

DIVERSITY

Anatomy of a Cover Letter

WOMAN

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He Said What?

Bridging the gender communication divide in the workplace

BY JACKIE KRENTZMAN

IT'S TIME FOR YOUR annual review and compensation meeting. You take a deep breath, walk into your supervisor's office, and an hour later come out with an excellent review—and a 3 percent pay raise.

Your male colleague goes in next. He comes out with a smile and a 7 percent pay bump.

Sound familiar?

This scenario is repeated endlessly throughout Corporate America. Regardless of job performance, the man often gets a higher raise, not because he is more competent or was better at his job, but simply because he knows how to ask.

"I hear this time and time again," says Deborah Tannen, PhD, professor of linguistics at Georgetown University and author of the influential book on workplace communication, *Talking from 9 to 5: Women and Men at Work*. "There is a

general feeling by many women that you should not put yourself forward. To ask for a raise by saying how good, how important you are can seem to many women like boasting. There is a feeling among women that you shouldn't have to do that—good work will

TAKE THE LEAD

be rewarded."

And we are not alone. Facebook COO Sheryl Sandberg, one of the most powerful women in American business, fell into the same gender trap, sabotaging her own pay potential. In her new book, *Lean In: Women, Work, and the Will to Lead*, she describes how when Facebook CEO Mark Zuckerberg offered the COO position, Sandberg told him she would take whatever salary he suggested. Later, her brother-in-law told her that no man would ever accept the first offer.

As these examples demonstrate, one of the most sustaining and pernicious gender gaps in Corporate America today

is the difference in communication styles between men and women. Although there are always exceptions, in general, men and women tend to communicate differently—with often dire implications for women.

From Playground to Boardroom

Watch a group of four-year-olds interact on the playground. The girls tend to cluster together, talking, laughing, playing games in which they each take a turn. Then watch the boys. They usually are running, climbing, and trying to outdo one another, physically or verbally. When the two groups mix, in play or in school, the boys more often than not hold the floor and dominate the conversation.

Gender communication disparities take root at a very young age. By the time we reach the workplace, those tendencies are often fixed. "Communication is so habitual that it's harder to change than other things," says Tannen.

Studies, including Catalyst's Women "Take Care," Men "Take Charge," have shown significant communication and leadership styles between the genders. Polls within Corporate America demonstrate that traits attributed to male behavioral and communication styles are generally considered to be problem solving, dominant, active, achievement oriented, forceful, ambitious, confronting conflict directly, self-confident, rational, tough, and unemotional. The equivalent female traits include affectionate, appreciative, conflict avoidance, emotional, friendly, sympathetic, sensitive, warm, supportive, and whiny.

It's no wonder that at the regular Monday morning meeting, even if a woman is the appointed leader of the group, a man, or several men, will log more airtime.

"Take a typical Monday morning staff meeting," says Audrey Nelson, PhD, author and corporate trainer on communication strategies. "Getting the floor in a meeting is hard. It takes assertiveness skills to get the floor, and from childhood, men have been trained to do it. Men have no problem jumping into a conversation and giving an opinion. They also know how to keep the floor. As a result, men tend to dominate meetings, often talking three to four times longer than women."

Nelson explains that women tend to cede the floor to someone more aggressive because they are taught that the greatest value is to be liked. They want approval and affiliation, and they value relationship building, bonding, and honoring the group dynamic. Men generally don't value those qualities as highly. They value imparting information, reaching a decision as directly as possible, and, in some cases, being right and being acknowledged for it.

"This puts a woman in a double bind," says Nelson. "If she tries to get the floor the way a man does—for example, when someone tries to interrupt her, to hold eye contact with that person and say, 'I'm not done.—she is considered bold, maybe even a bitch. But if she doesn't and lets the man take over the conversation,

Communication and Culture

The workplace communication gap is not just a division in approach between the sexes. Communication styles can differ greatly among various cultures and ethnicities. *Diversity Woman* talked with Dr. Audrey Nelson about culture communication and perceptions in the workplace.

Diversity Woman: Do communication patterns differ among cultures?

Audrey Nelson: Absolutely. There is always a cultural layer. For example, Mexican American women tell me they always have to fight machismo.

DW: What about Asian cultures, in which women are sometimes expected to show deference to a man?

AN: Yes, that doesn't always play out so well in a workplace when a woman manages a man. Many of the Asian women I have worked with in training talk about how hard this is. In their culture, they are rewarded for keeping quiet, for being soft in their approach, for not speaking up—the exact opposite of what is expected in the American workplace.

DW: Do African American women have any special challenges?

AN: Many African American women are very vocal, and they are taught to speak up. So sometimes in the workplace, when they express their opinion as they have been taught, this can rub people the wrong way. They have told me that if a white woman gets animated about something, it is okay. But when an African American woman does, look out—we've got an angry black woman on our hands.

