



THE USHEROFF INSTITUTE LEADER'S EDGE

KEY GENDER COMMUNICATION DIFFERENCES

After in-depth observation, behavioral scientists have established that men and women exhibit stereotypical behaviors. The following four distinctions aren't etched in stone but be aware of them when you're communicating with members of the different sexes. And remember, truly effective communication is about accepting differences and using this awareness to strengthen our ability to influence others.

Women can take things more personally than men. They are more sensitive to criticism and transfer the information onto an emotional level. For example, men can direct 'personal shots' or 'digs' at each other in a meeting yet be able to walk out laughing together. In the same situation, women tend to hold onto the negative feeling, might leave by different doors and avoid contact with that person indefinitely.

Men tend to focus on the process rather than on the relationship. They generally speak to the point with the goal in mind. As young boys, they were taught to express themselves in a more direct, forceful way. They were encouraged to think and act independently and speak up for themselves. In the business world today, this shows up in men's pointed communication, which is usually directed towards achieving their goal. They talk to convey information and establish status. They will avoid expressing their feelings of emotion or discomfort if possible. Demanding a conversation with a man around feelings might result in uneasiness, dismissal or coldness.

Women, on the other hand, thrive on relationship building. As young girls, females were taught to express themselves indirectly. Being more tentative, softer and consensus-seeking were seen as desirable traits. Women today demonstrate these qualities by being collaborative. They use conversations to build and sustain interaction with others, to nurture relationships. They tend to be more open with their feelings and share personal information voluntarily. Women derive personal satisfaction from taking relationships to a deeper level.

Men and women's conversations are vastly different. Women tend to be more detailed, descriptive and begin the subject from the beginning rather than the end. They're reluctant to leave out details. Often, they share too many facts, which can lead men to tune out. This might imply that because they are long-winded, they lack confidence.

Men on the other hand tend to be more blunt, concise and prefer to get to their bottom line as soon as possible. Generally, they are more economical with their words and appreciate others who communicate in the same way. Many men might be seen as lacking patience or as being secretive.

BASIC STRATEGIES FOR COMMUNICATION SUCCESS

ESTABLISH COMMONALITY

We are most likely to trust people like ourselves and prefer to do business with them. This "commonality" (e.g. shared interests, values, goals) sets the tone for most interactions, including meetings and presentations. The sooner we establish commonality, the quicker we build trust, rapport and permission to move into business mode.

BE ADAPTABLE

We must open our mind to different ways of thinking about ourselves, our colleagues, management, customers, etc. Adaptability is necessary for being able to see the bigger picture. Judith C. Tingley, Ph.D., author of GenderSell, believes the more we understand about the opposite gender, the less likely we are to be misunderstood or offend. We can elevate our level of influence when we are able to look at things from two points of view for greater understanding.

KNOW YOUR COMMUNICATION STYLE

From time to time, corporations hire our firm to coach individuals who are valued but not perceived as "leadership material". Often the person's problem is simply a result of being unaware of how he or she communicates. Many of us are so bottom-line focused, content driven and results oriented that we miss the essence of true communication.



Our audiences must believe that we are "there with them" - concerned with their needs, interests and goals -- and that we are not just pursuing our own agenda.



To transmit this concern for our audience, we must be aware of our tendencies as communicators (e.g. do I get caught up in my own enthusiasms rather than addressing what my audience wants to know?). We also need to become skilled at assessing how our audience is responding, for example, by monitoring non-verbal clues (such as body language) that reveal how well we're holding their attention or making ourselves understood.

CONDUCT MARKET RESEARCH

To really discover how others feel about us and how effectively we're communicating, we must seek external feedback. Although the content of the information we're delivering is significant, it's our delivery style that determines how well we're actually being heard. Remember the old adage that says, "It's not what you say, but how you say it." Conduct informal surveys from time to time to solicit feedback and advice from colleagues, your boss and employees to help you assess your style. Give them permission to be truthful and thank them for their honesty.

GENDER SENSITIVITY TIPS FOR WRITERS AND SPEAKERS

1. Use gender-neutral pronouns. Rather than use he/she or him/her, switch to a) plural or b) to the first or second person:

Examples:
a) plural "It is difficult to upset people when you give them your undivided attention."
b) first person "It is difficult to upset us when you give us your undivided attention."
2. Find substitutes for compound nouns that contain "man" or "woman" as part of the word.

- Example: Use "person". Refer to either a woman or man as a spokesperson.
3. When referring to both sexes, be gender neutral and alternate between mentioning males and females first.
4. With mixed-gender groups, avoid references such as "You guys."
5. Use "Ms." - unless you know she prefers "Miss" or "Mrs." And the only people still using "Madam" tend to be butlers and writers of poor direct-mail marketing materials.

