



UNDERSTANDING GENDER AT WORK

**HOW TO USE, LOSE AND EXPOSE
BLIND SPOTS FOR CAREER SUCCESS**

DELEE FROMM

CHAPTER 5

Understanding Gender at Work: How to Use, Lose,
and Expose Blind Spots for Career Success

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COMMUNICATE

To make your value visible and to advance in the workplace it is essential to use clear, effective, and confident communication. When communication is clear, fewer misinterpretations occur and there is a greater chance that you will be understood and succeed. Effective communication in the workplace allows your ideas to be heard and makes your contributions obvious. If you are not able to communicate well, others may not see your abilities and value. And for advancement, this is key.

In addition to clear and effective communication, it is important for women to learn how to express the language of confidence, influence, and authority. Boys learn early in life to express these characteristics through communication due to the masculine hierarchical view of power (being one-up or one-down) and the emphasis on status. Deborah Tannen who has studied gender communication differences for decades concludes that as a result of this world view, masculine communication patterns revolve around independence, orders, advice, and information as well as negotiation of status in the group. In direct contrast, feminine communication patterns revolve around relationship, with a focus on equality, connection, support, intimacy, feelings, and rapport.¹⁰⁵

Feminine communication styles and habits when viewed through masculine lenses can, and often are, misread. Women and men who use a

tentative style are often viewed as lacking confidence or even competence. On the other hand, women who only use a direct masculine style may gain a reputation for being bossy or arrogant. And those are the polite descriptors. The way around this gender blind spot (GBS) is to become a skillful communicator who is able to select the style that best fits the circumstance and appear confident, competent, and professional.

Language styles and verbal habits arise from personal factors in addition to gender, including national culture, age, geographical area, profession, and personality. All styles or language patterns are valid and work well when used with people who have the same style. They act as a shortcut to understanding and make communication faster. However, differences in style can cause problems in interactions. When men and women communicate without appreciating gender differences in communication or use gender communication habits and rituals unconsciously, miscommunication, misinterpretation, and even conflict can arise. To understand your gender style of communication, a questionnaire is provided at the end of this chapter.

Communication rituals and habits that distract from your ideas and make you appear less competent and confident are examined in this chapter. The career strategy promoted in this chapter is *Go Along to Get Along*. The focus is on managing impressions by managing automatic gender habits and approaches. Tools and techniques (T&T) for speaking clearly, for reducing tentative and uncertain language styles, and for standing firm when challenged or interrupted are provided. Since the goal is not to abandon a feminine style of communication but rather to expand communication skills, the appropriate times to use feminine language patterns are also discussed.

DEALING WITH COMMUNICATION BLIND SPOTS

GBS: RAPPORT NOT REPORT

For women using a feminine style, conversations are a way to build relationships and enhance intimacy. For men, they are a way to solve problems, give information, and establish status. Thus men tend to be direct, voicing their ideas and opinions boldly and concisely. Women, who like to solicit perspectives from others, tend to use a conversational style that invites comment and discussion *even when they have already made a decision*. Women have been found to provide a lot of detail to show that we have done the work. They use preamble as a way to connect with the listener before providing information.

Feminine language styles or habits can be misread as tentative and uncertain rather than what they really are - connective. Through a masculine lens it can appear that an idea, opinion, or plan is being sought. By being direct and concise with others who value and use this communication style, you will be seen as confident, competent, and certain.

Speaking in this way also allows your ideas and opinions to be heard. A clear speaking structure makes it easy for your audience. Listening is difficult because our capacity for processing words far exceeds the rate at which words are spoken. As a result, our minds tend to wander and we lose focus.

In the following section, I include a simple and standard communication guide that may be used in a variety of situations. The description of the elements explains how to use the guide and how these elements, both the order and type, make it easy for the audience to listen and follow your ideas.

T&T: COMMUNICATION GUIDE

In workplace meetings where time is often of the essence, it is important to be able to express ideas with brevity and precision. Due to the importance of connection in female gender culture, however, women tend to use more words to appear to be friendlier. Brief and curt emails, for instance, are often interpreted by women as uncaring and rude. However, communication is all about the audience. For men, being wordy is a signal of uncertainty and even defensiveness. Through a male lens, conciseness communicates competence.

To help you expand your communication skills and become a clear and concise communicator, a communication guide template is included here. This guide may be used in a variety of situations including face-to-face interactions, voice messages, speeches, and written communications, such as emails or memos.

