



# Why single-sex training?

Gender-based training can help women find their own, individual voice, says **Rosalind Adler**

**T**he first time a boy put his arm around my shoulders, I had a nosebleed. It was the shock. I was 13 and had already been at an all girls' boarding school for two years.

This was my first teenage party and I was very pleased with my lilac miniskirt and purple and orange skinny-rib jumper. The boy I danced with was 17 and wore a suit. I've long ago forgotten his name but I do remember that it was a totally new experience, thrilling and scary.

After a few dances, someone must have turned the lights down – as in *off* – and that's when I felt poor Suitboy's arm stealing around my back and resting lightly on my shoulder. And then the nasal deluge. My mum had to come and take me home early.

That was four decades ago and it's taken me nearly all that time to recover. Well, okay, let's not exaggerate. But it has taken me nearly all that time to come to see men as human beings just like me and not as strange, exotic aliens. I



honestly think the early separation of boys and girls in my life was deeply unhelpful.

Needless to say, when the time came, my own child – a son – went to mixed-sex schools and it means a lot to me to see him now, coming up to 20, at ease with his friends, both male and female, living life as it is meant to be lived, surely, in a co-ed world.

So, I'm no apologist for single-sex *anything*. I firmly believe that we are – to use the current jargon – “all in this together” and that separation in all its guises is usually not the way forward.

Yet I and my colleague, Lea Sellers, have set up a company that makes a virtue of encouraging women to spend a day in a single-sex environment, while they experiment with finding their own voice and style when they speak in public, face the media or need to make their

presence felt in a business meeting.

There is, of course, immeasurably more that unites the sexes than divides us. And there are some very annoying generalisations around: women can't read maps, men can't multi-task, woman can't parallel park, men can't commit, all women in business are nurturing team players. Hello? Has anyone watched *The Apprentice* recently?

Of course there are nuggets of truth in some of the generalisations and some will resonate more strongly than others but, when I think of my friend Stephen, who is bringing up eight-year-old twins on his own, the tired old clichés ‘men don't do emotions’, ‘men aren't intuitive’, ‘men have one-track minds’ feel rather stale.

We do need to stop drawing dividing lines that are spurious and we need to stop making false



distinctions that don't fit with our experience of each other in real life.

However, it is true that women have only come to public speaking in a big way comparatively recently, whereas men have been doing it since Aristotle used to give his five-hour perorations – and no PowerPoint... imagine! Women in public life, female CEOs and MDs, are a very new phenomenon when one looks back over the last 2,500 years.

Less than a hundred years ago it was a widespread slur to say that women in public life, who used public speaking as a powerful tool for change, had turned to lobbying or to forging a career because they were disappointed in private life – “too ugly or stupid to keep a man” as one delightful cartoon of the early twentieth century had it.

I can remember much more recently, in the



1960s, 1970s and even later than that, when the received wisdom was that female television presenters were best suited to lighter, domestic topics. Leave the hard news to the men, dear.

So, as with so much else, the weight of history is with men and the model we have for what a public communicator should be like is inevitably male. Think of the great speakers you admire. How many of them (apart from the fabulous Shirley Williams) are women?

The fact is that we are still, in 2011, trying to prove ourselves and one of the obstacles that beset many women, however high-powered and talented they may be, is a lack of confidence.

It is true, of course, that lots of people of both sexes lack confidence in the areas of public speaking/public exposure. Who doesn't find it even a little bit daunting to be on TV, to address a full room or even to speak up at a meeting? And here's the nub of the issue: working with someone on their presentation/communication skills is very intimate and private work, which needs to be undertaken with care, expertise and sensitivity. It takes guts to be prepared to work on those skills, because the process makes you vulnerable. If you're working on how you come across, you are examining all sorts of things: preconceptions you hold about yourself; the views you hold most dear and how to express them; the way you sound, look, even dress. And when you're trying something new, whether it's a new outfit, a new dance step or a new way of communicating, it helps if you feel as safe as possible from the 'wrong' kind of scrutiny.

