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The Mechanics of
Gender Communication

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Hey, Let me Finish!

The Mechanics of Gender Communication



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I was cruisin' in my Stingray late one night,
When an XKE pulled up on the right.
And rolled down the window of his shiny new Jag
And challenged me then and there to a drag.
I said, "You're on, buddy, my mill's runnin' fine
Let's come off the line, now, at Sunset and Vine.
But I'll go you one better if you've got the nerve,
Let's race all the way...to Dead Man's Curve."

"Dead Man's Curve" sung by Jan and Dean,
written by Jan Berry, Roger Christian, Artie Kornfeld, and Brian Wilson

Is it a challenge to have a conversation with certain people at work, maybe even your immediate supervisor? How do you get your point across without headin' to destruction at Dead Man's Curve? Do you hate when he interrupts you? Don't you love it when she finishes... your sentences?

First Check Under the Hood

What makes communication work? Communication is a process of exchanging information and meaning. It generally starts off with one person saying something to another, the other replies, then the first person says something, and the other responds, and so forth. Patterns of talk expose themselves and have been examined over the years in terms of who talks, who interrupts, and who talks the longest. Our focus is on gender but there are other variables such as culture, age, geography (where you grew up), and status that may influence talk patterns.

Signal when Turning

Wouldn't it be great if we each came equipped with our own blinker we could turn on to signal when we wanted a turn to talk? Since we don't, the next best thing is to learn how conversation works, how we take turns, and are able to anticipate and manage the conversation flow whether it is the Monday morning staff meeting or a one-on-one with your supervisor!

These turns take a few different forms.

They can be actual "turn taking," starts and stops of conversation: one stops talking and the other responds by starting to talk. Or they may be interruptions: one breaks in or starts talking causing the other to stop when she/he hasn't finished her/his sentence or train of thought. Interruptions are usually viewed as disruptive, taking control of the conversation away from the speaker. Another form of turn taking is called overlapping: one starts talking simultaneously while the other speaker is still talking; the other speaker often continues. Overlapping may take a more supportive approach, indicating agreement with or boosting up the speaker. Comments like "uh huh," "umhmm," "yeah, right," "really?," "good idea," and "that sounds good," uttered when the other is still speaking, generally indicate that you're listening to the speaker, not necessarily agreeing, and you're not interrupting to speak or take over the conversation.

Turn taking has been studied for years by sociologists and communication experts. Research from the mid-70's and early 80's suggested that few overlaps and interruptions happened in conversations between women and women or between men and men. Yet in conversations between men and women, more interruptions occurred than overlaps, and 96% of the interruptions occurred by men. A review of research from the early 90's on interruptions and gender found no clear evidence of men interrupting women more frequently and

suggested it was important to focus on the content of the discussion and the reasons for the interruption. The tendency for men to interrupt more than women was significant across 43 published studies in a 1998 review of gender and turn taking. Let's look at the impact of turn taking and interruptions on women and men.

Destruction at Dead Man's Curve?

What are the consequences for blurting out that comment or question and interrupting the speaker? How do you feel when you're interrupted? Those being interrupted often feel that the "listeners" aren't really listening. The listeners appear to be planning on how, when, and with what they can interrupt the speaker. In U.S. culture there seems to be a universal teaching that we "speak when spoken to" and "don't interrupt when someone is talking." The speaker may view the intrusion as disrespectful, harassing, or an effort to discredit her/him. Those witnessing the person interrupting the speaker may view the interrupter as rude or disrespectful. Here's an interesting finding that may impact you and your talking style at your next group meeting: women interrupting men were perceived more negatively - as rude, irritable, and self-centered - than when interrupting other women or even men interrupting women or men.

Men may interrupt for different reasons than women. "Research indicates that men are more likely to interrupt to control conversation by challenging other speakers or wrestling the talk stage from them, whereas women interrupt to indicate interest and respond to others" (*Gendered Lives* by Julia Wood, 2005). Another explanation for interrupting and perceptions of interruptions follows.

...men generally interrupt more than women because interruptions are considered normal and good-natured within the norms of masculine speech communities... Whereas interruptions that reroute conversation might be viewed as impolite and intrusive in feminine speech communities, the outgoing, give-and-take character of masculine speech may render interrup-

The tendency for men to interrupt more than women was significant across 43 published studies in a 1998 review of gender and turn taking.

tions as just part of normal conversation. (*Gendered Lives* by Julia Wood, 2005.)

