

Code Switching

Effective Communication Between Women and Men Is a Shared Opportunity

BY SHERRY THOMPSON

In today's economic environment, good communications are more important than ever. There's more competition in the marketplace, and many businesses and families face stressful financial situations.

Knowing how women and men communicate, and being able to switch between the two styles, is crucial in the workplace, as well as at home and in the community, says Audrey Nelson, Ph.D., speaker, author and communications consultant who works with government agencies and Fortune 50 companies in the United States and internationally. Nelson, who is from Boulder, Colorado, is the keynote speaker for the Women's Fund of Greater Omaha's Oct. 1 fall luncheon.

"Everything in the office — from problems to personnel and companywide successes to satisfaction — boils down to communication. There's a direct link between our ability to communicate and our overall success, not just at work, but in life," Nelson says in her book "Code Switching: How to Talk so Men Will Listen," which is due out later this summer. "When careers and paychecks are on the line, effective communication between genders is critical, regardless of whether you work in the mailroom or the boardroom."

Nelson uses the linguistics term "code switching" — having the knowledge of two cultures or languages and readily swapping between them as one communicates — when referring to moving between female and male communication styles.

In business, this translates to using effective communication to improve the bottom line. "It's having a workforce that is not working against each other, but is working with each other and is working as a team," Nelson says. While code switching takes focused efforts on the part of both women and men, the benefits include higher productivity, increased morale, greater retention and higher functioning teams.

"Everyone I know has to work with someone of the opposite sex," Nelson says. "Most of the time, they want to know how to make communications more successful."

Shared Opportunities

"This is a shared, equal opportunity," Nelson says. "Women and men can learn from each other as they bring different skill sets to the table."

Nelson is a fan of the concept of androgyny, or having a combination of male and female traits. Studies have shown that people who score best on

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Claire Damken Brown, Ph.D. and
Audrey Nelson, Ph.D.

androgyny indexes have higher self esteem and are better communicators, she says. Because their comfort levels are higher in both masculine and feminine situations, they can respond appropriately whatever the circumstances.

"Good communicators are adaptable, flexible and plastic," Nelson says. "They have the plasticity to move in and out of different styles and change to meet the needs of the person they are talking to."

Nelson herself flip flops between communication styles about 10 times a day. "I can be nurturing, caring and emphatic. I can set boundaries and say no," she says.

When people define characteristics of a good manager, they list being nurturing and caring, and

also being assertive, Nelson says. Someone who can code switch.

The number of women entering the workforce has steadily increased during the last three or four decades. In the earlier years, women often were viewed as misfits having to modify their ways to the men's culture.

That's no longer the case. Today there are nearly as many women as men in the workforce. More women than men are graduating from college, and with higher GPAs. When a company wants to hire the brightest candidate, that talent pool includes more women, Nelson points out.

The old stereotype of gender communication no longer is valid, says Carol Hunter, director and

cofounder, along with Tim Rouse and Geil Browning, of Influence and cofounder with Rouse of FGI International, which is based in Omaha.

"Today it's about women and men both knowing how to respond to their audiences in order to accomplish what needs to be accomplished in the business setting," Hunter says. "The best leader is not working to elevate self. The best leader, woman or man, is working to serve the organization and to make a difference."

Gender, however, still plays a role. "More and more women are in key roles in business," Hunter says. "In most cases, they have learned to respond to their audience and the situation."

Omaha Remains Conservative

Research shows that Omaha is more conservative than other areas when it comes to women reaching higher levels of leadership. Hunter says there is a growing awareness of having women and men work together for shared success in business, which is a focus of Influence and other FGI International programs.

"The companies that are aware of the issues seek us out," she says. "They don't put it as being a gender thing; they put it as wanting healthy teams working together."

While gender is one component of how people communicate, other factors, such as ethnicity, age, culture, who you are communicating with, biology and social expectations, also contribute, according to Shereen Bingham, Ph.D., professor and assistant director of the School of Communication at the University of Nebraska at Omaha.

"Society instills in us that men are this way and women are this way," she says. While this influences communication, Bingham says it also opens the door for doing things differently.

"We have the agency to communicate in ways that are different from what our society expects, if we want," she adds. "Gender expectation is only one of many things that influence our communication styles. There is not enough emphasis on our similarities."

