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MORE THAN WORDS CAN SAY:
DIFFERENT COMMUNICATION STYLES BETWEEN MALES AND FEMALES
IN MANAGEMENT

BY
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Thesis Submitted in Partial Fulfillment of the Requirement for
the Degree

of

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MORE THAN WORDS CAN SAY:
Different Communication Styles Between Males and Females
In Management

In order for managers to communicate with their employees effectively, they must understand that gender is a major factor in whether or not the intended message is transmitted and received correctly.

INTRODUCTION

There is nothing more frustrating than saying one thing and having someone take it to mean something else. For example, when a manager is trying to be helpful, he or she is seen as being pushy. When this same manager is trying to be considerate, he or she is seen as being cold. Because of this miscommunication, many cross-messages come about and problems are generated. People tend to interpret the same situation in different ways. A strain is put on the people involved and on the conversation.

Strains in conversation are not only the result of differences in people, but it is also a result of differences in their conversation style. According to Deborah Tannen, Ph.D., "Many instances of rudeness, stubbornness, inconsiderateness, or refusal to cooperate are really caused by differences in conversational style" (27).

Traditionally, male dominance in the business sector has created the norm of how business should be conducted. As a result of this male influence, it is assumed that the correct way to do business is to get down and talk logistics with no time wasted.

This command-control style of conversation is seen as very direct and to the point. By not "beating around the bush" in their negotiations, males have shaped the American way of doing business with their style of communication.

However, this style is beginning to change. Over the past few years there has been a significant influx of women entering the business sector. Along with their ideas and visions, women also bring their style of communication into the system. In turn, this has stimulated both cheer and resentment as they make their way into middle and upper management. Due to their more indirect approach and the sharing of power in their conversations, when decisions need to be made, women are perceived as either passive and unable to hold authority, or as overly aggressive and considered "bitches."

In the work place, these two different means of achieving the same end can cause problems. Nevertheless, with an understanding about differences by both parties, a smoother, more efficient system of communication can be established.

DIFFERENCES

There is a compelling amount of literature on the differences between males and females. It is usually pointed out that these differences are a result of how males and females are raised. Male and female communication differences can often be the result of the different styles of playing together. For example, this includes the idea that females play in small groups, have a best friend they

consult, and generally play games where everyone is included. They are concerned if someone is hurt, and usually play games that require nurturing or caring for others.

Males, on the other hand, usually play in large groups, are independent, and do not have a strong desire to include everyone in the game. They play games where there is a winner and a loser. Their attitude tends to be of one-upmanship. Each of these different styles of interaction requires different communication styles. This is because of the different attitude toward playmates. As these children grow up, their communication style is carried over.

In addition to growing-up with different communication styles, males and females have more obvious differences. They can talk with more than just verbal words. They can also communicate with nonverbal cues such as body language, attention span, posture, eye contact, and attitude. These nonverbal cues are referred to as people's metamessages (Tannen 29).

In general, people are concerned with how their words will affect those around them. Therefore, people prefer not to say exactly what they mean, especially if the news is negative. They allow their metamessages to do the talking for them. This in turn can lead to misunderstanding when words and metamessages conflict with each other. The common cliché of "actions speak louder than words" stems from this phenomenon.

Managers need to notice both verbal and nonverbal communication within their employees, especially in higher levels

of management. Liking versus disliking, dominance versus submissiveness, and positive versus negative responsiveness are all messages that come across due to metamessages. Generally, as a rule, women tend to pay more attention to metamessages than men do. As a result they are seen as having the "loving" touch. Furthermore, most women tend to be able to recognize when someone is bothered about something. Also, "Women are typically portrayed as good listeners with highly developed verbal skills" (Feuer, 24).

Males tend to emphasize the need for independence while placing less of an emphasis on social involvement and noticing metamessages. Males are problem solvers that usually do not enjoy receiving information from others, especially women. On the other hand, women feel comfortable seeking help. Females strive for intimacy and cooperation that is usually a major part of social involvement with other people.

Differences are also seen in the way males and females offer help. Men tend to give informational help that consists of facts. "Women, according to convention, are more inclined to be givers of praise than givers of information" (Tannen 69). For example, men are concerned with quantifiable information such as sales figures and cost cutting activities. Women may point out what a good job someone is doing without involving figures.

Other differences include females being touched by males more than males are touched by females. This can include males putting a hand on a females arm while talking together, or reaching out and grabbing an arm while passing in close quarters as they say "Excuse

me". Females are usually called by their first name while men are referred to as Mr. or Dr.. In addition, females tend to be seen as mothers-not authority holders. All of this sends out different metamessages about differences in gender.

Moreover, one well known myth is that females tend to talk and interrupt more than males. Consequently, "men almost inevitably ask the first question, more questions, and longer questions" (Tannen 76). Men also talk more frequently and for a longer amount of time. In addition, males "interrupt women up to five times as much as women cut off men" (Feuer 25).

