

He Said, She Said

Bridging the Gender Communication Gap

It has become a pop culture to analyze the differences between men and women. Some people believe the sexes are so different it is though they are living on different planets! Of course, there are gender differences in communication styles. It is important to stress that each style is equally valid. The goal in gender communication is not to change the style of communication but to adapt to the differences.

There *are* certain patterns of behavior that each gender tends to display. However, this is not to state that all men and women have certain characteristics. We have to be careful never to generalize or stereotype. We are all on a continuum and there are always variations. Rather, this article will focus on certain traits that different genders *tend to* possess in terms of communication styles.



Gender Differences Start Early in Life

Gender differences in talking have been observed in children as young as 3, about the time language is developed. While little girls talk to be liked, little boys often talk to boast. Little girls make requests; little boys make demands. Little girls speak to create harmony; little boys prolong conflict. Little girls talk more indirectly; little boys talk directly. Little girls talk more with words; little boys use more actions. While boys and girls both want to get their way, they use language differently to do so.

We're Wired Differently

In the book *Brain Sex*, geneticist Anne Moir and co-author David Jessel state, "Male and female brains are structured and process information differently." Because of this, Dr. Moir urges that we stop the "battle-of-the-sexes" since neither are right or better, we're just "wired" differently. Thus, in communicating, it would help if men and women would stop judging and trying to convert each other, accept our different abilities and skills as complementary, and blend them cooperatively to manage workplace and life issues.

Strategies for Bridging the Gender Communication Gap

❖ **Information issues.** Women gather information by asking questions, but men view question-asking as a sign of weakness. It's no wonder men won't ask for directions! Men need to understand this information-gathering process and listen to the questions. Women must be sure men have adequate information, because if they don't understand, they may not ask for help.

❖ **Managing metaphors.** Women frequently use stories or illustrations about home or relationships. Men tend to rely on metaphors about sports

or war. This sets the stage for miscommunication. Women often do not follow the touchdown analogies, while men would have trouble following home decorating stories. We should avoid simply gender-reversing descriptions to communicate. Instead, consider using gender-neutral images (weather, nature, movies, etc.)

❖ **Power struggles** – Women tend to be more cooperative – focusing on relationships. However, men tend to be more assertive and focus on rank and status in an organization. Women see men being too focused on power, while men may see women as weak. In this case, each gender can learn from each other. Men can focus more on a collaborative approach. Women need to be more assertive.

❖ **Getting to the point.** Women like to tell and hear stories, including methods of coping with distress and finding solutions. It's their way of connecting and building relationships. Men don't want the stories, they just want to get to the point. They don't care about the route, just the destination. The problem is that each gender becomes impatient. Women push for details while men look for the big-picture message. Each gender can benefit from the other's communication style. Men need to explain their thinking and not simply jump to conclusions. Women need to get to the point in a speedier manner.

❖ **Facts and feelings.** Women are generally more comfortable talking about their feelings. Men prefer to focus on the facts and skip the feelings. This can result in significant communication problems. Each type of communication has both an intellectual and an emotional element. It is important for both genders to see there are two parts at play. A man can increase the feeling quotient by making this type of statement: *"I know this project has been very stressful for you. Let's talk about ways to manage the difficulties we're facing."* A woman, conversely, can dim the emotional intensity by saying: *"I think we need to discuss the major issues blocking the implementation of the new plan."*

Avoiding Misunderstandings

Misunderstandings can be avoided when co-workers look beyond personalities and consider the different ways in which men and women communicate.

Let's look at a few additional examples.

Men's Behavior

➤ **Trash Talk** – Joking, teasing, and playful put-downs are common components of male relating.

What women think: Making others feel small is *not* a female trait. Women tend to see putdowns as arrogant or hostile.

The middle ground: In general, trash talk is usually harmless, as long as both parties "play." When both parties engage in it, it can be a way to bond around a problem, such as a trying work assignment or demanding sales quotas.