COMMUNICATION GUIDE

The Opening:

The Subject:

Main Point:

The Body — statement about structure:

(*e.g.*, reasons, ways, chronological order, data, results, location)

1.

2.

3.

4.

Main Point (repeated):

Requested Response:

COMMUNICATION GUIDE ELEMENTS

The Opening

Begin with an opener or grabber, even if it's a simple "hello." Openings are opportunities to catch the audience's attention, build connection, establish your credibility, and get people thinking in the direction you want them to go. Don't fill this opportunity with words lacking intent or focus. Openers should be aligned in content and tone with the rest of your remarks. Examples include, "I am pleased we are meeting to discuss this important issue," and "We can get agreement on how to solve this problem." The opening allows acknowledgement of and connection with the audience before the message is stated.

The Subject

The subject provides a context for the information you are about to share and tells your audience what you will be talking about. For instance, you might say, "I want to focus on ...," "this is about why I think XX...," or "I have called you together for..." This helps the person you are addressing to mentally switch from the work they are doing and more easily follow what you are about to tell them.

The Main Point

The main point tells the listener the essence of your point. Think of it as a headline. To make it more memorable, try to create a main point that is short and concise. Putting the main point up front allows those with a preference for the big-picture and those who are impatient listeners to get your message quickly. Have you ever been frustrated by a voice message or an email because the main point did not occur until the very end? This structure prevents that problem.

The Body

After the main point, state the structure of your supporting points. Structures are varied and can include reasons, ways, chronological order, research results, statistical data, geographical location, and procedure. For example, you could say, “Here are three reasons...” or “Here are five ways we could deal with this issue.” Explaining the structure gives the audience a roadmap. You support the main point you are making with ideas, reasons, details, evidence, proof, illustrations, facts, research data, or stories. This structure allows your listener to hear the material in a mentally coherent pattern, making it easier to understand.

Restated Main Point

You may wish, depending on the context, to tell them your main point again to focus the conversation that follows. Repetition makes it easier to listen, comprehend, and remember.

Requested Response

If appropriate, tell them what you want them to do based on what you’ve said. Perhaps it is a discussion you want to have. Perhaps you would like an indication from them that they agree with your argument or proposal. Making clear what you need from them allows them to more easily respond to your request and to the information you have provided.

Below is an example using the Communication Guide in a face-to-face meeting.

The Opening: “Good morning.”

The Subject: “Is now a good time to discuss the legal issues raised in the report?”

Main Point: “Several aspects of the project need to be reviewed by outside legal counsel.”

The Body: “They include:

1. Privacy concerns re: the data being collected from our shareholders and clients.
2. The required legal notice period appears longer than anticipated by the closing date.
3. Competition Act issues arising from the acquisition.”

Main Point again: “Several aspects of the project need review by outside counsel.”

Requested Response: “Do you want me to start the review process with outside counsel?”

GBS: ALWAYS BE AGREEABLE AND SUPPORTIVE

This GBS is both a help and a hindrance in the workplace. Being agreeable and supportive makes you a team player and others will like working with you. It is obviously a great strength. However, this feminine ideal becomes a hindrance when competitive verbal tactics are used to undermine your authority, impugn your credibility, and decrease your influence. Such competitive challenges are seldom about the substance of the discussion and are usually about power dynamics. These tactics influence which ideas are heard, how ideas are received, and who gets the credit. In order to manage impressions, claim and maintain legitimacy, assert power and influence, and shape perceptions, it is best to deal with competitive tactics quickly and effectively.

Unfortunately the feminine rules of *always be nice and never fight back* and *always smile and be sweet* do not serve us well in dealing with competitive verbal tactics. They hinder our ability to manage the power dynamic and to look confident and competent. To more fully understand

how these feminine rules impact behaviour at work, here are some examples.

- Giving in too easily in negotiation or when asking for what you want
- Backing off when faced with opposition or sharp criticism of ideas
- Not dealing with interruptions or stolen ideas
- Ignoring challenges to authority and even sexist remarks
- Avoiding giving a controversial opinion only to have someone applauded for voicing it

So what can we do? How do we navigate our internalized gender rules and others' gendered expectations in a way that allows us to appear confident and authoritative without appearing aggressive? Below are some tools and techniques (T&T) that will allow you to stand firm.

