How to Close the Communication GAP Between Men and Women

BY DEBORAH TANNEN

ALTHOUGH IT seems that men and women grow up in the same world, how they use language—in different ways and for different purposes—makes it seem that indeed the two sexes are talking at cross-purposes. For women, talk is the glue that holds relationships together; it creates connections between people and a sense of community. For men, activities hold relationships together; talk is used to negotiate their position in a group and preserve independence. With these divergent concerns, women and men typically talk differently when they are trying to achieve the same end. And they often walk away from a conversation having "heard" very different interactions. Consider these two examples of communication confusion:

♦A woman who owned a bookstore asked the manager to do something, and he agreed to do it. Days later it hadn't been done.

Here's what the woman said: "The bookkeeper needs help with the billing. What would you think about helping her out?"

The man had said, "Okay," by which he meant, "Okay, I'll think about helping her out." He had thought about it and decided that he couldn't spare the time. The owner was perturbed; she felt she had given him specific instructions. But what he heard was a suggestion he was free to reject.

♦A women asked her adult son, who lived with her, for help with expenses after he began to work full-time. Weeks later he was acting as if they hadn't spoken about it.

The woman had asked for rent money like this: "I think it would be fair for you to pay rent now."

He replied, "I'm leaving soon anyway."

The woman walked away from the conversation greatly relieved. But as time passed and no rent appeared, her anger erupted. In the ensuing quarrel it emerged that her son had heard her statement as an opinion, not a request for rent. He had walked away from their initial conversation feeling that the idea of his paying rent had been raised, but not settled.

Is it a coincidence that in both conversations, one taking place at work and the other at home, the person who gave "orders" indirectly was a woman, and the person who misunderstood her intentions was a man? According to my own and others' research, the answer is an unequivocal no.

Women and men have characteristically different conversational styles. Although there are ethnic, regional, and individual differences in conversation, a vast number of people—myself included—feel that gender differences account for their behavior and that of their partners, friends and colleagues.

Starting below, a sampling of typical male and female responses to a comment, compiled for us by linguist Deborah Tannen, author of the best-selling "You Just Don't Understand: Men and Women in Conversation."

Talking is the bond that makes women into strong friends.

Understanding the differences between women's and men's styles makes it possible to ease or even dispel the frustration that results when others don't understand what we mean and behave in ways that seem puzzling, if not downright objectionable.

Girls Suggest, Boys Command

RESEARCH BY psychologists, sociologists and anthropologists shows that one of the most striking differences between girls' and boys' styles is how they ask—or direct—others to do what they want. At all ages, girls are more likely to phrase their preferences as suggestions, appearing to give others options in deciding what to do. For example, anthropologist Marjorie Harness Goodwin of the University of South Carolina observed girls who were making glass rings out of bottle rims on the streets of Philadelphia. They made suggestions like, "Let's go get more bottles," or "Let's wash them because they might have germs in them." They gave reasons for their suggestions, and the reasons involved the good of the group. Goodwin found that boys at play tended to give each other commands like, "Don't come in here where I am!" Stanford University developmental psychologist Eleanor Maccoby also found that girls try to influence others by making polite suggestions, and boys do so by more direct commands.

Women and men bring these habits and expectations, formed during childhood play, into adulthood. At work, for example, many women are intensely uncomfortable with male bosses who give bald commands. One woman said that when her boss gives her instructions, she feels she should salute and say, "Yes, boss!" His directions sounded so imperious as to border on the militaristic. Another woman told me that she enjoyed working for a woman who tended to say, for example, "I have a problem. I have to get this report done, but I can't do it myself. What do you think?" Predictably, the employee would offer to write the report.

Though most women understand and appreciate such polite requests, a male employee might find such a request inscrutable. If he does perceive that he is being invited to offer to write the report, he might resent being pressured to offer rather than being assigned the task outright. People with direct styles of asking for things, including most men, perceive indirect requests as manipulative.

