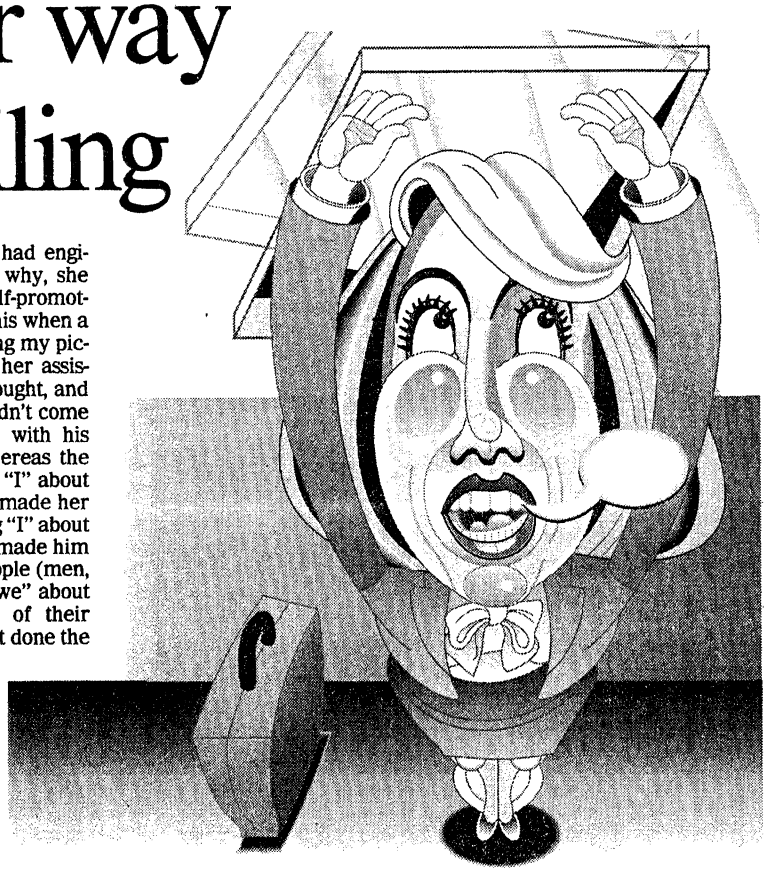
You can talk your way through glass ceiling



By Marcia Stalmer, USA TODAY

By Deborah Tannen

Recently, a caller to a cable television talk show on which I was a guest bellowed, "There is no glass ceiling anymore. Women are getting all the promotions now." What an optimistic view, I thought. If only he were right. Instead, a new study finds that an invisible barrier to women's advancement is still firmly in place. Of the Fortune 500 companies, a mere 13 include a woman among their five highest-paid executives, and of the companies' top 2,500 jobs, only 1% are held by women. Right now, the federal Glass Ceiling Commission is readying its preliminary report for presentation to Congress next month. And lest the caller think that this issue is only a concern of the left, it's interesting to recall that the commission was established in 1991 after prompting by Senate Republican leader Bob Dole.

Why has the glass ceiling been so intractable? One element (though surely not the only one) is what I call "conversational rituals" — automatic ways of speaking that affect the responses we get when we talk to others, including how we are judged on the job.

A man who heads up a large division of a multinational corporation was presiding at a meeting devoted to assessing employees' performance. One after another, every senior manager pronounced every woman in his group not promotable because she lacked the necessary confidence. The division head wondered how this could be.

Although I do not doubt that some women (and men) lack confidence, my conclusion, based on observations, tape recordings and interviews in office settings, is that women are often judged to be less confident than they really are because their automatic ways of speaking — their conversational rituals — are taken literally. The logic of these rituals grows out of girls' socialization not to boast, put themselves forward or try to claim credit in an obvious way.

How often are women told, "Don't apologize. It's not your fault," because they said "I'm sorry" — by which they didn't mean "I apologize" but rather "I'm sorry that happened." Or perhaps "I'm sorry" was just an automatic utterance, no more meaningful than "ya know" or "as it were," to smooth the conversational flow. But because women are more likely to say "I'm sorry" in this "ritual" way, men (and women who don't use this ritual) are likely to take their words as a literal apology and conclude that they are so underconfident that they think everything is their fault.

Another conversational ritual common among women involves seeming to take blame to save face for the other person. For example, a woman whose job it was to approve insurance policies had to tell an underwriter that the underwriter had not given her all the necessary information. She began, "I'm a little confused." When the ritual is shared, this works fine. The underwriter took the blame back on herself and offered the omitted information. But ritually claiming confusion can make you look, well, confused, to someone who doesn't recognize it as a ritual.

I heard a woman saying "we" about a successful project I knew she herself had engineered. When I asked her why, she said, "It would seem too self-promoting to say 'I.'" I thought of this when a photographer who was taking my picture for a magazine asked her assistant for a lens he hadn't brought, and he responded, "That lens didn't come with us." I was impressed with his grammatical ingenuity. Whereas the woman had avoided saying "I" about something that would have made her look good, he avoided saying "I" about something that would have made him look bad. I've also heard people (men, as it happened) who said "we" about work that had come out of their group, although they had not done the work. They weren't lying, but they were talking in a way that could result in their getting credit for more than they had actually done.

A woman who headed a division suggested to one of her managers that he offer a vacant team-leader position to a woman in his group. "She doesn't want to be promoted," he objected. "Ask her," his boss insisted. The next day he reported, with genuine surprise, "She accepted." Promotions often go to those who seem to want them, but many women feel they should not act as if they want a position higher than they've got, although when offered a higher position they assume it with alacrity and skill.

The seeds of these contrasting styles are sown in childhood. Girls learn, from their peers as well as from adults, don't boast, don't put yourself forward, downplay your achievements so you will be liked. If a girl tells other girls what to do in too assertive a way, they call her "bossy" and don't want to play with her. Boys, in contrast, expect to be bossed around by higher-status boys, and they are pressured to emphasize what they're good at and downplay their errors or weaknesses. Take these habits into the workplace, and you find many women who are not taking pains to hide errors and not talking in ways that draw attention to their accomplishments.

Of course, not all women and men talk in the ways that are common among, and expected of, their gender. Many men who talk in ways more common among women run into similar frustrations, feeling they are being passed over for promotions in favor of those who are better at calling attention to what they've done (or appear to have done).

And many women talk at work in ways expected of men, but they often run into a different problem: They are seen as too aggressive, not feminine enough, trying to be like a man. This happened to the host of the talk show I referred to in the beginning. "In my last job," she said, "I did not use that typically female style when I told my secretary what to do. I just spoke to her straight. She went to my boss and complained that she didn't like the way I was talking to her." Damned if you don't.

Men as well as women might find they sometimes get better results by talking in ways expected of women. Recent studies have shown higher satisfaction among car buyers who bought cars from female salespeople and among patients who saw female doctors. A study also found both women and men rated female managers more favorably than male managers.

So the solution cannot be to talk one way or the other all the time. The solution is to know how conversational style works, use this knowledge to monitor your own conversations, and decide what you want to do if you're not happy with the response you're getting.

If you understand how conversational style works, you can decide when you want to try talking differently and when you want to talk the same way. But discuss it with those you work with so they will not misjudge you.

I don't want to turn women into men or men into women; I want to give everyone more control through awareness of how ways of speaking affect getting credit, getting heard and getting promoted — right up through the glass ceiling.

Deborah Tannen is professor of linguistics at Georgetown University and author of Talking From 9 to 5 *and* You Just Don't Understand.