

PROBLEM SOLVING

Team work, gender and the power of bonding*Wednesday, May 24, 2011***SUSAN PINKER**

Less than 24 hours after Osama bin Laden was killed by U.S. Navy Seals, I was driving through the gates of Marine Corps Base Camp Pendleton, near San Diego, to meet members of the newly formed Female Engagement Team. The FET, a 40-member, all-female battalion, had recently returned from Afghanistan, where they were deployed on a special mission to forge bonds with Afghan citizens.

When I set up interviews with some of the toughest women in the United States, no one knew about the clandestine strike against the al-Qaeda leader, of course. Yet the timing of my visit made me think about the U.S. military's strategic deployment of the sexes: the all-male Navy Seals for stealth and violence, the all-female FET for winning hearts and minds. Is there a lesson here for business?

If there is, the message is less about strict Mars-Venus divisions of labour than about what men and women find most rewarding, and most motivating, about working in groups.

According to new research by Wendi Gardner, an associate professor of social psychology at Northwestern University in Illinois, and Elizabeth Seeley Howard, an adjunct professor at New York University's Stern School of Business and their colleagues, when women are in groups they are more intent on forging one-to-one relationships. In contrast, while men have buddies in a group setting, they get more satisfaction from the collective – from their identity as a group member.

"It's not that men are less social, but that there's a different emphasis. Their social experience is more focused on the group," said Prof. Seeley Howard. Meanwhile, "even women in a group context are going to view their experience through a relationship lens," added Prof. Gardner.

It's not hard to see this pattern in men's devotion to sports teams, and in women's epoxy-like commitment to certain colleagues and friends, which is why "when you learn about this finding, you're not surprised," Prof. Gardner said.

Their ongoing research into how men and women differ in their attachment to groups didn't involve the FET marines, but because success in the military is so tightly bound to group life, the work offers unique viewpoint on how the quality of women's one-to-one social bonds can break down barriers in hostile environments.

"We have this awesome bond that can never be broken," said Sergeant Nora Mund, a 23-year-old gunsmith who served as a squad leader in the former Taliban-held part of Helmand province, one of the most violent areas of the country. She described how Afghan women stayed hidden until the FET members took off their helmets to make their female presence known. "We saw more and more females, and we got guided into the compounds. Then the women started to poke their heads out, and our female approach relaxed them. The grunts [male marines] had an aggressive stance, an aggressive approach. We didn't," she told me.

"Once [the Afghan women] learned that the female marines were there, they started coming out of their compounds. It was really easy to talk to them, and it progressed from there," Sgt. Mund added, citing dinner invitations from one family.

The FET members – called "the third gender" by their superiors – had a special knack for communication, said Navy Chief Hospital Corpsman Amanda Wardleigh, whose job was to organize mobile clinics in Afghan towns. One FET member "developed such strong relationships ... that we would walk down the street, and women, men, everyone would come out of their houses and yell her name. Even if she wasn't there, as soon as they saw us, they said they wanted to come to America to visit her."

The tendency of women to form strong one-to-one bonds within a group, and to inspire trust outside it, might raise the question of whether there's a gender difference in group loyalty. But Prof. Gardner said her research found no evidence of that. "Men and women were similarly attached and loyal to their groups. But the bases for those attachments were different. For a woman to be strongly attached to her group, she needs relationship bonds."

And the lesson for business? It seems that most women's sense of belonging, to a team or a department or a company, hinges on the one-to-one relationships they forge there. And if the coalition forces in Afghanistan have taught us anything, it's that there's more than one way to be a team player.

*Susan Pinker is a psychologist and author of *The Sexual Paradox: Extreme Men, Gifted Women and the Real Gender Gap*.*

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