T&T: STAND FIRM

What does it mean to stand firm? Being on the receiving end of a verbal tactic can be uncomfortable and unsettling. And that is what is intended by the tactic – to throw you off your game and show power. How can you respond? If you ignore it you remain at a disadvantage. If you confront it, you risk escalating the situation. The objective is to find tools that allow you to calmly and confidently stand up for yourself and your ideas. It can be done very quietly and quickly by knowing the right tools to use. Stopping it quickly is very important where the comment or the repeated pattern of comments have the potential to damage your reputation or challenge your credibility. You shouldn't need to challenge these competitive tactics alone. Others are complicit if they don't speak up. Enlist the help of colleagues or even supervisors.

Here are some common workplace situations that require standing firm instead of being agreeable and supportive.

Interruptions: Men interrupting women is very common so you are not alone if it is happening to you. If it makes you feel better, men also interrupt other men. Here are some suggested communication tools for dealing with this situation.

- Preface your comments with a road-map so others will know where you are going with your point and when they can jump in. For instance, you could say, “I would like your views on this but let me give you the background on this issue first.” Or, “I would appreciate your opinion on this matter but first I would like to describe the situation as I see it.”
- Here are some responses when you are interrupted.
 - “Let me finish my thought,” or “Let me complete my sentence.”
 - “I would like to finish.”
 - “I have another point to make.”
 - Keep talking over the interruption firmly and calmly without speeding up or going higher in tone.
 - Hold your hand up and reinforce it by saying, “Hold on I am not finished.” Look the interrupter in the eye until you have taken back the floor.
- Avoid asking for permission by saying things like, “Please let me finish,” or “I would appreciate if you would let me complete my sentence.”
- Enlist a colleague to build an alliance. Having someone else say, “Let Jess finish. Let’s hear what she has to say,” makes it clear that others don’t support interruptions. It also takes the heat off you in having to deal with it each time and makes you feel good knowing you have support.

Stolen Ideas: Another common workplace situation is having your ideas stolen or having others take credit for what you have done. This behaviour makes sense in light of the masculine mindset where status

and achievement are paramount, however, there is no excuse for taking credit for someone else's idea. This behaviour needs to be dealt with. Here are some tools for responding in this situation.

- Ensure that you state your idea clearly and confidently. Avoid using tentative language patterns such as, "I was wondering if it might not be a good idea.... Would that be OK?" Instead take yourself out of the statement. You might say, "the software has not performed as expected. I propose ...". If you wish to soften the statement you may encourage others to add their thoughts and opinions by adding at the end, "Does anyone have other ideas?"
- Employ a tactic called "Thank'N'Yank."¹⁰⁶ This response involves thanking the person and taking back ownership of the idea. For instance, you could say, "Exactly. So glad you like the idea. Now let's talk next steps." Or, "Thanks for building on my idea. Glad we agree. What are some other ways we could approach this?"
- Enlist a colleague to acknowledge that the idea was yours. Have them repeat the idea and your name. They don't have to agree with it (although that helps) but rather they are ensuring the credit is not lost. Do the same thing for them if interruptions and stealing ideas is common.

If you know such behaviour is about power dynamics and gender culture, then you will more likely be able to stand by your ideas and opinions to make your value visible. And others will start to recognize your ideas as well. A friend who worked in the very masculine world of mining told me she knew she had made it when junior males started acknowledging her contributions and ideas overtly in meetings.

Undermining Comments: Remarks meant to undermine you can run the gamut from sexist comments to sharp criticism. In calling you *kid*, *honey*, *sweetie*, or *young lady*, for instance, the speaker aims to get you off your game. Holding firm under these circumstances can often be very

difficult. These comments almost always involve competitive tactics used consciously and they are aimed at reducing your status and negatively impacting your professional image. Here are some tools that may be used on their own or in combination for dealing with these tactics.

Don't take it personally and stay focused. Often competitive tactics are just that – a game to get you to do or say things you wouldn't normally do. They are meant to throw you off and reduce your credibility, power, and legitimacy. By responding calmly and rationally, you have won.

Use the power of the pause. One of the easiest ways to show that a line has been crossed is to become silent. Women often try to smooth things over or make them better by talking. So silence is a very potent tool. Early in my career as a psychologist I was asked out for dinner while attending a conference. The waiter approached our table of seven men and me, the lone woman, and while looking at me said, "Those are great odds." No one spoke as we did not know each other well and our only connection was the conference. The silence told the waiter he had been inappropriate and he immediately apologized. I did not need to say or do anything. After you have used the power of the pause, just continue as if nothing has happened. The message has been sent.

