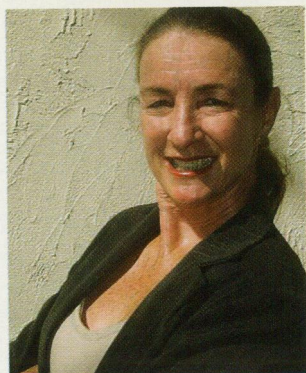


GUEST COLUMN

BY AUDREY NELSON



A bar code on her forehead

One day a man walked up to me after one of my gender communication seminars and with furrowed brow launched into a typical diatribe: "Why are women so hard to understand?" he wanted to know.

I smiled briefly. Ah, the age-old "What do women want?" question. But before I could respond, he continued with some vehemence, "You know, I wish my wife and my teenage daughter came equipped with bar codes on their foreheads so I could tell what's really going on, and what they're really trying to tell me."

What a remarkable image; for a moment I was struck uncharacteristically speechless. And yet, based on my years of research, training and corporate consulting in gender communication, it certainly rang true. In essence, this man was saying to me, *"I feel awkward and need guidance. Please tell me how I should treat women, and especially the most important women in my life."*

We're on the coattails of a major social transition, and men and women are still learning how to live and work together. Men are not the enemy. Most want to do the right thing, but they just don't know what that is.

That's where a bar code would come in handy. Many men are confused. Their communication style is more direct, and therefore they may send fewer contradictory cues than women. Indeed, the latter are quite a bit more complicated and sophisticated in their communication patterns than men, who often have difficulty decoding what turn out to be mixed messages.

Take the case of Karen, the 32-year-old director of advertising at a mid-sized apparel company. I observed her and her team when I consulted at one of its monthly staff meetings. When it was Karen's turn to speak, the vice president of her division turned to her and asked, "How are you doing?"

"Not all that well," she replied gravely. "It took six months for me to finally get my raise — the one that was retroactive to Jan. 1. I couldn't believe how much bureaucratic garbage I had to go through." As she shared the gory details, the rest of the staff nodded supportively.

"That's awful," one of her colleagues said.

"What a pain," chimed in another.

Even the vice president was taken aback. "They should never

have put you through all that," he said, shaking his head.


Then, just as Karen was about to finish her tale of woe, she flashed a quick smile. As if on cue, the men in the room shifted uncomfortably in their chairs. They looked perplexed. What did that smile mean? Was Karen really as upset as she said she was? Could they take her complaints seriously? Would the V.P. feel compelled to follow up on her grievance, now that she seemed to discount it so handily? The notion of a "female message bar code" might have appealed to many of the men in the room at that moment.

We're on the coattails of a major social transition, and men and women are still learning how to live and work together. Men are not the enemy. Most want to do the right thing, but they just don't know what that is.

If you want to know what people think or feel, you don't look at their kneecaps, you look at their faces, and Karen's face contradicted her words. Indeed, that seemingly innocuous smile undermined her compelling verbal expressions of frustration and distress. No wonder her male colleagues seemed puzzled; Karen had shot herself in the foot with her female nonverbal style.

Unfortunately, women often subvert their own credibility by these kinds of conflicting messages. And Karen's obvious lack of consciousness about what she had just done would most likely come back to haunt her later in her career.

What could Karen have done differently? As in any learning situation, awareness comes first. Karen needed to become conscious of her habitual, inappropriate smiling before she could change her behavior. Once alert to her unconscious reflexes, she could then self-monitor to check whether her words matched her appearance. All she had to do was better manage her facial expression so she looked serious at the conclusion of her complaint.

Congruity between the verbal portion of communication (what is being said) and the nonverbals are a critical component of the "believability" and credibility of communication. It's as simple as that. 

Audrey Nelson, Ph.D., is a corporate communication consultant, trainer and keynote speaker. This article is adapted from her book, "You Don't Say: Navigating Nonverbal Communication Between the Sexes" (Prentice Hall Press), which has been published in five languages. www.audreynelson.com