

# He Said, She Said: How Men and Women Talk at Work

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Now that women make up half the workforce, the battle of the sexes is over, proclaimed [The Shriver Report](#), a recent study of how Americans live and work. But equal representation in the workplace doesn't necessarily mean men and women always share the same approach to office collaboration.

"Men and women bring different communication styles to the table," says Audrey Nelson, communications consultant and co-author of "Code Switching: How to Talk So Men Will Listen." As a result, she believes this can lead to "communication breakdowns and misunderstandings."

The solution isn't for women to emulate men or vice versa, Nelson says. Instead, there's a lot the sexes can learn from each other.

## **Cutting to the Chase vs. Burying the Lead**

"Men tend to be much more direct, women more indirect," Nelson says. "Both of those styles have plusses and minuses."

For example, Nelson explains, usually if you ask a man, "How did I do on that project?" he won't mince words. If he's seen you do better, that's exactly what he'll say.

Although this economy of words saves time, to some women, it can come across as "brash, harsh, insensitive, or unfeeling," she says.

"Men tend to be blunter in the workplace," says Michael Crom, executive vice president at Dale Carnegie Training. "It would be nice if they would cushion things a little better."

Rather than saying "But..." when you don't agree with a colleague's suggestion, Crom recommends that direct communicators soften the blow with, "And another perspective could be..."

Women, on the other hand, are often masters at sugarcoating tricky messages, according to Nelson. When giving a colleague lukewarm feedback, Nelson says, "Being indirect spares the person's feelings and helps them save face."

But beating around the bush has its downside too. Suppose a man asks a female colleague, "Are you going to have those numbers to me by Friday at noon?" but she needs more time. "A woman will want to give a story" in many cases, Nelson says.

"So she responds, 'You wouldn't believe what happened to me last week. I had three people out with H1N1, three computers down...'"

If her male coworker favors a direct approach and just wants a "yes" or "no," the story-telling can cause frustration and even hurt that woman's credibility, says Nelson, who advises answering such questions "pyramid style." Example: "No, I won't have those stats ready for you by Friday at noon, and here's why."

## **Building Relationships vs. Bolting for the Finish Line**

Another key difference in how the sexes converse at work is that women are more likely to take the time to cultivate relationships with their colleagues and customers, says Christopher Flett, author of "What Men Don't Tell Women About Business: Opening Up the Heavily Guarded Alpha Male Playbook."

In general, "men just want to get things done, but women want to get them done right," says Flett, who founded and runs Ghost CEO, an international coaching firm specializing in women's professional development.

Women tend to see the project as a whole and keep the long-term effects of decisions in mind. "Women are looking at every part of the relationship and figuring out how to give the best service. Men just want to pull the trigger. They lose interest once the contract is signed."

Thanks to the recession, maintaining close alliances with one's teammates, managers, and customers has become a critical skill, Flett says. "That valuation that women have always been attacked for -- building relationships -- is now paying off for them."

Of course, there is such a thing as lingering too long in the land of "gathering feedback" and "trying to make everybody feel good," Flett says. Get bogged down by the process and you may never reach your goal, be it a timely product launch, a high-stakes marketing campaign, or your targeted sales figures, he cautioned.

## **Complementing Each Other's Differences**

The good news is that neither gender is more adept at workplace communication than the other. In fact, a 2008 [Pew Research Center survey](#) of 2,250 U.S. adults found that 69 percent said that "men and women make equally good leaders."

Rather than forcing men and women to become clones of one another, experts suggest throwing stereotypes out the window and capitalizing on your coworkers' strengths.

"When I'm building a team, I look for people who have different communication and personality styles," says Crom.

"I want someone who's dominant as the leader. I also want someone who's analytical. I want a visionary who can come up with creative ideas and inspire people. I want an achiever, someone who's very realistic and will meet deadlines and drive projects through. And I want a facilitator who brings people together and helps keep peace on the team," Crom explains.

"Any of these could be male or female."

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