Calling a conversation style manipulative is often just a way of blaming others for our discomfort with their styles. This boss's way of allowing her employee to offer to write the report is no more manipulative than making a telephone call, asking, "Is Rachel in?" and expecting whoever answers to call Rachel to the phone if she is in. Only a child is likely to answer "Yes" and continue holding the phone—not out of orneriness but because of inexperience with the conventional meaning of the question. This is exactly what leads direct people to feel that indirect orders are illogical or manipulative—they do not recognize the conventional nature of indirect requests.

How to Get Him to Help at Home

NOT PERCEIVING such requests at home may be why some men don't do more work around the house. The husband genuinely doesn't understand that when the wife says, "The house is really messy but I don't have time to clean up," she expects him to offer to clean up while she's grocery shopping. A more direct request is more likely to get the desired result.

It might be tempting to interpret girls' and women's indirectness as insecurity: They don't feel they have the right to demand. But this would be interpreting women's behavior from the perspective of men's styles. A man in a position of authority, like boys at play, is likely

to give orders in a bald, direct way because that's the way boys and men typically establish and reinforce their authority. But women, like girls at play, assume that their authority is clear because of their position. They do not expect to have to recreate it continually in how they give orders. This could just as logically be interpreted as showing they are more secure, since they don't feel they have to keep proving themselves by talking tough; they feel they merely have to make it clear what they want.

Another common misjudgment is that being indirect is somehow less than honest. Indirect communication is perfectly clear when the indirectness is mutually understood. Many—in fact, most—cultures of the world operate with everyone being indirect. American men who go to Japan and try to do business by getting right to the point don't get very far. And women's styles work just fine with other women who have similar styles, just as Maccoby found that girls' indirect styles are perfectly effective with other girls. The bookstore owner, for example, did not encounter problems with her female employees, though she spoke to them in the same way that confused the men who worked for her.

Given these differences, how should the bookstore owner give orders to male employees? She would probably not feel comfortable saying, "Help the bookkeeper with the billing today." It would feel too impolite and would make her uncomfortable. A possible solution might be to find a compromise between her indirect style and the more direct style that is more typical of men. She might say, "Sally needs help with the billing. I'd like you to help her out today. Is there any reason you can't?" "I'd like you to" should satisfy her sense of politeness, and she is stating the reason for her request. She is also giving him an opportunity to express his reason for not complying, if there is any. Yet it is clear that she is telling him what to do.

In actuality, however, the bookstore owner did not need to change her style at all. As a result of their discussion, the manager now realizes that when the owner "asks" him if he wants to do something, she is really telling him to do it. Because of the roles they are in—she's the boss, he works for her—he was more motivated to adjust than she. But he couldn't have known how to adjust if they hadn't talked about their style differences.

Style Differences Cause Confusion

AUTHORITY RELATIONS are also significant in the conversation between the mother and her adult son. The mother felt that as the parent and owner of the house, all she had to do was make her wishes known: Her son would feel obligated to honor her wishes. But if she knew that men often honestly misinterpret indirect requests, she might have tried to end the conversation with her son by seeking a commitment to act. She may not have been comfortable giving an order ("Have a check for me on Monday"), but she might have asked, "When can I expect a check?" This is polite in the sense of giving him an option, but it is also explicit about what she expects him to do.

Solutions are more difficult to find when authority relations put the woman at a disadvantage: How can a female employee deal with a male boss whom she finds too imperious? The most hopeful solution would be finding an opportunity to discuss it with him, perhaps by giving him a book or article (like this one) about women's and men's conversational styles. Then the basis for her complaint is not a personal weakness but a common phenomenon. Even if the boss doesn't change, she might find herself better able to dismiss his tone as "his style" and not take it personally. This reframing can be successful even if she doesn't have the kind of relationship that would allow them to talk about the problem.

Men bond through sports and use talk to secure their position in a group.

Asking others to change, especially if they're the boss, will not work if they don't understand the logic of the other style. They will feel their way is right and won't see why should they switch from the right way to a wrong way just to please you. But understanding that there is logic to the other way of talking—that this isn't the neurosis of one woman or man but a systematic pattern—makes most people more likely to consider adjusting their styles.

