

Communicating Across the Cultural Divide: Male and Female Communication Styles

by Cheryl Stephens

Gender only begins to explain the great diversity in communication styles. Most of us draw upon a variety of conversational and speech skills to suit the needs of a particular situation.

A person's communication style depends upon:

- Personal history
- Personality type
- Ethnicity or Nationality
- Race
- Gender
- Locale of acculturation
- Era or generation

and those of their parents. It will also reflect particular locations, contexts, and expertise.

Let's just look at some communication behaviors first:

Those who are more talkative will be seen as dominant and controlling. They will also be seen as leaders if they exhibit other leadership behaviors such as asking questions, helping to set up structures and procedures for the groups, giving information and opinions, and identifying and solving problems.

In business, they will be the most-liked individuals if they are also assertive, decisive, and intellectual – and male. Recent studies have shown that women who are strong leaders may gain a grudging respect but will not be appreciated unless they also display good, warm, nurturing inter-personal communication skills. Those who are nurturing, responsive and emotional will be appreciated but not raised to the highest status of leadership and respect.

People who use powerful language are believed to be more competent, intelligent, and trustworthy than those who use “powerless” language. Women are more likely to use deferential – powerless -- language: tag questions, disclaimers, question statements, overly polite language, hedges, and hesitations. Thus they appear to be less powerful but have more personal warmth.

Ruth Taylor, a BC family lawyer, recently spoke to the BC CBA Section on Women's Practice and Equality Issues. She discussed the ways these patterns and perceptions affect a woman's credibility as a witness in the hierarchical and traditional environment of a court proceeding. The minutes of the Section's October 25th meeting contain valuable insights on this issue.

According to Deborah Tannen, in *“Talking from 9 to 5: How Women's and Men's Conversational Styles Affect Who Gets Heard, Who Gets Credit, and What Gets Done”*, “Conversational rituals common among men often involve using opposition such as

banter, joking, teasing, and playful put-downs, and expending effort to avoid the one-down position in the interaction. Conversational rituals common among women are often ways of maintaining an appearance of equality, taking into account the effect of the exchange on the other person, and expending effort to downplay the speakers' authority so they can get the job done without flexing their muscles in an obvious way."

These two approaches to conversation also reflect the personality traits most common to men or women. But beyond gender, personality, while it may also be learned to some extent, may be the real key to understanding communication styles. "Type A" assertive, individualist, aggressive, active, ambitious personalities have more in common with each other, whether male or female, than they do with other more social and collaborative personalities. There are a range of communication styles and men and women spread across this range. However, in certain environments – law, government, business – the dominant or resented style has always been the one identified as "male". Some women naturally acquire the same style; other women acquire in deliberately in order to be heard.

"Finally," Tannen says, "we can't just tell individuals that they should simply talk one way or another, as if ways of talking were hats you can put on when you enter an office and take off when you leave. For one thing, if you try to adopt a style that does not come naturally to you, you leave behind your intuitions and may well behave in ways inappropriate in any style or betray the discomfort you actually feel."

Nowadays the lawyer seeking success should know their own natural communication style, know the tools of other communications styles, and know when to use and how to choose the most appropriate style for the task at hand.