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Decoding Workplace Communication Differences between the Sexes

by Jean Kelley

If you're a woman, you may sometimes wonder how your male colleagues can get into a heated discussion during a business meeting, end the meeting with issue unresolved, yet walk out of the room as the best of friends.

If you're a man, you may get frustrated when talking with your female co-workers about one topic, and they bring fourteen more topics into the conversation - all of which seem totally unrelated.

We all know that men and women think and act differently, both at work and at home, but knowing there are differences between people is only half the battle. To have successful working relationships with members of the opposite sex, you also have to know why those differences matter and what to do about them. The good news is that with a little insight into men and women, you can overcome the apparent communication and behavioral challenges that plague any workplace and gain greater understanding of each other.

Once Upon a Time...

Before we can look forward to a harmonious future, we need to begin by looking back into human evolution. Once upon a time about a million years ago, communities consisted of hunters (men) and gatherers (women). The hunters left every morning and tried to hunt food for the community. The gatherers stayed home, gathered the nuts and berries, and prepared for the food the men would bring back. As far back as scientists can tell, women and men had different roles, and as a result, their brains developed in different ways.

For example, a man's brain goes in and out of a rest state all day. Millions of years ago when men sat in trees waiting for their prey, they had to be quiet and disengaged. They didn't want to scare away their

potential dinner.

Therefore, their brain evolved to learn to engage, disengage, engage, and disengage throughout the day.

Women, on the other hand, couldn't do that. They had to be on high alert all day, protecting themselves and their children as they gathered necessities and tended to the community's needs. Their brains evolved to be always active.

In fact, if you look at an fMRI (functional MRI) of a man's brain at rest and a woman's brain at rest, you'll see that the woman's brain is busy and firing everywhere, whereas the man's brain is quiet. This is not to say that one gender is better than the other is; it's simply an illustration of one of the many differences between how men and women have evolved.

So what else is different from a brain wiring perspective? Here are a few highlights:

- **Brain chemicals.** Men produce more testosterone, and women produce more oxytocin. Testosterone is an aggressive chemical, and oxytocin is a "tend and befriend" kind of chemical. These chemicals are significant drivers in a person's brain.
- **Cycles.** While women have a 28-day cycle, men have a cycle every day. Their testosterone spikes in the morning when they wake up (so they can go out and hunt), wanes in the afternoon, and spikes again in the evening around 8 p.m. It then goes back down, only to repeat the cycle the next day.
- **Brain matter.** Men have more gray matter, while women have more white matter. The gray matter is used for local processing of thoughts and tasks. The white matter is what connects everything. This is why when a woman is processing an emotional event, she does so immediately. All the interconnections

make processing faster in her mind. A man is processing locally and will do so for a longer time. He doesn't have the same type of factors to draw from.

- **Hierarchy.** While both men and women understand hierarchy, men really understand it. Whoever brought back the biggest animal from the hunt, received the most status in the community. Therefore, that desire to be "top dog" and get their point across is innate in men. Likewise, women wanted the security of being with the men who could provide the most food for the family, which is why even today women (no matter what their income level or social status) want to be associated with successful men. It's hardwired. Of course, there are always exceptions to every rule. Within the spectrum of both male and female brains, there are gradations. There is also something called the "bridge brain," which is someone who has characteristics of both the male and female brains.

Why This Matters

Because we're working and communicating with each other every day, knowing the differences in gender communications is vital. Much has already been written about personality, values, and behavioral differences in communication; now it's time to overlap gender differences into the equation.

For example, while women have distinct viewpoints on topics, when they communicate they often try to "keep the peace." Men, however, are typically more aggressive in their communications, more argumentative about their ideas, and more vocal about their stand on a certain thing.

Women focus on building consensus. Because they're contextual and they process information in the white matter, they're

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The Three Pillars of Success

by Eric Adler

A pillar is defined as a firm upright support for a superstructure. Getting ahead in life is like building a superstructure and in order for the structure to stand securely, it needs supporting pillars. Three are all you need and here they are:

Pillar #1: Get out of Your Own Way

The majority of people tend to get into a comfortable rut. They know what they will be doing each day, each week, and each year. Within certain guidelines, their lives are predictable and stable. Predictable and stable, however, are not factors that lead to success. Risk taking and instability are the keys to going from mediocre to stellar. Most people have a difficult time moving out of a comfortable situation and into one of insecurity and unknown turns. This is exactly what you have to do to become successful - get out of your own way.

The best way to do this is to take small steps towards a larger goal. Realize that there are four major areas that make up our comfort zones: geographical, personal, activity-related, and mental. That is:

- **Geographical:** Where we live, work, and play
- **Personal:** Our friends, family, and co-workers
- **Activity-Related:** Our entertainment and hobbies
- **Mental:** What and how we think

Now, the trick to expanding one's comfort zone is to not change all these areas at once. Try one or maybe two at a time, get used to that and then move on to the others. Changing any one area can be stressful. Doing too much too soon will send you scurrying back to your comfortable rut.

Understand that expanding doesn't mean getting rid of what's already there. You can make new friends and not abandon the old ones. You can pick up a second hobby and still enjoy the first. This is an addition not a subtraction process.

Pillar #2: Know Where You Want to Go and How to Get There

It's easy to say, "Set goals." It's not so easy to set ones that are actually meaningful to you. We sometimes get so comfortable that we lose sight of what else there is to strive after. So our list ends up looking like everyone else's New Year's Resolutions: Lose weight, exercise, and spend more time with the family. We all know how successful these broad, half-hearted goals are - made on January 1, forgotten by February 1.

Three factors need to be put into play when setting goals:

- **Set Your Own Goals:** Don't let others decide for you. If a goal isn't meaningful to you, you won't develop the enthusiasm needed to achieve it.
- **Make Your Goals Concrete and Specific:** Don't just say you want to make more money. Set an exact amount and a firm period in which to make the goal.
- **Determine What Effort is Required:** If you don't know what you need to do in order to reach a goal, it's a wish not a goal. Be very clear about how much energy, time, and resources are going to be needed to be successful.

Pillar #3: Stop Talking and Take Action

Deciding to move out of one's comfort zone and setting the goals to get to new levels are the easy parts. These are the planning

stages. Now comes the time for action. Too many times people stop after setting up the parameters for success and then never take another step.

- **Don't Announce Your Goals:** Telling others only invites people who will tell you how hard it will be or why it can't be done. Keep your goals to yourself to avoid all the naysayers.
- **Never Move Backwards:** Don't let setbacks stop you. If things are temporarily going wrong, don't use this as an excuse to retreat. Analyze what went amiss and what's needed to get back on track.
- **Reward Yourself Along the Way:** Break a large goal into many mini-goals. Once you achieve a mini-goal, reward yourself. This will help keep your enthusiasm high and give you many small successes leading to the big success at the end.

Establish these three pillars and you can accomplish anything you desire. ❖

Eric Adler is a trainer and master coach in the fields of communication, motivation and mental training. He is an Austrian-based, best-selling author and Europe's leading social competence expert who developed a unique method for measurable and verifiable personality development. A public study that consisted of 800 adults and teens documented that Eric's unique form of personal development training had a very effective impact. His expertise is widespread in the licensing system in Europe, and he now issues licenses to trainers, speakers, coaches and consultants in the U.S., as well. For more information, visit www.asc12.com or e-mail adler@asc12.com.

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