Women Use Warm-Up Chat

ANOTHER WAY that women's and men's styles differ is that most

Little boys are less likely to heed when girls speak than when boys do.

women mix business and personal talk. For example, a woman who directed a counseling center would meet with each staff social worker weekly. When she met with women on the staff, they might spend three quarters of their time talking about what was going on in their own lives, and a quarter updating the cases and discussing case-related problems. Some of the men on the staff felt that taking time from these business sessions to talk about personal matters was wasted. They believed nonwork discussions about sports or politics, for example, should not be raised during conference hours. They might talk about these things at the coffee machine or before a meeting actually starts, but not during it.

But the women felt that the personal talk established the comfortable relationship between them that provided the basis for working together; it made it possible for them to conduct their business successfully and efficiently.

A woman who works with men may have to moderate her desire for personal talk in a work setting. And a woman who works with women may not have the option of giving it up. This discovery was made by a woman who was hired as editor of a newsletter. She had so much to do that she decided to run the office as she had seen men run offices she had worked in: no time for small talk; get right down to business. After a short time, she began to hear rumblings that the women in the office were unhappy with her. They felt she was cold and aloof, that power had gone to her head and made her arrogant. She decided to modify her style with a compromise between women's and men's styles, taking some time to talk, check in with people about their personal lives and exchange pleasantries. The feeling that the people they work with are interested in them personally seems to be a requisite for many women to be happy in what they are doing. Quite the contrary, many men resent personal questions as intrusive and may even misinterpret them as showing romantic interest.

Getting Heard at Meetings

ONE WOMAN, whom I'll call Cynthia, was a member of a committee organizing a fund-raiser for a political candidate. Most of the committee members were focused on canvassing local businesses for support. When Cynthia suggested that they write directly to former colleagues, friends and supporters of the candidate, inviting them to join an honorary board in exchange for a contribution, her suggestion was ignored. Later the same suggestion was made by another committee member I'll call Larry. Suddenly the group came alive, enthusiastically embracing and implementing "Larry's idea."

Almost any woman who has taken part in a mixed-gender meeting or group discussion has had the experience of having her ideas ignored when she expressed them but picked up when they were echoed by a man—and thereafter attributed to him. Why does this happen and what can we do about it?

The naturally higher pitch of women's voices makes it harder for us to sound authoritative. But this natural disadvantage is often aggravated by the way women and men voice opinions. Many women try to avoid seeming presumptuous by prefacing their statements with a disclaimer such as, "I don't know if this will work, but . . ." or "You've probably already thought of this, but . . ." They may also speak at a lower volume and try to be succinct so as not to take up more meeting time than necessary. In other words, the man who said "the same thing" probably said it very differently. Dispensing with the disclaimer, he may have spoken at greater length, and expressed his idea with certainty rather than tentativeness.

But it would be unfair—and untrue—to blame women alone for being ignored. Research shows that women are not as likely to be listened to as men, regardless of how we speak or what we say. Maccoby observed three-year-olds playing with partners. The little boys did not respond when a girl partner told them not to do something, but they did respond to the verbal protests of boys. Girls, in contrast, responded to the verbal protests of both girls and boys.

Simply put, male children pay less attention to females than to other males. And the experience of women at meetings indicates the same is true for adult men and women. This does not mean we cannot change how men respond to us; it just means that we are starting out with a handicap that we have to understand in order to overcome. Women may still need to choose the issues on which to speak out if we do not want to be regarded as too aggressive. We may push ourselves to resist disclaimers: Just jump right in and state an idea

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without worrying about how important it is or whether anyone else may have thought of it before. We may practice speaking louder and at greater length, resisting the impulse to have our intonation rise at the ends of our sentences—a pattern often used by women to show consideration and invite response but interpreted by men as a sign of uncertainty and insecurity.

