

Did You Hear What I Think I Said?

By Dianna Booher

Have you noticed that you don't communicate with one half the population as well as the other half?

Lots of attention has been given to the generation gap—the differences in music, in clothes, in hairstyles, in lingo—but very little attention to the “gender” gap. And, of course, our relationships with spouses, with colleagues, and customers/clients at work and in the community depend on our interactions with these “other adults.”

In fact, management guru Peter Drucker claims that 60 percent of all management problems result from faulty communications. Marriage counselors say that communication problems are at the root of more than half of all divorces.

Here's my thesis: There's not a “right or wrong” style. Men are not superior communicators. Women are not superior communicators. They're just different. What are some of these differences?

Questions

Men often interpret questions as objections. And that's understandable because sometimes women don't make direct statements, especially when what they want to say may be confrontational or negative. Women are taught to seek approval, not to make waves. So sometimes they hint—through a question that's intended to make the man rethink his opinion or action.

On the other hand, sometimes women just mean questions as questions—there's no hidden agenda or “point.”

The difficulty comes when the man interprets the question as a question—and the woman intends it as an objection. And she gets frustrated that he doesn't seem to get her point or care that she has a different opinion. She thinks her objections are being ignored or minimized.

Then sometimes the woman can mean her question as a simple question. When the man wrongly interprets it as objection, he seems unnecessarily illogical in his angry reaction.

Women use questions two ways: to get information and to state objections. What's the solution to eliminate ambiguous meanings? There are three: 1) Women, be direct. 2) Men, verify the meaning of the question—or objection—so you can answer more appropriately. 3) Both should frame the question.

Either the man or the woman can take responsibility for verifying or framing. Be direct. Use a lead-in so the listener knows how to interpret.

Details/Big-Picture

Details or the big-picture? Men speak in headlines; women give the fine print. Women often probe for details because they're more attuned to nuances in meanings. They want to verify that they understand exactly. They also probe for details just to show interest and to vicariously participate in a situation. When men don't share the details easily, women think they're being evasive or creating distance or simply don't care about the issue.

Men generally consider details trivial, not worth assimilating or remembering. They immediately process what's said to them or what happens into a big-picture message and then go on. They honestly don't remember details, once they're sure they've got the big picture. The same is generally true with decision-making. A woman says: detail, detail, decision. A man says: Decision. What were the details again? Men value fast decisions; women value thorough ones.

Some men are better known for this trait than others. This is how the late president Calvin Coolidge got his nickname of Silent Cal. One Sunday evening his wife was ill and didn't accompany him to church. After he came home that night, she asked him, "What did the preacher preach about tonight?"

"Sin." "Well, ... what did he say about it?" "He's against it."

Sharing information

Women derive satisfaction from feeling helpful. Therefore, they share information freely and feel no reluctance to ask for help or information when they need it. Men generally equate information with power. They need to feel respected and admired. Asking for help can feel like an act of humiliation.

So what's the middle ground? Women can handle the dilemma by giving information in a casual, off-the-cuff way without waiting for the man to ask specifically for what he needs to know. Men can overcome their reluctance by reminding themselves that asking for help or information may be the faster, more logical approach.

Consensus

Even when men and women agree on a point, they generally have different reasons for doing so. Women, most often, work for consensus. They themselves value being accepted and thought amiable, open-minded, and caring. Women want acceptance and approval. Men value being respected more than being accepted. They want to be recognized for achievements. Women generally want to fit in; men want to stand out.

So what's the solution when one gender is trying to gain agreement and the other gender is pinpointing differences? Women will do better not to try to force men to agree on anything they don't want to agree on. And men will do better not to make women focus on differences and divide themselves into confrontational camps.

Both genders can also learn to state disagreements more agreeably. Howard W. Newton says: "Tact is the art of making a point without making an enemy."

Language

Much research has been done on the language and word choice of both genders. Women tend to give fewer directives and use more courtesy words with those directives. Women's language tends to be indirect, discreet, tactful, and at times manipulative. Men, however, generally give more directives, with fewer courtesy words. Their language tends to be direct, powerful, blunt, and even offensive.

Dr. Robin Lakoff, a pioneer in this area, has written most extensively on this subject. Others' research has confirmed many of her conclusions and has also raised questions about earlier hypotheses, relating some issues to power and position in the work force rather than simply gender differences. The following differences between the genders, however, still stand:

Women use more intensive adverbs (*so, just, very, much*), more expressive adjectives (*gorgeous, electrifying, devoted, awesome*), more emotional words (*furiously, lovingly, thrilled*), and more diminutives (*tiny, cute, precious*). Their color vocabulary is more extensive (*teal blue, periwinkle blue, baby blue, powder blue, navy, aqua*). Whereas with men, things are either red or blue.

Women tend to use tentative language. In general, they use less slang, more precise diction, and better grammar than men. Men use more game analogies, stronger profanity, and more expletives than women do. They tend to use more forceful, confident language. They generally use more slang and colloquialisms. Precise diction and proper grammar are less important to them.

How do we reconnect conversational cross-wires as men and women and close the gender communication gap? Learn to understand the differences in style—neither style is right or wrong—just a different way! The goal is just not to clash over minor style differences.

Awareness of these gender differences can mean the difference between a marriage or a divorce. A promotion or a termination. A great learning experience or a disaster. A supportive or stifling work environment. A long-term friendship or a short acquaintance.

Understanding the difference in gender communication styles will improve your success ratios in sales, management, or marriage.

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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.