For these reasons, some people like to work one-to-one, completely privately. It is a bit like trying on a new piece of clothing: you may want to fiddle with it and look at it from all angles in private before you fling back the changing-room curtains and wow the onlookers. In an ideal world, you might like a personal shopper to advise you. The reason we offer single sex training is to give an extension of that feeling of privacy: men relax in a different way when they're with a group of other men – and it's the same for women. That's why – for *some* women, not all – training with only other women behind closed doors for a few hours, as it were, is extremely helpful. We can record interviews or talks on camera and play them back so women can see themselves, make adjustments and learn not to cringe.

We've worked with women – both individually and in groups – who feel at sea about how to *be* in public because, for one reason or another, they work or live with people who seem to overshadow them, people who enjoy the limelight and love to speak in public, people who appear



to be able to deliver a flawless and thrilling presentation effortlessly.

One woman whose husband and whose first wife both enjoyed the limelight felt at once pressured to be like them and also cowed by the impossibility of competing with such “naturals”. Finding one’s own voice and style and trusting it – allowing it to be different from the style that is the current orthodoxy surrounding you – can feel like uphill work in a situation like that.

It’s this wish to encourage women to find confidence that led us to set up our new venture. We want to encourage women to get their message across inventively, imaginatively, authoritatively – and, ultimately, productively. And we want them to do it in their own way, not copying *someone else’s* way. (And, of course, women don’t need to be like men.)

I’m sure we’re not alone in noticing that often men find it far harder than women to admit that they lack confidence – and it’s this element of ‘admitting it’ that can perhaps skew some of the statistics.

There are, however, an awful lot of statistics that can’t be explained away. The February 2011 report *Ambition and Gender at Work*, published by the Institute of Leadership and Management, examines why “far fewer women than men reach senior management and leadership positions”. Apart from the well-rehearsed external obstacles to women’s career development that are typically to do with the bearing or raising of children, the ILM’s research shows that “women managers are impeded in their careers by lower ambitions and expectations. Compared to their male counterparts, they tend to lack self belief and confidence – which leads to a cautious approach to career opportunities – and follow a less straightforward career path. The higher expectations and increased confidence of male managers propels them into

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**Rosalind Adler**

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management roles on average three years earlier than women”.

Again, one must beware of generalisations. Many women don’t fit this mould but the stats are unnerving nevertheless: “Twenty per cent of men will apply for a role despite only partially meeting its job description, compared to 14 per cent of women.”

More proof, if it were needed, that women have lower self-esteem than men can be found in evidence such as the following: an advert in a national newspaper advertising a job at a salary of £50,000 received virtually no female applicants. A couple of months later, exactly the same ad, but this time offering a lower salary of £30,000, elicited a huge response from women (Prof Marilyn Davidson, Manchester Business School).

At the end of last year, the International Centre for Women Leaders at Cranfield School of Management published *The Female FTSE Board Report 2010*, which benchmarked corporate boards. It looked at the number of women on UK boards and revealed that the number of female-held directorships stands at 12.5 per cent overall, while women make up only 5.5 per cent of executive directorships. Thirty nine companies have multiple women directors, but 21 per cent of the FTSE 100 still have no women at all.

My colleague Lea Sellers has extensive experience of readying people for television appearances. Women who have been on *Question Time* have often confessed to a lack of confidence. Indeed, some have cited fear as a good enough reason NOT to appear on the programme. Some said they felt men seemed to find it easier to carry off a performance with gusto and chutzpah whereas women seemed more concerned with honesty and sincerity. They felt they couldn’t compete with the adversarial political spirit of the programme. Some women said they had got to the top of their profession and did not want to ‘rock the boat’ by appearing on television: “It might look like showing off.” Others were afraid of making fools of themselves and almost all worried about the way they looked and what they should wear. Most media virgins wanted to know how they should prepare for television. Those few who did not prepare felt it showed on air in a lack of depth and robustness.

In conclusion, deciding to do a day’s training in a single-sex group is a little bit like having occasional separate sessions if you’re going for relationship counselling: it’s sometimes useful to work with a heightened sense of confidentiality before you come back together to join forces as you move on. **TJ**