



THE SPLIT EAR:

THE FEMALE ADVANTAGE

It's why women hear so much more

By AUDREY NELSON, PH.D.

Listening is a part of the female job description and the key component in facilitating interpersonal relationships.

Based on my experience as a corporate communication consultant and trainer, I would argue that listening is the most important communication skill. In this department, women seem to have the edge.

The "split ear" phenomenon I derived from Monty Roberts' observations of an alpha mare meting out discipline to a herd of wild mustangs. He noticed that the mare, when confronting a renegade and abusive young colt, held one ear forward and one back, as if she'd divided her attention. The ear facing backward was aimed at the rest of the herd and

especially at a young foal this colt had just kicked. The forward ear was trained on the "bad boy." I believe this is analogous to the split, or double, ear we observe among women.

Human females have the ability to "listen with two ears." At any one time, they may be paying attention on two or more disparate levels. A woman hears the verbal message just as a man would, but she is also reading between the lines to intercept feelings. That's her socio-emotional ear. She evaluates facial expressions, voice, gestures and posture — the whole repertoire of non-verbal behavior — and draws conclusions from these, as well as from the other person's words.

"Women's ability to manage the

flow interaction, to really listen and hear what people say, and to gather information from others in a nonthreatening way is a strength," claims management consultant Judith Tingley. Certainly in the work world, most consider the participation of subordinates as essential to the effective influencing of staff. But we also observe this skill every night at the dinner table, where a woman attempts to regulate the flow of talk to include her most reticent child and restrain her most precociously verbal child from dominating the conversation.

Perhaps this is why the responders in my gender communication survey of 1,000 men and women all made the point that women are better listeners than men. Here are some of the men's

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responses to my question "What do you feel is the greatest strength in women's communication?"

- "Women have better listening skills. They look at the whole picture."
- "They have the ability to pick up on nonverbals and to listen completely."
- "They're sensitive to the speakers' feelings and mental state."
- "Empathy, inclusiveness, compassion. They have feelings and emotions."
- "Women listen to what is meant beyond the words."
- "Mind reading!"

Why do women listen differently? Part of the answer may be tied to brain structure. For women, emotional responses reside in both hemispheres of the brain, which are connected with the corpus callosum, a thick bundle of nerve fibers — thicker in women than in men. These fibers facilitate the exchange of information between the two halves of the brain.

According to genetics expert and television producer Anne Moir, "This means that more information is being exchanged between the left and right sides of the female brain than the male brain. The more connections one has, the more fluent one is in understanding emotions."

Predictably, anthropologist Helen Fisher takes a more anthropological outlook at female listening superiority. From her point of view, millions of years ago on the grasslands of Africa, women stayed around the hearth when men left for months at a time to hunt. A woman's acute sensitivity to listening probably developed because of her babies — she had to listen for their cries while defending against predators.

Some social scientists would argue that since much of female survival and sex role prescription has depended on the ability to encode and decode accurately others' nonverbal cues, women have had to develop their listening skills more effectively. In fact, Gloria Steinem has suggested that women's so-called "intuition" (or "mind reading," as one of my male survey participants put it) is not some extraordinary ability but really a byproduct of their better-developed listening skills.

Whatever the reason, unfortunately, many men feel threatened by a woman's ability to glean more from the communication than they do. They don't like it. They'll accuse the woman of reading too much into their verbal statements. "Well, that's not how I feel!" they will protest. But women are paying attention to the nonverbals that qualify the verbal. "You said you don't like the furniture I picked out," a woman may say, "but here's what I really think is going on with you."

Moreover, men don't want to listen to all the detail that women feel compelled to share, especially in business situations. "What's the bottom line?" and "Get to the point!" were born out of male culture in response to women going on and on.

Men complain to me, "Women over-communicate. They have to talk about everything, and they have to beat the topic to death." A male manager told me that his female colleague gave him some excellent insights about their boss. "However," he said, "it was way more than I needed or wanted to hear!"

Indeed, since women are process- (and not goal-) oriented, men believe they are too easily distracted. This adds to the credibility gap between the genders. The solution? Women can strive to keep their communications short and to the point. It's wise to cut back on excessive verbiage. This is truly a case of less is more; the men in their lives may listen better with less.

Learning to be more precise in speaking is equivalent to learn-

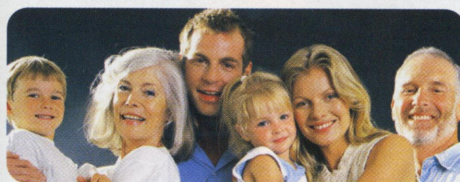
ing to be a good editor of one's own writing. Judith Tingley suggests the only context in which a woman should use "excessive wording" is "when she is talking to women or groups of women, when she wants them to see her as similar to them."

If a woman has been accused of going on too long, or if she's been told to "just get to the bottom line," she should learn to use a pyramid answer style: First reply with only a one-word or one-sentence answer. To the question, "Is the report going to be ready on time?" the proper answer is, "No, it isn't." She can then build with details in two to four more sentences, using a bullet-point style and short, succinct sentences. "The computers were down. We couldn't get them up for three days. . ." and so on rather than giving a long-winded history of the project's failures and successes before coming to the point.

*Dr. Audrey Nelson is an international corporate communication consultant, trainer and keynote speaker. Her book, *You Don't Say: Navigating Nonverbal Communication Between the Sexes*, (Prentice Hall 2004) is available in five languages. Visit her at www.audreynelson.com.*



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