DW: What are some solutions? What can a multicultural woman who has a communication style outside her

company's norm do to gain acceptance and be heard and respected?

AN: Reaching across the aisle to open lines of communication can be like walking on a tightrope; it requires a lot of self-awareness and self-management. One could easily argue that women in the "power down" position have to do more of the accommodation. The ability to "code-switch" and not alienate your audience, co-workers, or boss contributes to a successful outcome. The ability to speak in common terms, so work gets done, conflict gets resolved, and mutual understanding and respect prevail in the workplace and beyond, is the goal.

Here are more tips for improved cross-cultural communication.

1. Know your audience and adjust your style to bridge the culture gap.

The best communicators have flexibility and plasticity to adjust their style to meet the demands of the situation they are in. This does not mean you "give up" your style or who you are. It means you develop a larger repertoire of behaviors.

2. Be able to culture flex. The old saying goes "when in Rome." Have you ever noticed that when you travel to a foreign country and learn a little of the language, norms, and customs, your visit goes more smoothly and people respond to you better?

3. Get out of your comfort zone. Women from Vietnam, China, and Japan have shared that it takes a lot of courage to speak up. Women are supposed to remain silent. So stepping up and making a comment takes a lot of courage and may seem awkward at first.

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she can be considered a doormat. It is damned if you do, damned if you don't."

Meetings are only one of many venues in which communication styles can differ between the sexes. Even in one-on-one communication, the prototypical female style can lead to an erosion of respect and power for a female executive.

For instance, women are more prone to ask questions and have different objectives than men. Men ask questions to gather information. Women do as well, but they also ask questions—and even go so far as to pretend not to know the answer when they actually do—to show interest in what the other person has said in order to cultivate the relationship. By building up someone else's confidence and the public perception of her expertise, the woman leader is boosting not herself, but her team.

"Communication style doesn't come down to having confidence, but it affects how others judge confidence," says Tannen. "Women tend to use indirect language to ask people to do something, and this can be seen as a sign of lacking confidence. For example, a female department head may ask a subordinate, 'Can you do me a favor and make these copies for me?' She didn't need to word it that way. And if the manager's supervisor heard her ask for copies in such a way, she could be perceived as having a lack of confidence."

Closing the Gap

Most companies in the United States are led by men and have a male-dominated culture, which means a male communication style, which is intertwined with a male leadership style. "They cannot be separated," says Nelson. So once a woman becomes "branded" as weak or

lacking confidence, no matter how competent she is at her job, she may be fighting an uphill battle for respect, promotion, and pay.

What's a woman to do? Should she suddenly begin to interrupt and dominate meetings? Bark out orders to staff? Demand a 15 percent raise?

"The biggest mistake a woman can make is to become a man," says Nelson. "To walk, talk, and behave like a man. Nobody likes it when somebody does that, women or men. And why would you give up some of the great female skills? We are better listeners, empathetic, better readers of non-verbal cues. Why trash that?"

"The answer is, women—and men—need to adopt a form of workplace androgyny, what we call gender flexing," Nelson continues. "This means I keep my great feminine skills. I can be caring, nurturing, open to giving an employee time off because her husband left her. But an hour later, when a pushy vendor tries to corner me into the sale of a product I don't want, I can be assertive, set bound-

aries, and say no. This allows me a bigger behavior repertoire."

This means, when it's time to conduct your weekly meeting, be authentic. There is nothing wrong with beginning with five minutes of chitchat, asking about everyone's families or weekend, to establish rapport. And by all means, go ahead and make sure everyone in the room has a chance to be heard. At the same time, be aware of how others like to communicate and respect that (without letting any one voice dominate). If you have something to say, try not to couch it in language like, "You probably already thought of this, but . . ." And if the goal of the meeting is to make a certain decision, move steadily toward that outcome.

The onus is not only on us. Companies need to take active steps toward bridging the communication divide. Organizations that promote one style of communication and leadership can disillusion the other 50 percent and lose valuable talent. As Nelson notes, one of the Big Four accounting firms for which she consulted lost 75 percent of newly hired female employees in their first three years at the company. "And they wondered why," she says.

In the end, the solution comes down to listening, understanding how others operate, and, above all, not coincidentally, communicating. **DW**

So, why don't men ask for directions?

DW asks linguist Deborah Tannen about the classic male-female communication gap.

"If you need to ask and say 'I need your help, I'm lost,' that is not a negative experience for many women, because it gets you where you are going and you've made a connection with someone in the process. But many guys are uncomfortable, because they feel they are putting themselves into a one-down position. A man tends to want to have the knowledge. Men tend to focus on the who's-up, who's down aspect of relationships, while women tend to focus on the connection aspect.

So, in a man's world, it makes sense to ride around for 30 minutes to find a destination. Perhaps now with GPS, this won't happen. But I've been told that many guys put the GPS on but won't listen to it. They think, 'I'm not going to let her tell me what to do!'"

—Deborah Tannen

