

Gender Matters—

Understanding the Battle of the Sexes

by Marta Wilson, PhD

Growing up, we learned a lot about gender and the standards by which we would be judged and perceived when we became adults. We were offered much guidance for filling our roles in society. The media bombarded us with all kinds of advice. Some guidance like these tips for wives from the May 13, 1955 issue of *Housekeeping Monthly* call to mind how much gender roles have evolved in less than fifty years:

- ❑ **Prepare yourself.** Take 15 minutes to rest so you'll be refreshed when he arrives. Touch up your make-up, put a ribbon in your hair and be fresh-looking. He has just been with a lot of work-weary people.
- ❑ **Have dinner ready.** Plan ahead, even the night before, to have a delicious meal ready, on time for his return. This is a way of letting him know that you have been thinking about him and are concerned about his needs. Most men are hungry when they come home and the prospect of a good meal (especially his favorite dish) is part of the warm welcome needed.
- ❑ **Listen to him.** You may have a dozen important things to tell him, but the moment of his arrival is not the time. Let him talk first—remember, his topics of conversation are more important than yours. Remember, a good wife always knows her place.

Times have changed. However, women and men continue to struggle with blending and merging their tendencies and preferences, especially at work. As more organizations adopt team-based approaches, people must learn to effectively manage multiple professional relationships. Poor relations between men and women are a significant source of performance problems. Yet often there are few attempts to comprehend and resolve interpersonal tensions.

Understanding the characteristic differences between men and women helps us adapt to and complement each other's gifts and natural talents. We can benefit most from the strengths of both men and women in the workplace when there's a healthy balance of both gender influences. This article offers insight on how the genders vary and tips for improving working relationships.

Biological and Cultural Variation

Growing numbers of researchers believe that gender traits reflect biological and biochemical differences that take place during prenatal development, as well as anatomical structure differences in the brain itself. Two different factors are primarily responsible for the difference in brain organization of men and women: 1) the localization of cognitive functions within each hemisphere; and 2) the size of the corpus callosum, the structure that connects the left and right hemispheres of the brain. Women are more likely to have language functions in both hemispheres, whereas men are likely to have language skills focused in their non-dominant hemisphere.

Research suggests these differences are caused by the effect of prenatal hormones, particularly testosterone. The language areas in a man's brain are more diffusely organized, as compared to the more focally organized woman's brain. Studies show this accounts for some of the actual differences in communication behavior between men and women. The corpus callosum is larger in females than in males, suggesting there is more communication going back and forth between the hemispheres of a female brain than a male brain. This is the structural basis for the more bilateral brain organization in women.

In certain stressful situations, levels of the stress hormone epinephrine are higher in men than in women. High levels of epinephrine are linked to health problems such as heart disease, stroke and cancer and may account for the higher instances in these diseases in men. Research also suggests that the presence of these chemicals may account for the difference in the day-to-day communication behavioral differences between men and women.

Also, in the past, the roles of men and women in most cultures evolved around their daily sustenance. Women generally took care of domestic duties that kept them close to the home such as farming and caring for children. Men went off to hunt and to battle. Male and female infants were (and still are to varying degrees) socialized differently to fill these roles, from the toys they played with to the tone used to communicate with them. With these plus many other bio-

logical and cultural differences at play, it is no surprise that men and women see the world differently and use different strategies to succeed both personally and professionally.

Differing Communication Goals

Some sources say that men like to talk about things and women like to talk about people. Others report that women talk about feelings and men talk about facts. Others assert that women talk about the abstract and men talk about the concrete. Still others claim that women talk about emotional issues and men talk about intellectual issues. But all agree on one thing - there is a difference in male and female communication styles.