Go to the balcony. This is a negotiation term that refers to becoming detached and viewing the situation from a distance. If possible, remove yourself from the situation or take a break. Even the shortest break can disrupt the tactic. Or take a mental break to the balcony by saying, "Let me think about that." Or use the power of the pause. It will make the commenter think about what he or she just said.

Analyze the use. While away from the situation think about why this tactic was used. Analyze if this is a habitual style or if it is being purposely used to reduce your power and create a negative impression. It is important to know if you are a casual target like everyone else or a threat

to this person. This determination will help you assess how to deal with it over the longer term.

Use the power of alliances. In meetings or in front of others, let others deal with the person. This is a very powerful and effective way to stop the behaviour. When I was a junior lawyer, a client in a meeting kept calling me “Blondie” and then asked me to get him coffee using this name. It was this request that caused the lawyer for the other side to speak up and say it was not appropriate. It stopped the behaviour immediately and made my senior colleague rather embarrassed that he had not called it earlier. If you are the subject of sexist comments, bullying or harassment, talk to your mentor. Depending upon the type of comment you may even seek the support of HR. Know that there are others there to help you – enlist them.

Call it. This can be more difficult. Confront the comments directly only if you feel comfortable doing so. Perhaps use humour, such as, “I only let my parents call me young lady.” You may want to wait until after the meeting to pull the person aside and talk to them about their comments. However, it should not be on you to have to deal with this behaviour – especially when you are junior and when the person involved can influence your career. Talk to your mentor, supervisor, or colleagues and use the power of alliances to deal with this inappropriate behaviour. By calling out such comments you are ensuring that the culture of your organization is a respectful, healthy, and safe place to work. You will also gain respect by holding firm.

GBS: EQUALIZING POWER

The previous section deals with making your value visible through clear communication. This section looks at making your value visible by moderating language styles and verbal habits that can affect your image negatively if they are misinterpreted. It is important to note that

these styles are only detrimental if used habitually without awareness; there is no absolute right or wrong style or habit. Rather, it is important to select the appropriate style based on the situation and the audience instead of using the same default style each time. Conscious selection allows for appropriate, contextual, and strategic use of language, which will enhance your image.

An important factor in conscious selection is being aware of the misunderstandings that may occur when styles differ. If the style you employ differs from the norm at your workplace, inaccurate impressions about abilities, character, confidence and intention may be created. Consequently, it is important to be aware of the style you use habitually and how that style may differ from others. In communication, it is all about your audience.

The key to becoming a skillful communicator is being aware of your preferred language style so you can become fluent and versatile in other styles. Being able to use other styles allows you to select the best style for the circumstance and to always appear professional. This versatility also allows you to be authoritative and assertive without appearing aggressive, and deferential without being self-deprecating.

Feminine language habits and patterns that try to equalize power tend to weaken the image and message. They include tentative speech patterns, the use of “I” inappropriately, indirect style, and the passive voice. Each of these undermining speech habits is discussed below together with tips and tools for minimizing or changing them.

TENTATIVE SPEECH PATTERNS

Hesitant speech is a verbal habit that suggests the speaker lacks confidence. This weakens the impact of her ideas, assertions, and messages. Speaking tentatively is not wrong in all circumstances and may be used strategically to show deference or deflect aggressive stances. However,

these advantages tend to be limited when compared with the image created by their habitual and consistent use. If you want to create an image of confidence and certainty, be aware of these tentative speech patterns and limit their use to appropriate situations.

Undermining Starts

Undermining starts are phrases added at the beginning of sentences to signal uncertainty. When used automatically and frequently, they reflect uncertainty where none exists. When you have an idea or opinion that you want others to know about, it is important to stand out. Some common examples include: “Maybe it’s just me but...,” “This may be a dumb question...,” “I feel this is about...,” “I may not be right but...,” “I don’t have all the answers but...,” “I guess my question is...,” “I’m not an expert on that but...,” “I kind of think that...,” and “I may be the only one that feels this way...”

Weakening Modifiers

Using certain modifiers also weakens the impact of your message. These modifiers have the same effect as undermining starts. I have had more than one woman describe men they work with who are completely wrong on an issue but sound totally certain about their assertion. This is the reverse; there may be total certainty on the speaker’s part, but the insertion of these habitual modifiers signals otherwise. Here are some common examples: “**Hopefully** we will be able to deal with this,” “I **just** want to explain that...,” “It’s **kind** of normal for this...,” and “**Basically** the main issue is...” Keep in mind that if you need to communicate actual uncertainty, use these modifiers. Again, the key point is to use them consciously rather than habitually.

