

Communicating Across the Gender Gap

By Dianna Booher

Little did we know that the communication differences we experienced as kids on the playground would move from the classroom to the boardroom. As the face of business changes with more women occupying key executive positions, the necessity of narrowing the gender communication gap is growing: miscommunication can cost money, opportunities, and jobs.

Though researchers in the 1970s predicted the disappearance of gender communication differences as women moved into higher management positions, the gap—or “disconnection”—remains.

Where does this lack of awareness surface most often? In organizations where one gender primarily sells to buyers of the same gender. For example, stockbrokers. For years, male stockbrokers have been selling primarily to other males—their comfort zone.

Another example is the residential real estate industry where female agents dominate the scene. A third example—the health-care industry. In fact, the potential for gender communication gaps is widest in those organizations where one gender occupies most of the senior executive positions.

As the traditional picture changes and both men and women must communicate on teams, manage, and sell to the other gender, their awareness grows. Yet the result is often frustration. In other words, they experience the problem but don't know where to start to expand their repertoire of communication skills.

Professionals and companies that create cultures which encourage both genders in their career paths and recognize the accomplishments and contributions of both men and women will be the most productive and satisfied.

Neither men nor women are better communicators. They're just different. To be productive, we all need to learn to recognize these differences in the way the genders communicate.

Questions

As females grow up in our culture, they are taught not to be confrontational—not to make a scene or be aggressive or pushy. So how do they express opposition to an idea? Often they use indirect channels such as questions to make people rethink their positions, plans, or ideas. They, of course, also use questions in the traditional way—to solicit information.

Men, on the other hand, do not as readily recognize indirect messages or pick up on nuances in words or body language. In short, they don't always accurately “read between the lines” to understand a woman's meaning or question. The results: (1) Women ask questions meant as

indirect objections, and men seem to ignore their objections and feelings. (2) Women ask questions meant only to solicit information to which men react defensively.

Directness

Women's language tends to be indirect, discreet, tactful, and even manipulative. Women tend to give fewer directives and use more courtesy words with those directives. Example: "The approach is not exactly foreign to our designers" meaning "They are familiar with it." Or "Mary may not be available to handle the project" meaning "Mary doesn't want to handle the project." Or "I think the lobby looks overcrowded—what do you say we re-arrange the end tables and sofa?"

Men's language tends to be more direct, powerful, blunt, and at times offensive. Men generally give more directives, with fewer courtesy words. Example: "Tom blew the deal with that client because of his stubborn refusal to negotiate on the delivery." Or "That's a half-baked idea if I ever heard one." Or "I think the lobby looks overly crowded—move those end tables and that sofa closer to the entrance."

When a female manager asks a male employee, "Do you think you can have the proposal ready by Friday?" and he answers affirmatively, she expects the report on Friday. When Friday comes and the proposal isn't ready, the (female) manager looks at the situation as failure to comply with what she considered a directive while the (male) employee considered her comment a preference, not a directive.

Small talk

Women talk to build rapport with others and to explore their own feelings and opinions. Consequently, they consider most subjects worthy of conversation. They often talk about personal topics such as relationships, people, and experiences. To women, an important aspect of conversation is simply "connecting" emotionally with another person.

Men tend to view conversation as a means of exchanging information or solving problems. They discuss events, facts, happenings in the news, sports—generally topics not directly related to themselves. Other subjects about "routine" matters may, in men's estimation, not warrant conversational effort.

Whether in sales, management, or marriage, awareness of gender differences in communication can prove a boon to your success in working with teams, managing groups, or presenting your services or products.

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For more tips on conflict resolution, see Communicate with Confidence: How to Say It Right the First Time and Every Time (McGraw-Hill) by Dianna Booher.