Gender Differences in Workplace Communication

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A few years ago, I conducted research in the United States, Europe and Canada to see how gender differences in communication were displayed in the workplace. The first thing I found was that both men and women identified the same sets of strengths and weaknesses in themselves and each other.

Top Three Communication Strengths For Females:
1. Ability to read body language and pick up nonverbal cues.
2. Good listening skills.
3. Effective display of empathy.

Top Three Communication Weaknesses For Females:
1. Overly emotional.
2. Meandering – won’t get to the point.
3. Not authoritative.

Top Three Communication Strengths For Males:
1. Commanding physical presence.
2. Direct and to-the-point interactions.
3. Effective display of power.

Top Three Communication Weaknesses For Males:
1. Overly blunt and direct.
2. Insensitive to audience reactions.
3. Too confident in own opinion.

In the workplace, people are continuously — and often unconsciously — assessing your communication style for two sets of qualities: warmth (empathy, likeability, caring) and authority (power, credibility, status).

There is no “best” communication style for all business interactions — and, certainly, there are many exceptions to the generalities I’m presenting — but typically women have the edge in collaborative environments where listening skills, inclusive body language and empathy are more highly valued, and men are thought to “take charge” more readily and viewed as more effective in environments where decisiveness is critical. Men are also judged to be better at monologue — women at dialogue.

Women display more “warm” body language cues. They are more likely to focus on those who are speaking by orienting head and torso to face participants. They lean forward, smile, synchronize their movements with others, nod and tilt their heads (the universal signal of listening, literally “giving someone your ear”).

Men send more “status” signals through an array of dominant behaviors, such as side-to-side head shaking, anger and disgust expressions. They stand tall or they sprawl, sitting with their legs spread or widely crossed, their materials spread out on a conference table, and their arms stretched out on the back of a chair.

In all cases, a communication style turns into a weakness when overdone. A female’s collaborative approach can come across submissive and a male’s directness can be taken as callousness. Men come across as too aggressive when their expansive postures infringe on other people’s personal space, when they have a “death grip” handshake, and when they emphasize status cues to the point where look haughty and
uncaring. Women are viewed as weak or passive when they are unnecessarily apologetic, when they smile excessively or inappropriately, and when they discount their own ideas and achievements.

Here are a few more examples comparing communication styles at work:

To a woman, good listening skills include making eye contact and reacting visually to the speaker. To a man, listening can take place with a minimum of eye contact and almost no nonverbal feedback. (Women often cite a lack of eye contact as evidence that their male boss “doesn’t value my input.”)

When a man nods, it means he agrees. When a woman nods, it means she agrees or is listening or is encouraging another to continue speaking.

Men have a greater ability to hold their emotions in check and to “keep a poker face” in business situations. Women are more spontaneously emotionally expressive and have less ability in controlling their emotions displays.

Because they better at accessing the full message (words and body language), women are better at gauging reactions. This allows them to evaluate whether or not they are being understood, and to adjust accordingly. Female superiority in reading nonverbal signals is sometimes thwarted by men’s ability to mask their facial expressions.

Women sound more emotional because they use approximately five tones when speaking – and their voices rise under stress. Men only use approximately three tones, and their deeper voices sound more confident. But, because men don’t have a wide vocal range, they have a tendency to become monotone.

Men expand into physical space, while women tend to condense their bodies — keeping their elbows to their sides, tightly crossing their legs, stacking their materials in small, neat
piles, and contracting their bodies to take up as little space as possible. Men’s expansive posture not only looks more confident, it helps create the corresponding feeling of confidence. By contrast, when a woman’s posture makes her look smaller, it also makes her feel less powerful.

Women too often have from a “good student” mentality, believing that people in charge will notice their hard work and positive results and promote them. Men are more aware that they need to promote themselves (and their hard work and positive results) to get ahead.

As women make decisions, they tend to process and think of options out loud. Men process internally and don’t speak until they come up with a solution.

Men’s relative discomfort dealing with emotion leads them to look for solutions. Women more readily understand that sometimes people just need to be heard.

In business meetings, men talk more than women. One perspective on this verbal disparity comes from former Secretary of State Madeleine Albright, who – when asked what advice she had for up-and-coming professional women – replied, “Learn to interrupt.”

Two men speaking will angle their bodies slightly, while two women will stand in a more “squared up” position – a stance (when exhibited by males) that most men perceive as confrontational.

Men who don’t know each other well tend to keep a greater distance between them than women who have just met. This difference in interpersonal distance as determined by gender is even true in online communities that use avatars, where many of the unconscious “rules” governing personal space in the physical world can be found in the virtual world.

Men make direct accusations. Women tend to avoid confrontation
and prefer indirect accusations.

When considering how gender affects communication, keep in mind that with any human interaction, rarely is anything exact. Still, it is helpful to know when your personal “default” communication style (whatever it may be) is an asset, and when it becomes a deterrent. Comparing your strengths and weaknesses to these generalized gender differences is one place to start. And enlarging your repertoire of communication skills, so you can employ strategies that are most effective under various circumstances, will definitely give you an advantage. The most effective communicators, male and female, are masters at balancing power and empathy signals, so that they come across as both confident and caring.

About the Author: Carol Kinsey Goman, Ph.D. is the author of “The Silent Language of Leaders: How Body Language Can Help – or Hurt – How You Lead.” The impact of body language on leadership effectiveness is a topic she addresses in keynote speeches and seminars on “The Power of Collaborative Leadership.” She can be reached at Carol@CarolKinseyGoman.com.