Gender Differences in Communication

Editor's Note: This is a review of the research on gender and communication that was prepared by Dr. Beth Vanfossen for ITROW's Women and Expression Conference. (To obtain the full report, including an annotated bibliography, see the [Order Form](http://pages.towson.edu/itrow/wmcomm.htm).)

Contents

- Do men and women differ in their communication experiences?
- Who talks the most?
- Who interrupts?
- What about gender patterns in formal group meetings?
- What about gender patterns in informal group meetings?
- Is there a "women's language" connoting uncertainty and deference?
- Does it matter?
- What are some of the ways women are affected by these patterns?
- Are gender differences in communication patterns related to power?
- Some strategies, solutions and practical ideas

Do men and women differ in their communication experiences?

Before we look at the differences, we should realize that:

- There is enormous diversity in communication style and practices within each gender group.

- Most women and many men have at their disposal a variety of conversational and speech skills, any one of which they may draw upon, depending on the situation, their purposes, the roles they are playing, and the context.

Who talks the most?

- In mixed-gender groups, at public gatherings, and in many informal conversations, men spend more time talking than do women.

- For example, in one experiment, the men with expertise talked longer than the women with expertise.

Who interrupts?

- Men are more likely than women to interrupt the speaking of other people.

- A study of faculty meetings revealed that women are more likely than men to be interrupted.

- Some of the interruptions that women experience come from other women. (Women, when they do interrupt, are more likely to interrupt other women than they are to interrupt men, according to two studies.)

- Women are more likely than men to allow an interruption of their talk to be successful (they do not resist the interruption as much as men do).
What about gender patterns in formal group meetings?

- In meetings, men gain the “floor” more often, and keep the floor for longer periods of time, regardless of their status in the organization.
- In professional conferences, women take a less active part in responding to papers.
- When women do ask a question, they take less time in asking it than do men. In addition, they employ much less prequestion predication, they are less likely to ask multiple questions, and they are more likely than men to phrase their question in personal terms.

What are the gender patterns in informal group meetings?

- When the floor is an informal, collaborative venture, women display a fuller range of language ability. Here, in the kind of conversation where women excel, people jointly build an idea, operate on the same wavelengths, and have deep conversational overlaps.

Is there a "women's language" connoting uncertainty and deference?

- The use of tag questions ("It's really cold in here, isn't it?"), disclaimers ("I may be wrong, but . . ."), and question statements ("won't you close the door?") all decrease the perceived assertiveness of speech. However, research has not confirmed that women and men differ in the frequency of their use of these forms.
- Raters perceive those who use a deferential language style (super polite language, hedges, and hesitations) as having less power but more personal warmth.

Does it matter?

- Those who talk more are more likely to be perceived as dominant and controlling of the conversation.
- Those who talk the most in decision-making groups also tend to become the leaders. Especially important are "task leadership behaviors," such as asking questions, helping to set up structures and procedures for the groups, giving information and opinions, and identifying and solving problems.
- Interrupters are perceived as more successful and driving, but less socially acceptable, reliable, and companionable than the interrupted speaker.
- In a study of trial witnesses in a superior court, undergraduate student observers saw both female and male witnesses who use powerful language as being more competent, intelligent, and trustworthy than those who use powerless language.

What are some of the ways women are affected by these patterns?

- When someone is interrupted often or her comments are ignored, she may come to believe that what she has to say must not be important.
- Women are less likely than men to have confidence in their ability to make persuasive arguments.
- Many women feel inhibited in formal, mixed-gender groups.
- Some women participate in creating their own passive participation -- by allowing interruptions, by not taking advantage of natural pauses in the conversation, or by asking questions without explaining the context out of which the question emerged.
- Some women, when they do gain the "floor," talk too fast as though they know they are about to be interrupted.

Are gender differences in communication patterns related to power?

- When people are strangers, they expect less competence from women than from men.
○ But if women are known to have prior experience or expertise related to the task, or if women are assigned leadership roles, then women show greatly increased verbal behaviors in mixed-sex groups.
○ A study of witnesses in a superior court found that educated professionals who have high social status were less likely to use "powerless language," regardless of gender.
○ Thus, differences are linked to power, and are context-specific. Differences are socially created and therefore may be socially altered.
○ Other studies have found that talking time is related both to gender (because men spend more time talking than women) and to organizational power (because the more powerful spend more time talking than the less powerful).

Is assertiveness in women viewed negatively by others?

○ In several carefully-controlled studies using undergraduate students, assertive behavior exhibited by females was evaluated as positively as the same behavior exhibited by males (based on a study of employers who evaluated audiotapes showing direct assertive, empathetic assertive, and self-effacing assertive behaviors). The least-valued behavior is the self-effacing assertive.
○ Subordinates prefer a supervisor to balance a task-orientated style with a relationship-oriented style.
○ Research further has suggested that the adoption of task behaviors (a focus on getting things done) enhances a female’s adaptability in the organization (but the adoption of relationship behaviors -- focusing on the relationships among people -- proves problematic for males). "The healthiest and best-liked individuals, male or female, were assertive, decisive, and intellectual, rather than nurturant, responsive and emotional"(Fitzpatrick). Therefore, women may want to focus on task- and impression-management goals in their interactions.

Some strategies, solutions, and practical ideas:

There are three competing goals every time we communicate:

1. A task goal -- get the job done.
2. A relational goal -- do not do unnecessary damage to the relationships between you and others by your message.
3. An identity management goal -- make your communication project the image that you want.

Women should avoid using tag questions (That's an interesting idea, isn't it?"") or disclaimers ("I could be mistaken, but . . ."; "This may sound strange but . . .").

To gain the floor in discussion, women can creatively use strategic questioning. The careful use of questions in a conversation controls when a topic is changed and when a topic is extended and discussed at greater length.

Women probably should not adopt male behavior by greatly increasing their rate of interrupting others. Once a woman has the floor, she should resist giving it to another speaker until she has completed her points ("Just a moment, I haven't finished").

Instead of asking open-ended questions such as, "How is the project going?," ask closed questions such as "when can we expect the report of the data structures?"

Women should not undercut what they are saying with their nonverbal actions. They should adopt a slightly more relaxed posture, do less frequent smiling (and smile only when there is something to smile about), and less frequent nodding, head tilting and dropping of eyes in response to another's gaze. They should avoid using the intonation of a question (raising the voice at the end of a sentence rather than lowering it) when making a declarative statement.

The statements below are adapted from *The Androgynous Manager*, by Alice G. Sargent, Amacom, 1981:

○ Learn to state exactly what you want and face the risk of being cut down or wrong, especially at meetings. This is not a "safe" position, but it is an honest one. Be concerned more about stating your own position than about how the other person is reacting to you.
○ State your own needs and do not buck down even if the immediate response is not acceptance.
○ Stop self-limiting behaviors, such as allowing interruptions or laughing after making a serious statement.
○ Practice taking risks and overcoming fear.
- Learn to focus on a task and regard it as at least as important as the relationship among the people doing the task.
- Stop turning anger and blame inward. Stop making negative statements about yourself. Make positive statements.
- Stop feeling comfortable with being a victim and suffering.
- Deal differently with women: Develop an "old girl" network, working more closely with other women.
- Build a sense of community among women instead of saying "I did it, why can't she?"
- Support other women to the same degree or more than women support men.