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The great divide

Learning to talk so the other sex hears you is more complicated than you think

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Men may be from Mars and women may be from Venus, but when it comes to the office, they might as well be from different galaxies.

What is it about what a man says in a meeting that drives his female co-workers bananas? How is it that a man and a woman can hear the same criticism from the boss, but only the woman ends up crying? Why is it that a man and a woman can each propose the same idea, but only the man gets credit for it?

Women and men have always had different styles of communication, but understanding those differences is especially crucial in the workplace, because they often dictate salaries, promotions and power.

"Men go to work as if they're going to battle, whereas women go to work as if they're going to the village square," said Sandra Beckwith, a Fairport, N.Y.-based expert on the lighter side of gender differences and author of "Why Can't a Man Be More Like a Woman?"

Men come to the office primed to fight, and women come primed to network. "That makes the male work style combative while the female work style is more collaborative. Such different styles mean that clash and confusion are inevitable."

"Women don't always know the rules of the sport, say football, that men are playing by. One of the rules that we don't know is that it's OK to pick up a fumbled ball and run with it. This may play out in a meeting where a woman puts out an idea and it falls flat. Five minutes later, some guy in the room says, 'Hey, what if we do this?' He resurrects her idea, and he runs with that fumbled football. He gets lots of points for it, while she gets nothing."

Many people erroneously operate under the office version of the golden rule: "I'm going to communicate at work the way I want everybody at work to communicate with me," said Phil Stella, president of Effective Training & Communication Inc. in Mayfield.

He advocates an alternative he calls "the platinum rule," which he says is 10 times more effective but 100 times harder to execute: "Communicate with other people at work not the way you want them to treat you, but the way they want you to treat them."

To better convey your ideas to someone with a different communication style, Stella suggests studying the way she likes to receive and process information and adapting your approach accordingly. For example, if one colleague likes to get his updates short, snappy and to the point, that's how you should deliver information to him. If another co-worker prefers starting her meetings by asking how everyone spent the weekend, humor her and chime in.

Experts who speak about gender communication issues say that the women in the audience

tend to nod at most of what they talk about, but that in the workplace, it is often women who are the weaker communicators.

"The only way you can learn this stuff is to be aware of it," said communications consultant Arnold Sanow of The Business Source in Vienna, Va. He co-authored "Get Along with Anyone, Anytime, Anywhere: 8 Keys for Creating Enduring Connections with Customers, Co-Workers, . . . Even Kids!" and speaks at more than 100 seminars a year.

"For men, some of the things they need to do is become more considerate, caring, trusting - basically good communicators," he said. "Give women enough time to finish their ideas: Avoid interrupting them, finishing their sentences or being sarcastic and condescending."

Men can gain credibility with women by sharing more personal information about themselves, something women do naturally but men tend to shy away from. Women can score points with men by focusing on solutions instead of complaining about the same things over and over.

Judy Tso, a social scientist, consultant and principal of Aha Solutions Unlimited in Boston, said the problem for most women is that "the predominant corporate culture in the United States is built on male values, behaviors and perspectives. This includes the taboo of displaying emotion."

When a woman is emotionally attached to something, she's regarded as unstable, whereas when a man is emotionally attached, he's often seen as passionate, Tso said. Women must walk a fine line by being assertive without seeming too aggressive.

"A more balanced workplace would include allowing both genders to display emotion and accept that display as healthy," she said. "We don't want a passionless workplace."

One major source of friction and misunderstanding in the workplace is that women, more so than men, tend to take it personally when an idea or report of theirs is criticized.

"Have you ever seen two men go at it in a meeting? One of them can say, 'You are wrong, the sales numbers are going down, not up,' But 10 minutes later, they're saying, 'You want to go to lunch?'" Beckwith said. "If that were two women, they wouldn't be going to lunch, because for them, it's personal. The rest of the afternoon, they might avoid each other."

Experts say it's not enough simply to know how the other gender communicates; co-workers must also accept that another person may take a different - although equally valid - route to the same conclusion.

For instance, "men don't like to ask questions, because they've been brought up and conditioned to think that their job as a man is to have all the answers," Beckwith said. "For women, [asking questions] is a very valid way of getting information that works well for them. But men look at her and think, 'She must not know enough to do her job.'"

Women especially need to pay attention to their language and tone of voice, because that gives male colleagues cues as to how seriously they should listen. Women often unknowingly pepper their sentences with what Pamela Holland calls "power-robbing words and phrases" such as "well, maybe, sort of, perhaps," and "I'm not sure if this is a good idea, but . . ." Holland, chief operating officer of Brody Communications Ltd. in Jenkintown, Pa., is author of "Help! Was that a Career Limiting Move?"

In staking their claim to power and recognition, women need to compensate for voices that are higher and softer than their male colleagues. Women also need to speak in confident, declarative statements instead of sentences that sound more like questions, Holland said.

A major complaint women have is that men use too many sports analogies and war metaphors. Beckwith was in a meeting where a male co-worker said, "And then they called an audible on the play," a phrase she found so confusing that she had to interrupt to ask for an explanation (it means they stopped and changed directions). Not only would many women miss that reference,

they might not bother to ask what it means and tune out the rest of the meeting.

Conversely, one of the biggest complaints men have is that women don't get to the point quickly enough. One of the reasons is because men, on average, use half as many words per day as women, she said. "Men communicate to share what they know; women communicate to establish relationships. Women take a meandering path to get to the end of the story; men go straight to the punch line."

When a woman has a problem, she tends to ruminate over it, whereas a man wants to jump right in and fix it. Women don't want to focus on the solution until they've finished venting, and men don't want to hear all the details when they could be solving the problem.

Laurie Mitchell, president of Laurie Mitchell & Co. Marketing Communications Executive Search in Beachwood, sees the greatest contrast in the way men and women interview for jobs.

Men are better self-promoters in interview situations, proudly telling you not only where they've worked but also all the great things they did there. A woman, on the other hand, will tell you not only what jobs she has held, but also how she found those jobs and how lucky she was to land them.

"She never lets her accomplishments stand on their own, because she's too busy explaining how she got there," Mitchell said. "Her insecurities make her go into these totally irrelevant conversations."

Women also tend to hedge their sentences with conditional statements, such as "Well, I was thinking about this idea in the shower this morning," whereas men will simply say, "I came up with this, and here it is."

Both men and women bear the responsibility of improving the way they communicate in the workplace, and companies that encourage that as well as value the contributions of both genders are likely to provide the best products and services for their clients, Holland said.

For consultant Phil Stella, a willingness to understand and adapt to personal communication styles is more important than gender in defining a successful business relationship.

"My contention is that I would have more in common communicating with a woman who is very similar in communication style to me than a man whose style is different," he said.

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