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➤ **Prideful self-sufficiency** – As noted earlier, there's often truth to the jokes about men not asking for directions. In work settings men sometimes ask few questions, fearing that doing so will communicate to others that they don't know something. Males tend to equate knowledge with power and don't want to appear that they lack know-how.

What women think: Women see this behavior as childish and even arrogant. They also look at it as a huge waste of time, figuring it is more effective to ask a question, get the answer, and move on.

The middle ground: Some workplace cultures discourage questions, and indeed many people feel self-conscious about asking too many. In meetings or other settings in which everyone needs to be on the same page, both genders need to find ways to give and receive clarification.

➤ **Not giving feedback** – Because men don't tend to solicit feedback, good or bad, they also don't *give* feedback. Males don't want to be criticized, feel that compliments make someone less effective, and often think that women who need feedback are "high maintenance."

What women think: Women think men don't value their contributions and are overly critical. They may even feel that men withhold positive feedback in order to avoid giving women promotions or good work projects.

The middle ground: Constructive feedback needs to be built into the workplace culture. Both genders need to find a way to make it a tool for improving performance and productivity.

Women's Behavior

➤ **Equality-minded** – Women try to maintain an appearance of equality among everyone. They are concerned about the effect something has on another person, and want to make sure everyone feels like a worthy contributor.

What men think: Men tend to see this as a sign that women lack confidence and competence as leaders.

The middle ground: Females can wield "power" by orchestrating collaboration and enlisting cooperation. Men can learn from this. Nevertheless, women in leadership positions need to maintain a clear boundary between their authority and that of others.

➤ **Outside-in negotiating** – Females want to see the big picture and make sure everyone is on the same page with the same level of understanding before making a decision.

What men think: Since this is the *exact* opposite of what men typically do, men think this tactic means women don't have a clear position or aren't decisive enough.

The middle ground: In negotiations, it's imperative to know all the factors involved before making a decision. On the other hand, trying to make everyone happy is not how leaders make good decisions. A balanced blend of female thoroughness and male decisiveness is ideal.

➤ **Likely to downplay certainty** – Women don't want to appear pushy or uncaring of others' positions or ideas.

What men think: Men think that women *aren't* certain and need someone to take charge.

The middle ground: Moderate self-deprecation and humility are good qualities in leaders. However, *always* deferring to others' opinions and perspectives will be perceived as a sign of weakness. Find a middle way.

Summary

When it comes to communicating between genders in the workplace, the cardinal rule is: *don't judge*. Instead, carefully examine your co-worker's behavior, consider that some of it may be gender-based, and try to gain insight into how this behavior serves — or doesn't serve — workplace objectives. ■

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Additional sources: Beth Banks Cohn, Ph.D., a leading expert in change management and leadership development; and Roz Usheroff, an internationally recognized communication expert and personal branding coach. They are co-authors of the book, "Taking the Leap: Managing Your Career in Turbulent Times... and Beyond."

Male-Female Communication



Here are some general variations in the way men and women communicate.

- Men focus on power/rank/status.
- Women focus on relationships.
- Men talk to give information or report.
- Women talk to collect information or gain rapport.
- Men talk about things (business, sports, food).
- Women talk about people and relationships.
- Men focus on facts, reason, and logic.
- Women focus on feelings, senses, and meaning.
- Men thrive on competing and achieving.
- Women thrive on harmony and relating.
- Men “know” by analyzing and figuring things out.
- Women “know” by intuitive means.
- Men are more assertive.
- Women are more cooperative.
- Men tend to be focused, specific, logical.
- Women are holistic and organic.

- Men are at ease with order, rules, and structure.
- Women are at ease with fluidity.
- Men immediately want to get working on a project.
- Women tend to ask lots of questions before beginning a project.
- Men want to think.
- Women want to feel.

Summary

Men and women do indeed have different communication styles. However, neither are right or wrong, they are just different. We need to pay close attention to gender differences so we can untangle the gender communication knots. This will not only help get the job done more efficiently, this will also create a more positive workplace atmosphere. ■

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