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Closing the Gender Gap: Communication Styles of Women vs Men

Written by Beverly Y. Langford
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Although men and women share many similarities – intelligence, drive, ambition, commitment, talent, loyalty, just to name a few, most would agree that when it comes to some aspects of their communication, men and women exhibit some characteristic differences. Certainly, exceptions are always evident and generalizations or stereotypes tend to be frowned upon in our society. However, some classification of communication behavior patterns may help men and women move toward a clearer understanding of differences in order to create a stronger working relationship.

Understand that different doesn't mean that either communication style is better.

Linguistic authority Deborah Tannen, in her book, *You Just Don't Understand: Men and Women in Conversation*, says communication differences between the genders start early. Parents talk differently to male and female children, often without a clue that they are making any distinction. As children grow older, boys tend to play in larger groups with structured hierarchies, while girls often interact in smaller groups with emphasis on collaborating and creating positive interaction. Women's communication tends to be aimed toward establishing relationships while men's communication is focused on defining status, she says.

The fact that women like to talk isn't just a myth. A 2006 study discovered that women talk about three times as much as men in a given day, with the average woman chalking up 20,000 words in a day – 13,000 more than the average man (Fiona MacRae, <http://www.dailymail.co.uk/femail/article-419040/Women-talk-times-men-says-study.html>).

So, how to minimize the misunderstanding that, in the workplace, creates tension and wastes energy that we can spend on more productive pursuits?

Recognizing Differences in Communication Styles

Women typically ask more questions than men because they see questions as a way to connect, to show interest, and to keep the conversation flowing. Men, in contrast, will typically be singularly focused on the problem or issue and gather, through direct questions and analysis, the information needed to get to an answer. Because women are more lateral thinkers, they often solve problems in ways that may seem illogical to their male counterparts.

Women define topics broadly and shift or expand topics more naturally and gradually, often appearing to stay on a subject long after it has been thoroughly discussed, and they generally expect new comments to reflect what the last speaker said.

Women also tend to use linguistic strategies such as frequently punctuating their conversation with intense modifiers. Rather than saying a simple "Thank you," a woman may say, "Thank you very much," or "Thanks so much," or "I'm really glad that we had this meeting." At times, women rely on hedging to avoid seeming overly aggressive. A hedge would sound something like the following: "You have probably already thought of this solution, but have we considered getting the employees involved in the decision?" "This may be a stupid question, but do we have the rights to use that product name in our advertising?"

On the other hand, men see questions as simply requests for information. They tend to rely on the declarative statement as their primary communication vehicle. Even if they aren't completely certain, they will deliver their message with authority. In some cases, they use aggressive tactics, such as frequent interruptions, as ways to control the conversation.

They have no problem shifting topics abruptly, often to the dismay of the female counterpart, who may be wondering how that statement relates to the current conversation. Their linguistic habits sometimes involve far fewer hedges, and their requests may sound slightly (or not so slightly) like commands.

Ground Rules for Women

Here are a few points to remember when communicating with men:

- Don't misread certainty as an unwillingness to discuss. Challenge the authoritative statement.
- Minimize hedging. Realize that it can undermine your authority.
- Be brief. Not many men think women don't talk enough.
- Hold your ground. If your male colleague interrupts you, politely remind him that you weren't finished.

Ground Rules for Men

Remember these communication tactics:

- Don't misread hedges or frequent questions as uncertainty.

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- Take time to build relationships.
- Never patronize or talk down to your female colleague.
- At times, ask rather than tell.
- Remember that "please" and "thank you" go a long way in establishing rapport.

Be Aware of Some Differences in Nonverbal Communication

Women tend to smile more than men, and their faces typically exhibit more expression. They also like to make stronger eye contact when they engage in conversation. Remember mom: "Look at me when I'm talking to you." Because women are often more animated, frequently nodding during the conversation, their engagement may incorrectly signal agreement.

Men, on the other hand, maintain more reservation and control over their facial expressions. Notice two men in a car or on a city street engaged in conversation. Often they aren't making eye contact at all. Whereas women tend to face each other in conversation, men can carry on a discussion standing shoulder to shoulder.

In some cases, men may use more personal space than women, such as at a conference room table or on an airplane (think of the joint armrest).

If you're female, monitor your body language to avoid signaling agreement if you don't in fact agree. And don't assume that because you aren't getting direct eye contact from your male colleague that he isn't listening to what you have to say.

If you're male, make an effort to show interest and attention more obviously. And, be mindful of intruding into a colleague's personal space.

Being aware of differences and understand that accommodating for some of them doesn't mean that you should mimic the other gender's behavior. A heightened awareness and some subtle adjustments can go a long way toward creating a more effective context for productive working relationships.



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