

Maryland Entrepreneur Quarterly

FOCUSED GENDER STRATEGY ADDS DOLLARS TO THE BOTTOM LINE

by Trent Kittleman



Do men and women really tend to communicate in different ways in the workplace? Consider the following questions:

Self Promotion. Are the men in your workplace more likely to “brag about their achievements?” Are the women more likely to “give employees the credit”?

Taking Risks. Are men more likely to “overreach” than women? Are the women more likely to “be honest about their lack of experience before accepting a new assignment”?

Accepting Mistakes. Do you find that the men in your workplace try not to admit to any mistakes? Do you find that women tend to apologize for every mistake—including bad weather?

Asking for What they Want. How often do the men in your workplace go to the boss and ask for an assignment? A promotion? A raise? How often do the women ask the boss for *anything*?

Leadership. Do meetings led by men tend to go: this is the plan – this is your role. Do meeting led by women tend go: this is the issue – what are your thoughts.

Professional Appearance. Do most men in your workplace wear the suit-and-tie uniform that says “we’re part of the team.” Do most women in your workplace reject conformity and wear clothes that say “I have the right to be myself!”

Yes, men and women do *tend* to communicate in different styles and patterns, not just with words but in what they choose to say, how they choose to speak, what they choose to wear, and even in how they walk and gesture. So what does that mean for workplace harmony – and for women who are often disadvantaged by these differences?

The great news is that a focused gender strategy can result in significant improvement in workplace harmony and female advancement *without* telling men – or women -- that they have to change the way they function. What both men and women *do* need to do is learn to recognize these differences and to understand that the way the “other” gender communicates isn’t

“wrong.” There is value in the differences . . . in the diversity of skills that men and women bring to the workplace. Consider the following scenarios:

SCENARIO 1. John and Mary work for Company X and are negotiating to sell a valuable piece of land to Company Y. Mary begins the negotiation by asking Company Y, “What are your goals for this piece of land? Maybe we can find a way for everyone to benefit.”

John immediately worries that Mary’s “weak” opening has given the “opposition” a perfect opportunity to argue their position and establish a rationale for a low price, right up front. So John jumps in and says, “But first, I’d like to see just where we are. I need to know that your company’s budget is at least in the ballpark of our bottom line.”

Now, Mary is worried. John’s “aggressive” approach cuts off discussion. If the “negotiation” focuses solely on numbers, everyone may end up unhappy with the results.

- John needs to understand that Mary’s information-sharing style of negotiation can work well, if not better than his focus on “getting the best price.” For example, what if Company X has a different property that it’s more willing to sell and would

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satisfy Company Y's goals just as well or better. Or what if Company Y has a some land that Company X could use, and the parties could do a like-kind exchange. Mary's open discussion approach can result in a better deal for both parties.

- Mary needs to understand that John's effort to learn Company Y's bottom line is important, particularly if there is no win-win alternative or if Company Y's representatives believe in "scorched earth" negotiation.

The point is that having access to both negotiation styles puts John and Mary – and Company X – in the best position to negotiate the best deal, *provided* John and Mary recognize and understand the value and the interaction of both styles.

SCENARIO 2. A harried male Partner in a large law firm rushes out of his office. He finds Eric and Heather and tells them he needs one of the two of them to go downtown in an hour and take the deposition of a key witness in the trial they've been working on. "Can you do it?" he asks.

Heather responds, "Well, I can, if you want me to. But I've only taken one deposition before this. And I haven't reviewed witness X's statements since last month. . ."

Eric thinks Heather's "lukewarm" response means she doesn't want the assignment.

Eric responds, "I'd love to, boss. I can review the witness's statements over a quick lunch before I go."

Heather thinks Eric is overreach-

ing. She knows that Eric has never taken a deposition, and that he won't have time "over lunch" for adequate preparation. Heather knows she would do a better job and is upset when the Partner tells John to go.

- Heather needs to recognize that by focusing on her limitations, the boss hears what Eric heard – that Heather doesn't feel competent to do the job. She also needs to recognize that although her response is truthful, it is also a form of "hedging." In other words, if she does a poor job, it "isn't her fault." After all, she *warned* the boss she was inexperienced and unprepared! On the other hand, Eric is willing to accept full responsibility for the outcome of the deposition. Eric's response isn't overreaching if Eric has confidence in his own ability.
- The Partner needs to be "gender intelligent" about the different ways men and women communicate. Author Adrienne Mandell, in *How Men Think*, says that in order to understand their *true* level of competence she had to "divide the knowledge" claimed by the males and "double the knowledge" claimed by the females. A mathematical formula is probably not a good or practical solution. But, understanding the female tendency to understate her qualifications and the male tendency to overstate his, allows decision-makers to more accurately evaluate female and

male competence and maximize the talents of both genders.

A gender strategy that promotes understanding and integrating the diverse communication skills of men and women produces bottom line results. Catalyst, a nonprofit research and advisory service published a 2004 study that found of the 353 Fortune 1,000 companies responding to their survey, those with the highest representation of women in top management experienced a 35.1% higher return on equity and a 34% higher return to shareholders that the group of companies with the lowest representation.

Moreover, individual companies have experienced the same results.

Deloitte & Touche spent the time and money to educate their workforce when they realized how many talented women were leaving the company. The effort resulted in an estimated \$190 million a year in savings through reduced turnover.

IBM educated its workers in gender intelligence and was able to increase its number of women executives worldwide 425% -- from 185 in 1995 to 1,000 in 2005, a significant factor in the growth of its small and medium-sized business sales from \$10 million in 1998 to more than \$100 million in 2003.

If your employer isn't one of the companies taking full advantage of its female employees, *educate them* on the bottom line value of implementing a focused gender strategy.