Diminishing Endings

Diminishing endings are words added to the ends of sentences that signal uncertainty. They are the equivalent of verbal “up-speak” — the tonal upswing at the end of a sentence that makes it sound like a question. When every sentence that is spoken has a tonal lift at the end, the pattern becomes obvious and distracting. I hear it more and more in seminars and individual coaching. Psychologically, it is used to connect with the other person — to signal that you want the other person to share in the conversation. Unfortunately, up-speak and undermining endings minimize the message and reduce the person’s authority. To be clear, there is nothing wrong with these endings or with up-speak, and the use is entirely appropriate with friends or others who speak in this manner. However, for a listener with a different, more authoritative style, it will often be viewed as indicating a lack of certainty, knowledge, and ability. Here are some common examples: “How does that sound?” “Isn’t it?” “Right?” “Okay?” “Does that make sense?” and “If it’s okay with you.”

Stories from clients reveal that we often use these as verbal ticks when we are under stress. They are insidious and unconscious speech patterns that can slip in under the radar. Become aware by listening to yourself or asking trusted colleagues if they have noticed any particular speech pattern you use.

Misplaced Focus — “I” as Subject

Research analyzing approximately 400,000 computerized texts suggests that people who often use the pronoun “I” come across as more personal, warm, and honest, while people who use fewer “I”s come across as more self-confident. This research also reveals that the person with the highest status tends to use “I” the least, while the person with the lowest status tends to use “I” the most. Thus, if you want to convey confidence, check your use, and possible overuse, of the word “I”.¹⁰⁷

Another inadvertent consequence of overusing “I” is becoming the inappropriate subject of a sentence; this minimizes the strength of the message and focuses a misplaced spotlight on the writer. Some experts suggest never starting a sentence with the word “I” unless you are specifically talking about yourself.¹⁰⁸ Consequently, use “I” only if you intentionally want to be more personal, and convey warmth and honesty. Below are examples of phrases to use instead of “I” phrases.

Instead of These “I” Phrases	Try These
“I feel the research is complete.”	“The research is complete.”
“I have a problem with my assistant - she is always late.”	“My assistant is frequently late for work.”
“I am pretty sure that this project deadline is problematic.”	“The project deadline will not be met.”
“I love this file.”	“This file is interesting and challenging.”
“I don’t have enough time to complete the work.”	“The work cannot be completed on time.”
“I estimate this to be a 50-minute presentation.”	“It’s approximately a 50-minute presentation.”

DIRECT/INDIRECT COMMUNICATION

Direct communication is straight forward, with the purpose of giving and getting information clearly and efficiently. In contrast, indirect communication can convey multiple meanings and the aim is diplomacy and saving face. Since clarity is important with a direct style of communication, the speaker is responsible for the listener’s understanding. With an indirect style, the listener is responsible. An indirect style is therefore of great benefit when dealing with sensitive matters. However, what indirect style gains in diplomacy it loses in clarity. When a listener

is required to determine which of the multiple meanings the indirect speaker may have intended, misinterpretation and miscommunication often result.

In his book *Outliers*, Malcolm Gladwell describes the difference between direct and indirect communication using a dramatic example.¹⁰⁹ He explains that in South Korea, as in many cultures, individuals who are subordinate in status employ an indirect style with those of higher status, while those of higher status employ a direct style. Gladwell looks at South Korean Air where pilots spoke directly and navigators spoke indirectly and examines various plane crashes that resulted from the dramatic clashing of these two styles. In one case, the navigator said, “we have a fuel issue,” as an indirect way of saying, “there is no fuel left.” Unfortunately, his statement was not interpreted by the pilot, a direct speaker, as an emergency. As a result of this miscommunication, the plane crashed.

To understand the differences, here are some examples of each style.

Indirect Style	Direct Style
“The letter has not been sent.”	“Please get this letter out.”
“It would be good for you to see John about this matter while I am out.”	“Please see John today about this matter.”
“We have an issue with the opinion.”	“The third paragraph of the opinion is wrong.”
“Would you like some coffee?”	“I am going to get some coffee, would you like some?”

There are advantages and disadvantages to each style. A huge advantage of direct communication is that it reduces confusion. The indirect approach is often less clear, especially when the receiver is a direct speaker.

