Conversational style...

When men and women talk—
why don't we say what we mean?

BY DEBORAH TANNEN

A perfectly tuned conversation is a paradigm of sanity—a ratification of one's way of being human and one's place in the world. And nothing is more deeply disquieting than a conversation gone awry. To say something and see it taken to mean something else; to try to be helpful and be thought pushy; to try to be considerate and be called cold; to try to establish a rhythm so that talk will sail effortlessly about the room, only to end up feeling like a conversational clod who can't pick up the beat—either failing to get into the chorus line of talkers or breaking in abruptly and bringing the verbal dance to a halt—such failure at talk underlines one's sense of competence and of being a right sort of person.

Conversation is a risky business, steering a course between the conflicting human needs to be both connected to other people and independent. It's like Bruno Bettelheim's example (borrowed from Schopenhauer) of porcupines trying to get through a cold winter. They huddle together for warmth, but their sharp quills prick each other, so they draw apart—and become cold again. They have to keep adjusting their closeness and distance, balancing their needs to keep warm and to get from keeping prickéd—exactly like two people trying to live together or to maintain a friendship.

This drawing together and backing off is done continually through conversation—not only in the major heart-to-heart talks that occasionally are necessary to untangle the knots we have talked ourselves into (and that often get us more tangled up), but also in the seemingly meaningless thread of talk with which we find our ways through the labyrinth of daily life. Any show of involvement threatens the need for independence, and any show of respect for independence threatens involvement. The only way to resolve this paradox is not to say things outright. Enter INDIRECTNESS.

Indirectness is a necessary compromise between coming out and demanding what we want (which would violate others' needs not to be imposed upon) and sitting around with fingers crossed hoping it will arrive anyway (though most of us do our share of this, too)—in search of the proof of rapport that comes with getting one's way without asking, with being understood without explaining.

Indirectness (as linguists call it) makes all conversation an activity comparable to picking your way through a minefield, but the minefield is particularly hazardous in talk between men and women. While many people are prepared to stumble in cross-cultural communication—that is, with people from different countries—few realize that talk between men and women is cross-cultural communication. Culture is a paradigm of sanity—a ratification of one's way of being human and one's place in the world. And nothing is more deeply disquieting than a conversation gone awry. To say something and see it taken to mean something else; to try to be helpful and be thought pushy; to try to be considerate and be called cold; to try to establish a rhythm so that talk will sail effortlessly about the room, only to end up feeling like a conversational clod who can't pick up the beat—either failing to get into the chorus line of talkers or breaking in abruptly and bringing the verbal dance to a halt—such failure at talk underlines one's sense of competence and of being a right sort of person.

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When they grow up, women and men often retain their discrepant habits. For many women, talk is a way of creating and demonstrating friendship; for many men, talk shouldn't be needed between friends (John Wayne comes to dinner). This may explain the frequent complaint of women, "You don't tell me anything." It comes down to different assumptions about what's "anything" to tell.

Men tend to think fewer details in the events of their lives are worth telling (they might think more worth telling objective facts about how things work, sports, or politics). Women like to tell and hear about what happened today, who turned up at the bus stop, who called, and what they said, not because these details are important in themselves but because the telling of them proves involvement—that you care about each other, that you have a best friend. Knowing you will laugh at one's jokes, or tells a story that doesn't seem to make sense, the foundations of one's universe are shaken. One wonders, what am I doing with this person who doesn't understand me or can't tell a story? Or, what's wrong with me that I don't get the point or don't make myself clear?

If it happens so often that husbands and wives, friends and lovers have such a hard time figuring out what the other means, why do they keep resorting to indirectness? Why don't we just say what we mean? For one thing, we may not know what we want or mean—and not be ready to defend it or compromise for it—until we have a sense of what the other person wants or means. And by remaining off-record, we can avoid outright confrontation, we can take back what we said by protesting, "That's not what I meant." But another reason lies in what I call the "birthday present routine."

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asks Jim, "Where shall we go for dinner?" he suggests the Smokehouse. They go, and the food is terrible. Jane says, "It was terrible the last time I ate here, too." Jim feels tricked: "Why didn't you say so?" Jane answers, "You didn't time I ate here, too." Jim feels it would be impossible to oppose the word "why" for example, Bill said, "Let's drop by my mother's tonight." Sally asked, "Why?" Now anyone who speaks English knows the word "why" means. But what did Sally mean when she said it? She might be just asking for information, wondering, say, if Bill's mother is all right. Or preferring not to go but not wanting to refuse, she might be asking "why" as a stalling tactic. Questions are notorious for their multifaceted power. They can be literal requests for information, or hidden ways of manipulation. ("Can you reach the salt?" or "Are you free tonight?") They can put others down by requiring them to reveal compromising information or by putting them in the position of expert (something women are frequently observed to do). Bill answered Sally's question "Why?" with "All right, let's not have to go," assuming that she was indirectly refusing. But he was angry at her for being selfish.

Sally, for her part, who really just wanted to go. He ended up asking herself what she was doing with such an erratic man, who first suggested that they go, then changed his mind on the spot, refused to explain either inclination, at all, and then started sulking for no reason.

Of course, Sally's "why" could have been an indirect refusal. It's common to hear—and comforting to use—the self-defense "I was just asking," even when there really was a hidden motive lurking.

In all these examples, confusion arises because people derive meaning not from what is said but from the way it is said, like a running report on emotional weather. A great deal of casual conversation—maybe most—is relatively insignificant in what it says, but people don't wait until they have something important to say in order to talk. If they did, we'd have a lot more silence, and no way to show how we feel about each other, if we want to be involved—or not—and how.

All conversation is important for what it says about the relationship between the people communicating, as in T. S. Eliot's line, "How much it means to me that I say this to you." Since women have their antenna out way to monitor relationships, they're often more attuned to this function of talk. But being so attuned means picking up a lot of subtle signals which may or may not be intended—and may or may not be accurate. Why don't we just say what we mean—"put our feelings out there" and "check out" our interpretations, as was recommended in some encounter-group parlance of the 'sixties? Because any utterance, including any explanation or request for one, is subject to the same multiple interpretations ("What do you mean, what do I mean?"). Asking for an explanation or giving an explanation itself becomes evidence for lack of rapport—a breakdown in a system of communication we feel ought to be effortless. Underneath, most of us believe, as linguist Robin Lakoff put it, "Love means never having to say, 'What do you mean?'"
Tannen, "Conversational Style: When Men and Women Talk, Why Don't We Say What We Mean?" Vogue, October 1982, pp.185-192.