What research says are men's and women's styles of communications are just averages, Bingham says. "Really, there is so much variation within each gender and so much overlap between the two gender categories," she says. "A lot of women are more assertive than a lot of men, even through some studies have shown that men are more assertive."

Laurie Brekke, owner of Big Ink Writing Services with her husband, Wayne, says the couple has

learned from each other through working together for the past five years. "For us, there definitely is a difference between gender in the way we think about things."

Brekke says she now uses more of a masculine approach to discussions, as she's overcome her fear of confrontation — something she picked up from Wayne, who tends to be bold. He, on the other hand, has learned to be more introspective. "Instead of confronting something, he will step back and think about it first," she says.

To help other couples who work together, the couple produces the podcast "Love, Sex and Business" (www.lovesexandbusiness.libsyn.com), featuring interviews with professional counselors, authors and couples in business together.

While Brekke says she sees examples of differences in female and male communication styles, communication is more than just gender. "It's listening to the other person and trying to put yourself in their shoes," she says.

In business settings with both sexes, men tend to be more bold and competent, Brekke observes. Men often blurt out what's on their minds. Women, on the other hand, tend to be more comfortable in a brainstorming session where they come up with a lot of ideas, while men don't do as well because they are more abstract.

Communications expert Nelson says that if a person is going to be in the workplace, he or she needs to know how to communicate effectively with the opposite sex. When car dealerships found that 80 percent of the purchase decisions were made by women, many decided it was time to get women on the floor selling cars. Denver dealerships that took this approach have been successful, she says.

Why the Differences?

Boys and girls are raised differently, and they get different messages growing up, Nelson says. It begins even before birth. How a mother-to-be talks to her unborn child changes when she knows the baby's sex, Nelson notes. "We are pretty stuck in traditional roles of what a boy can be and what a girl can be."

Genetics also play a role. And, while there are differences in DNA, there are also social influences.

"A lot of communication is on automatic," Nelson says, offering this example: When a team includes male and female members who are equal colleagues, everyone directs questions to the man. When the woman finally gets the floor, which means she has to be highly assertive, she will be interrupted.

Nelson also notes that:

- Men tend to be direct; women indirect.

- Men are goal oriented; women are process oriented.
- Men focus on context; women on data.

- Women focus on relationships, feelings, emotions.

"The differences are good," Nelson stresses. "We

don't want women and men to be the same. Both men and women can learn from each other."

Nelson works with women on how to present themselves and be assertive. "If you don't tell people how you think and feel, how will they know?" she asks. Women, she says, often employ many of the same speech strategies as children. For instance, they may use attention getters, such as "You won't believe what happened to me today."

A man will make a simple request: "I need this report tomorrow." A woman, on the other hand, may lengthen the request to soften it, and use a tag question, such as "Is that OK?"

Women have a high emotional intelligence and are able to empathize with others. But Nelson notes that this doesn't mean men can't express empathy.

"It's really a team effort," she says. "It's about men and women working together. It's about trying to understand each other and being aware of the dynamics that go on," she says. "I don't want gender to take away people's individualism."

Hunter sees humor as one area where women and men differ. "The way we use humor in business, whether a man or woman, is to lessen tension, prevent conflict and, the biggest reason, to have some shared moments of light heartedness," she says. The best teams not only toil together; they also laugh with each other.

Code Switching

Hunter uses code switching to help audiences understand her background. For example, when she was talking about team building with a group where men outnumbered women five to one, she told them about her first full-time job — teaching math to military personnel for the Department of Defense.

"By telling these types of stories, you immediately change any stereotypes that might be in people's minds," she says.

The goal is more effective communication to get the work done together. "The whole idea is women and men working together to meet the goals of the organization."

Audrey Nelson's "Code Switching" book, which she co-authored with Claire Brown, Ph.D., recognizes that men and women have unique communication styles, and it offers practical advice and tips on how to open the lines of communication.

"We're not saying that women have to act like men," the authors write. "That is a formula for

failure because it's impossible, and it alienates everyone at the office. Plus, when you try that, you give up your femininity, and we're the first to admit that it's wonderful to be a woman. The workplace thrives with a balance between both the feminine and the masculine."

Nelson also is author of "You Don't Say: Navigating Nonverbal Communication Between the Sexes." **W**

**Women's Fund of Greater Omaha
Fall Luncheon
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