After a discussion on these two types of communication, a woman left my seminar at the break to email her assistant. The night before, she had left a message for him which said, “It would be good if you see X about the Y issue.” Based on this discussion about the two styles, she realized he would interpret this indirect communication as a choice and would most likely not do what she had asked. Her message, although diplomatic, was not clear.

One disadvantage of the direct style of communication is that it can evoke stereotype backlash. So when used by a woman this approach may be judged as bossy or even hostile, especially when used with an indirect speaker. In contrast, indirect communication can reduce contention, smooth over conflict, and save face for others.

In the business world, direct speaking is valued and is the approach most often used. However, where diplomacy and face-saving is required, especially with clients, bosses, and colleagues, indirect communication works best.

PASSIVE, ASSERTIVE, AND AGGRESSIVE VOICE

It is important for everyone to have a full range of voices in order to use the right one at the right time. As you will see as we go through the three voices - passive, aggressive, and assertive - the voice of choice in most situations will be assertive.

The *passive voice*, like the indirect approach, backs down from the encounter and allows the other person to save face. It can be used to soften a request, to reduce the aggression in the encounter, and to lessen tension. It is self-effacing, and typically a person who uses it will be viewed as subordinate. It is associated with feminine style and tends to be used more by women than men. In a masculine workplace, this voice can easily be misinterpreted as reflecting a lack of confidence.

The *aggressive voice* asserts dominance over the other. When used in day-to-day communication it can significantly damage relationships. It is the approach of choice when meeting aggressive opponents who are unwilling to change their approach. This stance indicates that you will not back down from the position you are advocating.

The *assertive voice* reflects the most balanced stance, and as such is an excellent default approach. This voice allows you to stand your ground while respecting the boundaries of others.

Below are some examples of each of the three approaches.

Missing Documents

Passive: “I may have missed them and I will look through the file you gave me again, but I can’t locate some important documents. I am sorry to interrupt, but could you tell me the place you typically put them?”

Aggressive: “I can’t believe this! I have wasted two hours trying to find documents that don’t exist. Next time you give me a file make sure all of the documents are in it.”

Assertive: “The documents you asked me to review are not in this file. Is it possible that they are elsewhere?”

Problematic Clauses in a Report

Passive: “It may just be me, but it seems that some of the charts I have marked in red are not as clear as they could be. If you could get those changed, that would be great.”

Aggressive: “What were you thinking? These charts are a disaster!”

Assertive: “There were a few charts at the beginning of the report that are not clear. I have marked the ones that require changes. Please make the necessary corrections and get the report back to me this afternoon.”

It is advantageous not only to be able to use all three voices but to use them consciously and purposefully. If you use one voice habitually, it will reduce your ability to communicate clearly and will affect the perception others have of you.

WHEN TO USE SUBORDINATE LANGUAGE

After a seminar on confident communication, I was approached by a participant who was trying to understand this information in light of her very powerful boss who typically used tentative and passive language patterns. The participant further described her boss as being carefully listened to by others and well respected for her ideas and expertise. This story makes clear that using the language of subordination alone will not prevent your value from being made visible. However, when you are starting out in a profession, the image you project should be one of confidence and competence.

Once you have attained a certain level of power and influence, you may wish to intentionally use minimizing language patterns to soften your image and signal connection with others. Using diminishing endings in particular allows for greater connection and makes you more approachable. Such endings encourage others to disagree and respond, so if you want a discussion about the point you are making, use them. Research even suggests that superfluous apologies (saying sorry when you are not responsible such as, “sorry about the rain”) builds trust and liking.¹¹⁰ The key, therefore, is not to completely drop feminine habits but rather to use language skills and patterns consciously to align with your communication goals.

GBS: AVOIDING CONFLICT

Feminine culture teaches girls to avoid conflict and confrontation due to the importance of relationships and harmony. Thus, most women avoid confrontation and conflict by agreeing, supporting, or avoiding.

Masculine culture, in contrast, teaches boys to be comfortable with confrontation and competition as part of status and power display. Neither approach encourages a positive and constructive way to deal with conflict. Learning how to respond well to conflict is a tool that everyone should have. It maintains relationships, resolves issues and, if handled appropriately, enhances your brand.

T&T: THE CONFLICT COMMUNICATION PROCESS

It is never easy to have conflict conversations due to the high stakes that are often involved and the conflicting views. By using and mastering the skills of conflict communication and developing the attitudes suggested in this section, such conversations become less difficult and the opportunities more obvious. The conflict communication process, outlined below, allows you to better understand the other person's perspective, recognize your possible contribution to the conflict, and come to a satisfactory resolution. Putting it all together may seem daunting at times, but having a process to follow makes it easier.

