

BUSINESS COMMUNICATION - BRIDGING THE GENDER GAP

By Candy Tymson

Since time began men and women simply have not understood each other. We are motivated by different things and have quite different needs. It's got nothing to do with whether or not we are 'equal' - we simply communicate in different ways.

With so many women now in senior positions and running successful companies the need to understand the gender differences in business communication has become essential - for both men and women.

While a host of popular books in recent times have helped us to understand each other in personal relationships, very little has been written to distinguish the differences in business circles.

Discussing the issue over dinner recently it was interesting to hear some of the frustrations expressed by CEO's about their senior female executives.

The managing director of a large food importer was complaining that his senior women have a tendency to come into his office, 'dump' all their problems and leave. Frustrated he says - "I pay them to solve problems, not give them back to me".

This is a typical example of the different way men and women operate. The woman is simply discussing the issues with him. She knows she needs to find the answers but talking about it helps her work out the solutions.

Meanwhile he has moved straight into solution mode. "Once I'm told about a problem I have to solve it". The result is he's feeling frustrated because he now thinks he's got to do her job. She's feeling frustrated because she thinks he is taking away her responsibility.

Status vs Relationship

So what are the differences? Generally speaking (and of course there are always exceptions) men use language to preserve their independence and maintain their position in the group; women use language to create connection and intimacy. /more.....

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Next time you are in a mixed business meeting notice the dynamics.

Basically there seems to be two styles. The Information Style and the Relationship Style.

The Information Style is often, but not always, associated with men. Talk is primarily a means to preserve independence and negotiate and maintain status.

The Relationship Style is often, but not always, associated with women. Conversation is primarily a language of rapport: a way of establishing connections and negotiating relationships.

Differences in the Workplace

Think about the different styles of approach when a male and female manager are asked to make a decision. In traditional circumstances the following may seem the norm.

The woman will tend to discuss it with others, seek their input and feedback before making a recommendation to senior management. She thinks it is important that everyone feels they have contributed to the decision and therefore are more likely to support it.

In contrast the man usually makes the decision, without any consultation, and makes the recommendation. He believes that seeking input is unnecessary. He's in charge so he needs to make the decision.

Because of this it is likely that he will think that she can not make a decision on her own, and needs to check with others first.

Very different approaches for very different reasons. The female's first priority is relationship. The male's is status.

Body Language

Even in body language, men and women can give off different signals. A female colleague, who is a director at a large financial company, expressed it well recently. She recalled a meeting of senior executives that morning, half men and half women.

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"To my horror I noticed that all the women were nodding and saying things like "yes", "O.K.", "I understand", while the men just sat straight faced and wrote the occasional note," she said.

"The men were totally focused on the task at hand. The women were working hard to relate to the speaker rather than focusing on what he was actually saying".

Women nodding during a conversation usually means 'I understand what you are saying'. Men nodding in a discussion usually means 'I agree with you'. Often problems arise when a man misinterprets a woman's automatic rapport-building nodding, as meaning that she's in agreement - when in fact she may not be.

Avoiding Communication Clashes

Understanding the gender differences in business communication makes for a more productive, harmonious workplace. People communicate in different ways. Another style is not wrong - it's just different! Both men and women can profit enormously by learning to understand the differences between them.

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