For some, the language of conversation is a way to establish rapport, maintain relationships and make personal connections. For them, emphasis is placed on displaying similarities and matching experiences. Although it varies from person to person, more women than men tend to use conversation as a means of connection. It's no coincidence that people who talk to establish connection also seek agreement in their conversation. For them, disagreement means a threat to intimacy. They share an inclination to help explore the other side of an argument or position and feel they are being supportive. For those focusing on connections, their motivation may be to minimize differences with others. Their goal is to maintain the appearance of similarity and equality - to level the status playing field. This is not to say that such people don't have the desire to feel knowledgeable or in control. In fact, they feel their power is enhanced if they can help. Even more, if they are focusing on connection rather than independence and self-reliance, they feel stronger when the needs of the many are served and the "community" is strengthened. People who talk as a means of connection feel they are not alone in life when they engage in small talk. They're not being trivial. They see their day-to-day lives as material for connection.

For others, talk is primarily a means to preserve independence, negotiate and maintain status in a hierarchical social order. They exhibit knowledge and skill by holding center stage through verbal performance. These are the folks who tell stories, jokes or impart information. Although individual tendencies vary, in general, men tend to use conversation as a means of negotiation. How many times have we heard conversations at work centered around "points of attack" and "coming out on top". This competitive style of thinking and behavior is a big part of the business world. It is transactional in nature, with a clear beginning and an end. It's like a football game - once the conversation is over, it's over. Rehashing a completed conversation is as useless as rescheduling a completed football game. You can have a new game, but you can't replay the old one.

Intimacy is key in a world of connection. Independence is key in a world of status. The workplace brings both worlds

together. In the world of status, we have people telling others what to do and people taking orders. In the world of connection, people navigate complex friendship networks and try to reach consensus. All of us need both intimacy and independence, but many individuals tend to focus on one of the other. Following are some tips to help achieve balance through feedback, agreement management, and more.

Tips for Stellar Relationships

Any ongoing association between two or more individuals is a relationship. Fostering relationships at work can make all links in the organizational chain stronger. People in relationship influence each other's thoughts, feelings, and behaviors. Our workplaces are complex networks of relationships, and the work we do — whether functional, transformational, or crisis driven — is influenced by our connections to coworkers. Skillful relationship management is critical to our professional effectiveness. If we possess the ability to manage relationships, we are better equipped to be a valuable team member. All people want to feel cared about and respected by others. Therefore, managing relationships involves empathizing with other perspectives, acknowledging feelings, respecting differences, and constantly seeking truth in interactions.

Seek Feedback | An easy way to monitor and manage the impact of our behavior in relationships is to ask for feedback. Unfortunately, people often wait for work relationships to become strained or damaged before making the effort to seek feedback. Interestingly enough, the feedback already exists in the giver's mind. All the receiver needs to do is ask for it. This is because people notice and remember details about other people's performance. People notice behaviors and actions that create successes and failures. Feedback is a precious gift. It is a gift that is o.k. to request. People like to give feedback but are sometimes fearful of creating hurt feelings by offering it. When we ask for feedback, as opposed to waiting for others to offer it, our receptivity is clearly demonstrated.

Manage Agreements and Breakdowns | Our cumulative record of agreements forms the essence of how people view us. How we approach and honor commitments is a defining dimension of our life. Over time, our ability to make and manage agreements will determine the strength of our relationships. Part of relationship management is how we approach agreements and breakdowns. Ultimately, performance around our agreements forms the basis of trust that others have for us. Therefore, our skill in making and managing agreements is critical to strong and lasting relationships with people of both genders.

When a breakdown in an agreement occurs, one must first acknowledge the breakdown. Many individuals, both male and female, do not take this important step and instead offer a flood of excuses. Without acknowledgement, conversation

about the breakdown can come to a standstill and jeopardize the relationship. Without acknowledgement, natural tendencies may become more pronounced. One thing can lead to another, and before it's all said and done, tension abounds. At times like these, it is important that each party go back to the original agreement and seek clarification. Things to check include: the nature of the agreement; what each party heard; and the definition of performance. Following acknowledgment of a breakdown, a new understanding must be forged regarding future expectations. The new agreement is based upon lessons learned from the breakdown. In this way, one can grow from failed agreements and learn how to better manage future commitments.

