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"Women are in a double bind. If we talk like women, we are not respected. If we talk like men, we are not liked."

See inside, "CrossTalk: Women and Men Talking."

by Deborah Tannen

The Not-So-Gentle Art of Conversation

CrossTalk: Women and Men Talking

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**by Deborah
Tannen**

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woman who owns a bookstore needed to have a talk with the store manager. She had told him to help the bookkeeper with billing, he had agreed, and now, days later, he still hadn't done it. Thinking how much she disliked this part of her work, she sat down with the manager to clear things up. They traced the problem to a breakdown in communication.

She had said, "Sarah needs help with the bills. What do you think about helping her out?" He had responded, "OK," by which he meant, "OK, I'll think about whether or not I want to help her." During the next day, he thought about it and concluded that he'd rather not.

This wasn't just an ordinary communication breakdown that could happen between any two people. It was a particular sort of breakdown that tends to occur between women and men.

Most women avoid giving orders. More comfortable with decision-making by consensus, they tend to phrase requests as questions, to give others the feeling they have some say in the matter and are not being bossed around. But this doesn't mean they aren't making their wishes clear. Most women would have understood the bookstore owner's question, "What do you think about helping her out?" as assigning a task in a considerate way.

The manager, however, took the owner's words literally. She had asked him what he thought; she hadn't told him to *do* anything. So he felt within his rights when he took her at her word, thought about it and decided not to help Sarah.

Women in positions of authority are likely to regard such responses as insubordination: "He

knows I am in charge, and he knows what I want; if he doesn't do it, he is resisting my authority."

There may be a kernel of truth in this view — most men are inclined to resist authority if they can because being in a subordinate position makes them intensely uncomfortable. But indirect requests that are transparent to women may be genuinely opaque to men. They assume that people in authority will give orders if they really want something done.

These differences in management styles are one of many manifestations of gender differences in how we talk to one another. Women use language to create connection and rapport; men use it to negotiate their status in a hierarchical order. It isn't that women are unaware of status or that men don't build rapport, but that *the genders tend to focus on different goals*.

The Source of Gender Differences

These differences stem from the way boys and girls learn to use language while growing up.

Girls tend to play indoors, either in small groups or with one other girl. The center of a girl's social life is her best friend, with whom she spends a great deal of time sitting, talking and exchanging secrets. It is the telling of secrets that makes them best friends. Boys tend to play outdoors, in larger groups, usually in competitive games. It's doing things together that makes them friends.

Anthropologist Marjorie Harness Goodwin compared boys and girls at play in a black inner-city neighborhood in Philadelphia. Her findings, which have been supported by researchers in other settings, show that the boys' groups are hierarchical: high-status boys give orders, and low-status boys have to follow them, so they end up being told what to do. Girls' groups tend to be egalitarian: girls who appeared "better" than others or gave orders were not countenanced and in some cases, were ostracized.

So while boys are learning to fear being "put down" and pushed around, girls are learning to fear being "locked out." Whereas high-status boys establish and reinforce their authority by giving orders and resisting doing what others want, girls tend to make suggestions, which are likely to be taken up by the group.

Cross-Gender Communication in the Workplace

The implications of these different conversational habits and concerns in terms of office interactions are staggering. Men are inclined to continue to jockey for position, trying to resist following orders as much as possible within the constraints of their jobs.

Women, on the other hand, are inclined to do what they sense their bosses want, whether or not they are ordered to. By the same token, women in positions of authority are inclined to phrase their requests as suggestions and to assume they will be respected because of their authority. These assumptions are likely to hold up as long as both parties are women, but they may well break down in cross-gender communication.

When a woman is in the position of authority, such as the bookstore owner, she may find her requests are systematically misunderstood by men. And when a woman is working for a male boss, she may find that her boss gives bald commands that seem unnecessarily imperious because most women would prefer to be asked rather than ordered. One woman who worked at an all-male radio station commented that the way the men she worked for told her what to do made her feel as if she should salute and say, "Yes, boss."

Many men complain that a woman who is indirect in making requests is manipulative: she's trying to get them to do what she wants without telling them to do it. Another common

accusation is that she is insecure: she doesn't know what she wants. But if a woman gives direct orders, the same men might complain that she is aggressive, unfeminine or worse.

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We have to walk a fine line, finding ways to be more direct without appearing bossy. The bookstore owner may never be comfortable by directly saying, "Help Sarah with the billing today," but she might find some compromise such as, "Sarah needs help with the billing. I'd appreciate it if you would make some time to help her out in the next day or two." This request is clear, while still reflecting women's preferences for giving reasons and options.

What if you're the subordinate and your boss is a man who's offending you daily by giving you orders? If you know him well enough, one potential solution is "metacommunication" — that is, talk about communication. Point out the differences between women and men, and discuss how you could accommodate to each other's styles. (You may want to give him a copy of this article or my book.)

But if you don't have the kind of relationship that makes metacommunication possible, you could casually, even jokingly, suggest he give orders another way. Or just try to remind yourself it's a cross-cultural difference and try not to take his curtness personally.

How to Handle a Meeting

There are other aspects of women's styles that can work against us in a work setting. Because women are most comfortable using language to create rapport with someone they feel close to, and men are used to talking in a group where they have to prove themselves and display what they know, a formal meeting can be a natural for men and a hard nut to crack for women. Many women find it difficult to speak up at meetings; if they do, they may find their comments ignored, perhaps later to be resuscitated by a man who gets credit for the idea. Part of this is simply due to the expectation that men will have more important things to contribute.

But the way women and men tend to present themselves can aggravate this inequity. At meetings, men are more likely to speak often, at length and in a declamatory manner. They may state their opinions as fact and leave it to others to challenge them.

Women, on the other hand, are often worried about appearing to talk too much — a fear that is justified by research showing that when they talk equally, women are perceived as talking more than men. As a result, many women are

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hesitant to speak at a meeting and inclined to be succinct and tentative when they do.

Developing options

Working on changing your presentational style is one option; another is to make your opinions known in private conversation with the key people before a meeting. And if you are the key person, it would be wise to talk personally to the women on your staff rather than assuming all participants have had a chance to express themselves at the meeting.

Many women's reticence about displaying their knowledge at a meeting is related to their reluctance to boast. They find it more humble to keep quiet about their accomplishments and wait for someone else to notice them. But most men learn early on to display their accomplishments and skills. And women often find that no one bothers to ferret out their achievements if they don't put them on display. Again, a woman risks criticism if she talks about her achievements, but this may be a risk she needs to take, to make sure she gets credit for her work.

I would never want to be heard as telling women to adopt men's styles across the board. For one thing, there are many sit-

uations in which women's styles are more successful. For example, the inclination to make decisions by consensus can be a boon to a woman in a managerial position. Many people, men as well as women, would rather feel they have influence in decision-making than be given orders.

Moreover, recommending that women adopt men's styles would be offensive, as well as impractical, because women are judged by the norms for women's behavior, and doing the same thing as men has a very different, often negative, effect.

A starting point

Simply knowing about gender differences in conversational style provides a starting point for improving relations with the women and men who are above and below you in a hierarchy.

The key is *flexibility*; a way of talking that works beautifully with one person may be a disaster with another. If one way of talking isn't working, try another, rather than trying harder by doing more of the same.

Once you know what the parameters are, you can become an observer of your own interactions, and a style-switcher when you choose. ●