When and How to Speak Up

BEFORE WOMEN decide to change our styles, though, we have to realize that we are in a double bind. If we speak as women are expected to speak, we will be seen as ineffective. But if we speak as men are expected to speak, we will be seen as unfeminine—or worse. A woman cannot simply speak as a man would, any more than she can appear at a meeting dressed as a man. When Geraldine Ferraro spoke as forcefully as a male political candidate would be expected to speak, Barbara Bush said she thought of a word that "rhymes with rich." Women who talk like men are seen as too aggressive, just as men who talk like women are seen as wimps.

Many women try to temper this by limiting how often they take the floor. Elizabeth Aries, a pyschologist at Amherst College, found that women who spoke up at one discussion group meeting would intentionally speak less at the next, so as not to appear dominating. Women students in my own classes at Georgetown University tell me that they consciously make this adjustment as well: If they contribute a lot one week, they keep silent the next. Even Margaret Mead, according to her daughter Mary Catherine Bateson, an anthropologist at George Mason University and a McCALL'S columnist, judiciously chose the issues on which she would speak out, so as not to come across as dominating. Such a strategy may be a wise one for everyone, women and men. On the other hand, it may also be wise to simply decide that we don't mind being seen as aggressive, so long as we are listened to. And we may hope that if enough women adjust their styles, expectations of how a feminine woman speaks may gradually change as a result.

In the Home: Who's Silent Now?

IF WOMEN often have a hard time speaking up at business meetings, there is another situation where the reverse is true and women tend to talk more than men: at home. The same man who dominates the board meeting comes home at the end of the day to a woman who will tell him everything that happened to her during the day—if she was home, what the children did and said, where she went and whom she met, who called to tell what news. If she was at work, she will tell him about the people at work, what this or that colleague said, what happened at the meeting, what she said and how it was received. Then she turns to him and asks, "How was your day?"

And he replies: "Okay."

Hurt, she presses, "Didn't anything happen at work?" "Nope," he answers, honestly. "It was just a day like any other." Or he might say, "I had a rotten day; I just want to relax." "What happened?" she encourages, eager to hear his woes. "Oh, nothing special. It was just a rough day, that's all. The usual."

She feels there is something terribly lacking in their relationship, and in him. He's deficient because he isn't in touch with his feelings, doesn't share, doesn't tell her anything. The relationship is deficient because they aren't as close as they should be. When women are asked the reason for their dissatisfaction with marriage, or for their divorces, they say "lack of communication" more often than anything else. I think they are usually referring to this sort of communication—an unstructured give-and-take about daily events, fleeting impressions and feelings that for most women is the essence of intimacy. When the man who is party to the same relationship doesn't mention communication as a problem, he is probably using a different definition of communication: He feels their communication is fine because when they have a major decision to make, they sit down and discuss it. His definition of intimacy is spending time and doing things together.

To deal with this frustration, the most important thing, again, is understanding the differences between women's and men's styles. Many women are relieved to learn that their partner's reluctance to tell what happened during the day is not an intentional withholding of information and intimacy; many men feel a burden lifted when they understand why their partners want that sort of talk and what it is.

Ways of adjusting will be negotiated by each couple. She may simply accept that she isn't going to get that kind of intimate chitchat from him and seek it from her friends. On the other hand, some men will adapt once they understand the kind of conversation their wives or girlfriends want and why they want it. Many men have learned to tell about their days, and more men have at least begun to listen and not tune out the women in their lives because of a conviction that she's going on and on about nothing. One couple hit upon a compromise: She wants to come home and start talking immediately; he wants to read the newspaper and unwind. So she leaves him alone for an hour, and then he puts down the newspaper and talks—or at least listens—to her.

Talking in new ways is difficult at first. Our sense of the "right" way to talk, like the right way to behave, is inextricable from our sense of being a good person, so talking in a different way seems like being rude, selfish, illogical or just plain weird. But understanding that conversational styles are simply different ways of being polite makes it possible to develop flexibility without feeling you are compromising your character. Try to speak differently in a safe situation and watch the different ways that people respond. With practice a reticent woman can learn to be more comfortable speaking up in a group, and a stoic man can learn to enjoy exchanging confidences at home. Flexibility can give you more options and more success in relationships with people at home and at work. ■

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