Strengthen Traditional “Masculine” and “Feminine” Communication Styles | If your strengths are people, feelings and relationships (a more traditional feminine style) you have years of experience and a storehouse of knowledge about people, feelings and relationships. Enhance it further by being vocal and visible about your observations and knowledge. In order to adapt effectively, you might consider increasing your knowledge of and the frequency with which you talk about sports, money and business. Leverage your facilitative listening skills. Your abilities to manage the flow of interaction, to really listen and hear what people say and to gather information from others in a non-threatening way are strengths to celebrate.

On the other hand, if sports, money and business (a more traditional masculine style) are part of your framework and psyche, that's great. A recommendation to increase your effectiveness even more is when talking about business, money and sports, make it brief and specific, unless you have reason to believe that person is as knowledgeable and interested as you are on the topic. If you are precise, concise, and structured, it's one of your natural strengths. Although people sometimes perceive your communication as being short and brusque, brief or specific comments are more likely to be heard and understood by both men and women. Still, brush up on your “softer” skills. You need to be able to talk about people, feelings and relationships for the same reasons you need to be able to talk about sports, business and money. They are all important parts of our culture.

CONCLUSION

Essentially, adapting to difference, whatever the difference, boils down to treating other people with respect. This is the higher meaning of “do unto others.” Treating people with respect sometimes means treating them as we would like to be treated. Perhaps more frequently treating others with respect can mean treating them as THEY would like to be treated. There are certainly times when an adaptation the other person would like is too much of a stretch for us. Ideally, there is a midpoint where neither person feels they have had to “give up” something, where both people feel

respected, and no one feels as if they've had to sell their soul. The only way to know what being treated with respect means to another person is to ask, listen, and consciously evolve our behaviors.

In some form, masculine and feminine archetypes, and some of the external trappings and rituals of gender, will always be with us. Life would be poorer without them. The sexes are neither fundamentally different nor exactly the same. When someone else has a quality, characteristic or skill that we don't have, there is potentially much more benefit to us from their contribution than if they were just like us. Even if we're more comfortable with the person who has the preferences we have, we're more likely to produce more, be more creative and perhaps even have more fun working with the person who is different than us.

RESOURCES

- A Perfect World: Words and Paintings from Over 50 of America's Most Powerful People* collected by Debra Trione
- CEASEFIRE! Why Women and Men Must Join Forces to Achieve True Equality* by Cathy Young
- Gender and Diversity in the Workplace* by Gary N. Powell
- Gender and Stress* by Rosalind C. Barnett, Lois Biener and Grace K Baruch
- Genderflex: Ending the Workplace War Between the Sexes* by Judith C. Tingley, Ph.D.
- He Says, She Says: Closing the Communication Gap Between the Sexes* by Lillian Glass, Ph.D.
- Mars and Venus in the Workplace* by John Gray, Ph. D.
- Men & Women at Work* by Katherine G. Kearney, Ph.D. and Thomas I. White, Ph.D.
- The Male Mind At Work - A Woman's Guide to Working With Men* by Deborah J Swiss
- When Mama Ain't Happy, Ain't Nobody Happy* by Kris and Brian Gillespie
- Work Miracles: Transform Yourself and Your Organization* by Stephen Hacker and Marta Wilson with Cindy Johnston
- Working With Groups in the Workplace - Bridging the Gender Gap* by Louise Yolton Eberhardt
- You Just Don't Understand - Women and Men in Conversation* by Deborah Tannen, Ph.D.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Dr. Marta Wilson founded TSI and now leads the dynamic group of PhDs and possibility thinkers whose expertise guides executives to achieve bold enterprise transformation goals. Dr. Wilson represents TSI in the industry and regional community as part of business development in the organization. A Board Member of the Northern Virginia Technology Council, Dr. Wilson is active in multiple professional organizations. She holds a PhD in Industrial and Organizational Psychology from Virginia Tech and specializes in leadership effectiveness. Dr. Wilson created and steers TSI's Feed to Lead Program, which nourishes the body, mind and spirit by supporting leadership potential in local youth. A prolific writer, she has written leadership articles and books, including *The Transformation Desktop Guide*, *Live A Difference*, and, most recently, *Leaders in Motion: Winning the Race for Organizational Health, Wealth and Creative Power*.

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