The various stages in the conflict communication process are described below in chronological order. Using these stages in the order provided allows the conversation to continue and the dialogue to stay open. Often in conflict where judgements are rampant and accusations numerous, the conversation stops and the parties shut down. Through the use of these communication tools and techniques you will have an opportunity to communicate and come to a resolution, or at least a better understanding of the conflict, from both sides.

Make your opening objective. Avoid the *why* and focus on what happened. Start the conversation with the facts. Describe it as a third party observing the situation would. This allows you to be more objective and prevents shutting down the conversation before it can get started. Avoid any opinions or judgements. Appearing to be in the right in a situation

and acting superior is the default approach of many people but it is not an attitude that helps resolve disputes. Rather, be curious and respectful.

Introduce your view. This is the stage where you start to include your point of view and conclusions. Continue to be honest and respectful, while being observant. Try not to make your view or conclusions sound like they are written in stone and are absolutely correct. Instead, talk tentatively, keeping the purpose of the conversation in sight. You may introduce your view and conclusions by saying, “it makes me wonder if...” “I am thinking that...” “It makes me feel...,” etc. Make it clear that it is you who is thinking, wondering, or feeling, and that your view is not the absolute truth of the situation. You want to ensure the other person knows that you are open to changing your view once you are aware of all the facts and circumstances.

Invite their view. Showing that you are open to hearing from the other side allows you to naturally invite them to tell their view of the circumstances. You might do this by asking: “What’s going on?” “I’d really like to hear your view on this,” or “How are you seeing things?” Know that there will be information you don’t currently have — information that may totally change your view of the situation. Use the listening techniques set out in the Politics chapter to listen carefully and fully.

Collaborate. Tell the other party your needs and interests — what was important to you in the situation? What were you hoping for? What happened that upset you, and why? Perhaps this is the reason that the conflict arose and created the problem. Find out their needs and interests. Generate solutions to the issue that fit your needs and theirs. This conversation can be initiated with prompts such as: “What is important to you?” “What would you like to see happen?” and “Help me to understand...”

The following are optional steps that may be used in a more formal process.

Document the agreement. You may wish to document the resolution in detail, including who will do what based on this resolution, what will be done, when it will be done and finally, how it will be done.

Decide on follow-up actions. The resolution may also involve follow-up actions, with details such as who will be involved, what they will do to follow up, when this will take place and what the consequences will be depending on what has occurred. This type of follow-up is more common in corporate settings or large organizations with formal reporting structures. To assist you in working through a conflict communication process, the worksheet below shows the various stages as well as point-form reminders for each.

Conflict Communication Process Worksheet

Stages/Notes	Description
1. The Objective Opening	The facts only; the <i>what</i> not the <i>why</i>
2. My View	Your point of view, including both facts and your conclusions <ul style="list-style-type: none">• be honest but respectful• talk tentatively• soften the message• invite opposing views• keep sight of your goal of wanting resolution• be observant
3. Their View	Invite them to share and be curious “Help me to understand what’s going on.” “I’d really like to hear your opinion on this.” “Please let me know if you see it differently.” “I’d really like to hear your thoughts on this.”

4. Collaborate	Tell them your needs and interests. Find out their needs and interests. Generate solutions that fit both of your needs.
5. Agreement	Who What When Document the details
6. Follow-up	Who What When

EXERCISES

QUESTIONNAIRE : M/F COMMUNICATION STYLES

Read each statement carefully. If the statement describes you, circle T and if it does not, circle F. As you respond, your frame of reference should be communication at work. The purpose of this questionnaire is to create awareness of your use of masculine and feminine communication styles and your ability to use both flexibly. If you are uncertain as to your use, ask a trusted work colleague.