These difference between the gender may be conscious or unconscious. Nevertheless, the actions of males and females affect the way subordinates and co-workers communicate with each other.

EFFECTS

The different communication styles males and females have affect management primarily because management is 99.9% communication and working closely with other people. Along with trust and respect, being able to communicate to someone so they can understand the conversation is what allows the company to reach its goals because fewer communication breakdown occur. If the employees cannot understand what the manager wants, chances are the employee will not do the correct thing.

The different communication style between male and female can effect the organization in a very negative way. Deborah Tannen Ph.D., gives an excellent example of this phenomenon in her book

You Just Don't Understand: Women and Men in Conversation,

"Morton, a psychologist on the staff of a private clinic, has a problem with the clinic director, Roberta. At staff meetings, Roberta generally opens discussion of issues by asking all staff members for their opinions. She invites debate about the pros and cons of proposal, but somehow, when the meeting ends, they always end up deciding-by consensus- to do what Roberta thinks best. The women on the staff are happy with Roberta as a director. They feel she listens to their points of view, and they like the rule by consensus rather than fiat. But Morton feels Roberta is manipulative. If they are going to do what she wants anyway, why does she make them waste their breath expressing opinion? He would prefer she just lay down the law, since she is the boss.

Morton's impression that Roberta does not act like a boss is the result of style differences. She is acting like a boss-a woman boss. She prefers to rule by consensus, and the women on her staff like it that way. But he is frustrated by her indirectness; he thinks she should rule by fiat." (pg. 217)

This is a prime example of how different communication styles can create disfunction within an organization.

Another negative attribute toward women is the fact that "When they think they're being nice, women often end up appearing deferential and unsure of themselves or of what they want" (Tannen pg 135). It is usually this type of thinking that causes people to label women as incompetent or "bitches." However, in You Just Don't Understand: Women and Men in Conversation, Deborah Tannen explains that there is a positive side to a females style of communication by stating

"Women's inclination to seek agreement may even be an advantage in management. Many people feel that women make better managers because they are more inclined to consult others and involve employees in decision making, and everyone agrees that employees are more likely to implement a policy efficiently if they felt they have played a part in making it." (pg. 181)

All of this is not to imply that men are not good managers. In fact management was, and still is to some degree a male dominated field. This illustrates that men must be doing something correctly. According to Mr. Gary Gross, an upper level manager for

the U.S.D.A. Soil Conservation Service, empowerment (which is an indirect, power sharing approach) is his preference for communication. Mr. Kevin Sharp, customer service manager, also states that he prefers an indirect approach to communicating with his employees.

TRAINING

Despite the differences between the gender, it is not a hopeless cause. By becoming aware of how the other gender communicates, managers can at least reach an understanding of the communication problems that can occur. Deborah Tannen states in her book That's Not What I Meant, that "We tend to see our own behavior as a reaction to others...If we realize that other's personalities and behaviors are not absolute, we can see the possibilities of changing them by changing our own behavior" (183).

As a result, training and development programs need to be implemented within the organization. The programs should begin by pointing out the differences between the gender and then branch off toward specific topics such as aggression, leadership, and tolerance. In general employees should go through a program based on individual needs and not solely gender (Powell 73). Both males and females can be too aggressive, bossy, or inconsiderate.

Mentors are another way to smooth out communication gaps (Powell 73). Lower level employees are boss watchers. Whatever the boss does, the employees feel they can also do it. For example, if a high executive is impatient toward communication breakdowns,

the employees will also act impatient toward communication breakdowns. If, however, the manager expresses understanding toward gender differences, then the employees will also start to think of gender differences.

Nevertheless, organizations should address the problems attributed to communication breakdown and implement the program it feels is best for the employees.

CONCLUSION

With knowledge that gender can play an active role to whether or not a message is transmitting and receiving accurately, managers can now take a proactive approach toward creating an open atmosphere where people can speak freely. By pointing out differences to employees, they do can acquire a greater tolerance toward communication breakdowns and feeling of frustration.

METHODS OF RESEARCH

My research primarily consisted of reading literature about communication styles. In addition, I did personal interviews with males and females in management positions both inside and outside the Cache Valley (See Appendix A). The interviews, however, were inconclusive. All of the managers emphasized different personalities of subordinates, rather than gender, to be the reason for different communication styles.

APPENDIX A

Date_____

Name of Company_____

Name of Interviewer_____

Male_____ Female_____

Approximately how many people do you supervise?

Is your supervisor male or female?

Does your supervisor "give order" in a direct or indirect way?

What is your predominant style of "giving orders" direct or indirect?

Are you more comfortable being direct or indirect? why?

In a manager's meeting what percentage of the talking is done by
males_____ females_____?

When "giving orders" to subordinates do you encounter:

	Males	Females
Resistance	_____	_____
Ignoring	_____	_____
Compliance	_____	_____
Joking	_____	_____
Backtalking	_____	_____

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