

## WOMEN AT WORK

# Bridging communication gap for genders is crucial

**JACKIE DIBELLA**

Did you ever communicate with someone of the opposite gender in the workplace and walk away with the belief that you were listening to a foreign language?

This should not be surprising. John Gray wrote an entire book about this phenomenon, *Men are from Mars, Women are from Venus*. The reality is that each gender communicates differently, so differently that the disparity can both be aggravating and strike one's funny bone.

It is tempting to judge those differences, but that misses the point. Each style of communication is valid and valuable. The goal in understanding these differences is not to change the style of each communicator, but to understand why they occur and develop personal skills for adapting to the difference.

Men and women tend to display certain patterns of behavior. While it is important to not generalize or stereotype, recognizing these patterns is the beginning of success in effectively communicating across genders.

Gender differences start early

in life. Through conversation, little girls seek to be liked and accepted. Little boys speak in competitive terms. Little girls make requests. Little boys make demands. Little girls speak to create harmony, while little boys prolong conflict. These differences are stressed in Teri and Michael Gamble's book, *Contacts: Interpersonal Communication in Theory, Practice, and Context*.



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Rochesterian Sandra Beck-

with's book *Why Can't A Man Be More Like A Woman?* states that "women gather information by asking questions, but men view question-asking as a sign of weakness." Not surprisingly, these behavior and communication patterns are seen in the workplace as well.

Consider the way each gender leads a meeting, makes a decision or delegates work. Several well-respected studies, such as the one conducted by Laurie Arliss in her book *Gen-*

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*der Communication*, explain and prove that women tend to soften their demands and statements, whereas men tend to be more direct.

Women, for example, use phrases like "don't you think" following the presentation of an idea; "if you don't mind" following a demand; or "this may be a crazy idea, but" preceding a question. Men may interpret these statements as lacking confidence or authority. By the same token, men often say "we must" or "you need to" and women may interpret these statements as dictatorial.

There is a misconception that "we work best with our own kind." Mixed-gender groups enhance the quality of decision making. Individuals who support others and build team cohesion are complemented by people who focus on the task

and ensure efficiency.

When each gender is aware of the differences and works to minimize the inherent challenges of the gender communication gap, the benefits can be reaped.

Mixed-gender work teams tend to be more productive, produce better quality decisions and result in greater member satisfaction than do single-gender work groups. Men and women who work together complement and enhance each others' performance. Acknowledging these style differences allows us to focus on content versus delivery.

We must be sensitive to each gender's needs and aware of mutual expectations while we learn to understand our manner of encoding messages, how interacting with each other influences business relations, and how to overcome perceptual barriers. □

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