

Cracking the Communication Code at Work

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A large communication gap exists between men and women in the workplace and the higher a woman rises in an organization, the greater the gap becomes. There is no question that all of us— men, women and the companies which employ us, and depend on us for teamwork— would be better off if we developed strategies and techniques to close the gap.

Why Does The Communication Gap Exist

Stereotyping is generally the culprit and both men and women have some responsibility for continuing the dynamics it produces. Men are acting on old scripts which were developed early on and may have been purely social in nature.

Stereotyping and its effects are somewhat like the iron fist in the velvet glove: you don't fear it when you see it coming but it packs a wallop which is often a knock out punch. When, in a fairly common scenario, a man at work sees you as possessing the feminine traits of being nurturing and kind, rather than assertive and displaying leadership capability, he is unlikely to consider you for promotion to a leadership role. It is wise to remember that women are not at work to be someone's mother or girl friend, sister or buddy. You are there to achieve success and a fulfilling career; you should think and act like someone who deserves success and will be able to handle difficult tasks with swiftness and confidence. When women buy into a "mother-wife-sister" stereotype, they not only perpetuate a frustrating disconnect in communication but assure their own career euthanasia. Let someone else get his milk and oreos or perform his support work; you be his equal; you collaborate on reports, develop new concepts, and be very firm about getting your fair share of the credit.

Communication Disconnect

As a result of this stereotyping, and acting out of old scripts, dysfunctional communication is alarmingly common in the workplace. One of the most common communication disconnects is men talking over women, not giving them a chance to speak or completely ignoring them. In fact, in a variety of ways, women at work are often ignored, excluded, patronized, insulted or undermined.

Women unwittingly acquiesce to their own professional shrinking act by playing out some of the same old, self- destructive scripts. Men can enjoy a spirited debate, argue in the morning and buy each other drinks or catch a ball game as soon as they leave the office. But women, who are not quite as thick skinned, at times, value harmony, as our mothers, no doubt, taught us we should. When offended, dismissed or patronized, our first instinct may be to let it go. Don't make an issue of it. Blend in, we might pass without notice. And all will remain peaceful, and maybe they

will like and accept us after all. But the “good girl camouflage theory” has proved a failed strategy time after time.

You should not be afraid to speak up. You are not at a tea party, or entertaining your grandmother. Recognize that you are in a business context and business is about problems and particularly about solving them, fast and completely. A certain amount of conflict, disagreement, sparring about issues, debating choices and solutions is inevitable. It’s a rough and tumble world out there. If you equate speaking up with being unpleasant and unfeminine, and particularly with some man not thinking you’re the girl he’d like to invite to the prom, then you are already on the down escalator, thinking you might magically, somehow, be going up.

Counter Measures for Women

“Judy B. Rosener’s research published in the Harvard Business Review identifies male-female communication style differences. She found that women “encourage participation, share power and information, enhance other people’s self worth, and get others excited about their work.”

Women often appeal to “equity and fair play.” Men are much more aggressive and go for the jugular. Women have a tendency to preserve harmony over making their meaning perfectly clear so they tend to “hint”. Hinting preserves not only harmony but deniability. If you hint and someone doesn’t like it, you can deny you meant it that way. If you want to practice diplomacy.....which frequently becomes about as cantankerous as you can get.....go to the U.N.; if you want to advance your career, create as clear cut an impression as you possibly can.

To Talk Is To Win

When something happens at work which is dismissive of you or excludes you, you must either speak up or exit the situation, if you truly want to redirect the flow of events and launch some real communication. You don’t have to be shrill or abrasive to speak up; you can simply be firm and clear. You don’t have to physically exit either your job or the building; you can distance yourself to an extent it becomes clear you have exited the situation and its dynamics.

As Kathleen Kelley Reardon, Ph.D. points out in “They Don’t Get It, Do They?...Communication in the Workplace – Closing the Gap Between Women and Men”, “The truth is that a wide range of communication strategies exists between demure and abrasive. Clinging to either end of the range is a recipe for failure. Many women worry that assertive behavior will upset men and lead to disfavor. What they have failed to consider is that they aren’t exactly in favor anyway. Letting others label your behaviors, direct the course of your interactions and exclude, interrupt, and devalue you is not better than upsetting a few men now and then.”

Often the problem women have is fear. You can’t be afraid to either excel, speak up, take a swing at bat or redirect communication in a way that is more positive for you.

When two or three male colleagues on a committee with you get together and have a meeting without you, then tell you “it’s no big deal”, or “you’re just too emotional”, don’t accept it.

Don't accept that this breach of corporate procedure is about you, or that your emotions have anything to do with it. Don't say your feelings were hurt or delve into someone else's psyche for the reasons which might justify his behavior. Just say "I'm on the committee and I should have been there. Simple as that. Don't let it happen again."

If one of your male colleagues suggests you came on strong in a meeting, don't fall back to a Scarlett O'Hara or Melanie response, neither coquettish or limpidly demure. Just say something on the order of "Thank you. A situation this important really called for it."

Or, in a more neutral vein: "How interesting you thought so."

After all, nothing of much importance can be happening or discussed where there is absolutely no conflict. Have the courage to take a stand.

As Reardon says" It's fear that allows dysfunctional patterns of communication to continue. **Once women recognize that they can redirect interactions harmful to their careers, they become empowered to manage the perceptions of others and their own self perceptions as well."**

This is a lesson we must all learn to succeed. Men and companies would do well to learn it also.