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Adam and Eve: The Original Communication Breakdown?

No one has ever attributed the misfortune of Adam and Eve to a breakdown in communication. But, knowing what we do now about the differences in the ways men and women communicate, it's perhaps not surprising that the lady chose to follow the serpent's advice, without talking things over with her mate first. He was probably off sorting out territorial issues between the beasts and the birds. Eve needed someone to talk to, and Adam just went along with the snack idea to avoid dissension in Paradise.

In many ways, we've come a long way since then. For example, we've learned how important effective communication is, especially in business. (Surveys of senior executives, such as those regularly conducted by the Conference Board, consistently reveal that communication skills are among those valued most in employees at every level. And these skills are considered essential in managers.)

We also know men and women differ in a variety of ways: psychology, behavior and physiology. Furthermore, human behavior experts have learned that we do not always respond to information in the same way. Our response will depend on interpretation, gestures and tone of voice, even the speaker's choice of words. So, just because men and women talk the same language, it doesn't guarantee they'll understand each other. It's not about right or wrong, good or bad: it's just about being different. Appreciating and respecting each gender for its respec-

tive differences builds a foundation for better understanding between people. (See Key Gender Communication Differences)

You'd think, in these relatively enlightened times, that many business professionals would be aware of these differences. But consider this: during a recent seminar on creative coaching, which involved a great deal of role-playing and observing the behaviors and reactions of the role-players, the facilitator was asked whether the obviously different reactions of the males versus the females were important to note and address when coaching employees. The response? "No, because we're all human beings. Next question?" For an "expert" to dismiss such obvious differences illustrates how far many managers and professionals may have to go to communicate well with different kinds of employees, as well as customers, suppliers and other important audiences.

To become master communicators, we must constantly remain aware of these differences and learn how to adjust our own communication style to address them. This knowledge is essential to our roles as managers and coaches, to expand our abilities to serve our organization and enhance the learning of our people. It can also boost our impact and credibility with senior management. As the business environment becomes more diverse and complex, professional success will greatly depend on the degree of influence we have with our many audiences.

You may ask why, in this new century of technology-aided communication, it's more necessary than ever to improve our communication skills? A key reason is that time is a commodi-

ty, and time-savers like e-mail and voicemail have become increasingly popular. But these technologies can also present barricades to relationship building. Therefore, to communicate efficiently and effectively, we must become strategic communicators. This involves adopting an approach unique to each person we come into contact with to make the best possible impression in the short time available. How do we do this?

Others perceive value when we make an emotional connection. They must feel indulged, respected and understood. The more we tailor our approach to our colleagues, boss, direct reports, customers, etc., the greater chance we have of establishing that emotional connection. And our chances for creating successful long-term relationships are greatly improved. Therefore, adapting our communication style, based on our awareness of gender distinctions can make the difference between building rapport or alienating others.

In conclusion, we must be aware that the influence of gender is just one of many factors hampering good communication. But learning to understand our different styles allows women and men to be more flexible and effective in our interactions with each other. Gender savvy means displaying sensitivity and respect in all methods of communication.

There are many men and women who do not display "typical" gender differences when it comes to communication. Observe them closely and you're likely to see excellent communicators at work. They are likely individuals who can win and hold the attention of audiences of both sexes, get their message across, and secure understanding and support.

Learning from Each Other: Communication Do's and Don'ts for Women and Men

The differences in the ways men and women communicate mean that we can learn a lot from each other. Most people have individual strengths and weaknesses. Study the communication styles and tendencies of your colleagues and the reactions of others to them to identify weaknesses (such as those in the list of "Communication Don'ts" below). Then evaluate your own style (using external feedback as well) to see how many you share. Do the same with the list of "Do's".

Ask for approval when you put out an idea. Nod excessively, which implies impatience.
Finish your suggestions with "tag questions" such as "Don't you think?" at the end.
Give overly tough feedback with little sensitivity. End sentences by raising your tone as if you are asking a question. It sounds tentative and "permission-seeking".
"Bottom line" without involvement, i.e. preaching or giving

orders with explaining or addressing the other's needs.

Stand on ceremony and waiting for the "most opportune" time to speak. Interrupt frequently.

Be long-winded. Redirect the conversation without permission or explanation. Speak in a high pitched voice.

Dart your eyes about or avoid eye contact while the other person is talking.

Speak too quickly.

Speak in a condescending or patronizing fashion, using words like "should," "ought" or "must".

Nod excessively, which implies submissiveness.
Speak louder than necessary.



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