal sensitivity toward men who had more power to reward them, the opposite was true for women.

Consultants were most willing to act with sensitive behavior toward female clients with low to moderate levels of power. That "benevolent sexism" [behavior](#) can lead to some women doubting their own competence or can reinforce a status gap between male and females, the researchers cautioned.

In addition, there is a dark side for men with lower levels of power because, for these men, receiving low levels of interpersonal sensitivity may preclude the personal, relational and team benefits of interpersonal sensitivity that are important when work is nonroutine and interdependent.

However, there is an upside for teams: Even one woman on a team can also increase men's willingness to act with more interpersonal sensitivity toward other men on the team, according to the research.

Based on these findings, Williams said, managers who form teams might want to first assess whether [interpersonal sensitivity](#) and the trust it engenders are important for team performance, then use that information to inform team gender mixes.

Williams also said that the research provides a springboard to an area

researchers have not paid much attention – civility with an undercurrent of subtle disrespect or sexism.

More information: "Is it Me or Her? How Gender Composition Evokes Interpersonally Sensitive Behavior on Collaborative Cross-Boundary Projects," [works.bepress.com/cgi/viewcont ...
ext=michele_williams](https://works.bepress.com/cgi/viewcontent?context=williams&path=/document/1147/1/1147.pdf)

Provided by Cornell University

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