1. I can leave out details and get to the point. **T F**
2. I can say no to requests. **T F**
3. I can change my communication style to flex to the other person's style. **T F**
4. I use minimizing openings such as "maybe it's just me" or "I guess my question is..." **T F**
5. I am comfortable questioning or debating my colleague during a conversation. **T F**
6. I often use minimizing endings such as "OK?" **T F**
7. When I speak it sounds authoritative and factual. **T F**

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8. My communication shows that I value and support others. **T F**
9. I am not offended or hurt when someone does not agree with my ideas. **T F**
10. I watch non-verbal cues during conversations. **T F**
11. I use greetings in most of my emails such as “dear” or “hello.” **TF**
12. I don’t use emoticons in business emails. **T F**
13. I ask questions to gather information and to enhance the relationship. **T F**
14. I talk with others primarily to provide facts and information. **T F**
15. If interrupted in a meeting, I actively seek to take the floor back. **T F**
16. I have no problems making demands. **T F**
17. I wait my turn to talk. **T F**
18. I speak indirectly to allow others to save face. **T F**
19. I speak in an assertive manner most of the time at work. **T F**
20. When listening I use head nodding and make sounds like “uh-huh” and “yes.” **T F**
21. I tend not to deal with others when they interrupt or take my ideas. **T F**
22. I can deal with sharp criticism of my ideas and don’t take it personally. **T F**

To score the questionnaire, circle the questions below to which you responded true (only T answers are scored), then add them up to determine which style you favour, if any.

Masculine Style **Total Score**

Question # 1, 2, 5, 7, 9, 12, 14, 15, 16, 19 and 22 = _____

Feminine Approach

Question # 3, 4, 6, 8, 10, 11, 13, 17, 18, 20, and 21 = _____

Difference between the scores = _____

KEY TO SCORING

A difference of four points or greater for either the masculine or feminine style indicates a predominate style. If you are using one style more than the other, you will benefit from trying out the other approach. Equal or almost equal scores indicate the use of both styles, which is the goal. Please note that no one style is better, however, in business the masculine style is most often used and valued. As with any skill, the ability to use both styles based on the situation is important.

TRY IT OUT!

Diminishing Endings:

Next time you want to use this phrase:

“Have you got a couple of seconds, I won’t take much of your time, I just thought we might take a look at this. Okay?”

Try this one instead:

“I would like to discuss the opinion you asked me to draft. Is now a good time?”

Passive, Assertive, and Aggressive Voice:

Using any **one of the following fact situations**, write out a response in each of the three voices.

1. A colleague always involves you in projects at the last minute and typically past the deadline.
2. The person in the next office likes to come and chat at least four to five times a day, typically when you are working on rush projects.
3. You are in a meeting and a person starts to demean your ideas in front of your boss or client.

Which voice would be most appropriate in each situation?

Direct/Indirect Communication:

Here is a simple exercise to help you become more fluent in both direct and indirect styles.

Direct: “Write the report.”

Indirect: “It is important that this report be written by the person who knows the subject area best and the client well.”

Fill in at least three more statements in the range between direct and indirect. For example, in the exercise above, after direct, you might write, “Please write the report.” Under that and more indirect might be, “You have the most knowledge about this particular area so please write the report.” Next might be, “Knowledge and experience in this area is important in writing the report and you have the most of any person on the file.”

Here is another example.

Direct: “I need the merger file.”

Indirect: “I was looking in my office for the white merger file and recalled that you had taken it a few weeks ago to look at one of the reports as a precedent. Am I recalling that correctly? Do you have it?”

Now imagine appropriate situations for the use of the two different approaches at work. What would be your impression of the person who used the direct response above? The indirect approach? If the direct approach is common where you work, you are in an environment that values direct style. You may find that those who have more influence and are more senior use direct style while others use variations of indirect style. What is important is that you are now aware of the styles used and valued. If you use a different one, be aware of how you are being viewed.

WHAT ORGANIZATIONS, LEADERS, AND MENTORS CAN DO

- As a leader ask yourself – “Am I a good communicator? Am I setting a good example for others on my team?” If the answer is no, get training or coaching.
- Are you seeing people you supervise who are not expressing themselves clearly and confidently? If not, coach them in the fundamentals or hire a professional coach.
- Make the workplace safer and healthier for everyone. Ensure that any behaviour that involves interruptions, sexism, stealing ideas, undermining, harassment, or bullying will not be tolerated.
- Help out those who are interrupted, have their ideas stolen, are bullied or harassed. When someone is interrupted, pointing out that the person has not finished works well. In meetings where sexist remarks or bullying occurs, asking for everyone to be respectful is an appropriate response.
- When an idea is stolen, comment that the person is agreeing with the originator’s idea. Or perhaps use the amplification technique – repeat the idea and the person’s name.
- For repeat offenders you may wish to speak to them privately or address it more formally with a policy. Make it clear that such tactics will not be tolerated.
- Organizations can ensure that the workplace culture is one of respect and inclusiveness.

WANT TO READ MORE?

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