Turn taking and interruptions continue to be explored. Do you consider yourself a great interviewer? Be aware that research shows that both men and women interrupters interrupted their women applicants more than the men applicants. Are interruptions used as power plays, an attempt to take over the conversation, or an effort to change the topic? Or is the behavior supportive, like an overlap, confirming that the listener understands and supports the speaker's view?

Avoid the Potholes

Take charge and manage the conversation. Now you know what to expect when conversing with someone of the opposite sex. Our conclusions today are not that much different than those from 20 years ago. (Yikes! I feel like I'm in a time warp!)

Men and persons of high status talk more than do women and low status persons. Men interrupt others more than do women, and women are the victims of more interruptions than are men. Men overlap women more than women overlap men. ... The communicative patterns in this area imply that women are less competitive and aggressive in interactions; men appear to compete and win. Men talk, interrupt, and overlap more frequently... (Gender and Communication by Judy Pearson, 1985)

There's more discussion around other factors besides or in addition to gender that influence the pattern of turn taking and

interruptions. Differences are also dependent to some extent on the content of the conversation, the differing cultures of those involved, education levels, and status of occupations. Either speaker can use power to attain conversational goals, be it taking over the floor, or redirecting the topic of conversation.

Gender Menders

To encourage "gender mending" at home and in the workplace, try these steps to increase more equitable and collaborative strategies in your talk patterns.

What to do when interrupted? You can ignore the person and keep talking. You can yell at them, "Hey, butt face, shut up. I'm talkin' here." You could even throw your shoe at them. However, we don't advocate responding to rude behavior with rude behavior or violence; we don't want to cause more problems at work.

When You're Interrupted

Here are some suggestions you may want to try. At your next business meeting or family event when you find yourself being interrupted, take a crack at this.

- Make brief eye contact with the interrupter.
- Calmly make a statement directed at the interrupter that draws the attention back to you.
- Use the interrupter's name, if you know it.
- Make eye contact with the group.
- Finish your statements or comments that had been interrupted.

Here are phrases either a facilitator or the person being interrupted might use to direct attention back to her or his self or the speaker.

Just a second...

I'm not quite done yet...

Hold on, I'll be with you in a moment...

Let's hold questions until I'm (she/he's) done.

I'll take comments and questions in a moment.

Hold that thought...

Just a moment, while I (she/he) finish(es)...

The Facilitator's Role and/or Your Role when You See Someone being Interrupted

Knowing that women are more frequently interrupted by men, others, especially if assigned as the facilitator at group meetings or events, play a role in mending interruptions. A facilitator can monitor who talks and length of time talking to insure that all present get an opportunity to state their views without being interrupted. Using steps similar to those mentioned above for the individual, the facilitator having seen the interruption can:

- State the interrupter's name, if you know it.
- Make brief eye contact with the interrupter.
- Calmly make a statement directed at the interrupter that draws the attention back to the speaker.
- During the statement, make eye contact with the group.
- As you finish your statement and mention the speaker's name, make eye contact with the speaker.

The speaker then finishes her/his statements or comments that had been interrupted.

Example. "The Man is Not just Along for the Ride"

Sitting at the conference table with several customers, Ross has just interrupted

Rachel's sales report. Chandler says, "Ross," as he gazes intently at Ross. "Hold that thought." Looking at the customers, Chandler continues, "until Rachel's done." Chandler ends his gaze by looking into Rachel's mocha-colored eyes. Rachel smiles and continues discussing her report.

Time to Put the Pedal to the Medal

Well - the last thing I remember, Doc, I started to swerve.

And then I saw the Jag slide into the curve.

I know I'll never forget that horrible sight.

I guess I found out for myself that everyone was right.

"Won't come back from Dead Man's Curve."

"Dead Man's Curve"

Now it's up to you to practice some of these skills. Start by being aware of your own conversation. Do you interact differently with men than women? Monitor your own interruptions: who, where, and why you interrupt or overlap other's talk. Pay attention to the conversations around you whether you're in the work cafeteria or at the bus stop. When you see someone being interrupted, step in and remind the group to let the person finish. If that person doesn't want to finish, they'll let you know. And they will appreciate your efforts for monitoring the conversation. The next time you want to interrupt someone, bite your tongue (not too hard) and let that person finish. The speaker will notice and appreciate how intently you have been listening to them. You read the whole article. Now you've got your instructions to keep you out of "Dead Man's Curve." Start practicing. Go on, try it. Try it now.

Both Dr Brown and Dr Nelson are PhDs in Communication. This is an excerpt from their upcoming book, "SheDoesn't Know Jack and He Doesn't Know Jill: Breaking the Gender Communication Code from the Bedroom to the Boardroom."

